

Modernity and
Ambivalence
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The Self-construction of Ambivalence

The burden to resolve ambivalence falls, ultimately, on the person cast in the ambivalent condition. Even if the phenomenon of strangerhood is socially structured, the assumption of the status of stranger, with all its attendant ambiguity, with all its burdensome over- and under-definition, carries attributes which in the end are constructed, sustained and deployed with the active participation of their carriers: in the psychical process of self-constitution. Like all other roles (perhaps even slightly more than other roles), the role of the stranger needs learning, acquisition of knowledge and practical skills.

Being a stranger means, first and foremost, that nothing is *natural*; nothing is given of right, nothing comes free. The native's primeval union between the self and the world has been sundered. Each side of the union has been brought into focus of attention – as a *problem*, and a *task*. Both the self and the world are clearly visible. Both call for constant examination and both urgently need to be 'operated on', 'handled', *managed*. In all these respects the stranger's stance differs drastically from the native way of life, with far-reaching consequences.

The concept of a *clean slate*, of infinite pliability and self-pliability of humans, once favourite among educationalists and cultural missionaries, could well be patched together out of the strangers' experience. After all, it poorly reflects the condition of the 'native', born as he is 'into' the community and growing inside it without much challenge from the outside. His is the state of 'being situated' or 'tuned' (Heidegger), which can feed nothing but the *relativ-natürliche Weltanschauung* (Max Scheler): that is, a natural propensity to view the conditions otherwise circumscribed, confined to this place here and this time now, as 'natural' and thus beyond discussion. Being a native member of any community of meanings is tantamount to being supplied with guaranteed, 'objective' criteria of relevance, and a 'graduated knowledge' (Alfred Schütz) which ranges from shallow to deep, depending on the relevance of its objects – but is also fraught with deep holes of ignorance, often only thinly covered

with a tapestry of 'taken for granted'.¹ The fact that such knowledge may seem incoherent and inconsistent to a logician, or indeed to any *stranger* not 'tuned in', or tuned imperfectly – is neither here nor there. The only thing which truly counts is that it 'takes on for the members of the in-group the appearance of a *sufficient* coherence, clarity and consistency to give anybody a reasonable chance of understanding and of being understood'. (Note that this is a *stranger*, sociologist and refugee Alfred Schütz, who speaks here of *appearance*.) It is thanks to this limited yet crucial sufficiency that 'For those who have grown up within the cultural pattern, not only the recipes and their possible efficiency but also the typical and anonymous attitudes required by them are an unquestioned "matter of course" which gives them both security and assurance.'² Security and assurance is something one can ill afford to surrender lightly. To the extent in which they depend on the 'matter-of-fact' posture, one would expect the in-group members to defend jealously the non-negotiable, immutable, indeed absolute character of their world-view constructed of the shared graduated knowledge. As long as they do defend it with success, they remain effectively inoculated against the horrors of ambivalent existence.

The existential situation of the stranger is radically different. He is denied the luxury of smugness or self-oblivion. His is an opaque, not a transparent existence. The stranger is his own problem. His identity has been delegitimized; its determining, 'tuning' power has been declared as criminal at worst and demeaning at best. This is not, however, the end of the stranger's trouble. The peculiarity of the stranger's situation *vis-à-vis* the natives is not confined to the condition of *not* being 'tuned' the right way, and to the resulting absence of relevant knowledge and skills. It cannot be removed simply by the process of learning and self-training. Such a process is bound to be self-defeating. The same knowledge which serves so adequately the life functions of the natives may well prove useless to the strangers even if (and particularly if) conscientiously absorbed and assimilated. Despite the appearance to the contrary, it is not the failure to acquire native knowledge which constitutes the outsider as a stranger, but the *incongruent existential constitution* of the stranger, as being neither 'inside' nor 'outside', neither 'friend' nor 'enemy', neither *included* nor *excluded*, which makes the native knowledge

¹ Alfred Schütz, *Collected Papers*, vol. 1 (The Hague: Martinus Nijhof, 1967), pp. 9–12.

² Schütz, *Collected Papers*, vol. 2, pp. 95, 102.

unassimilable.³ All the essential determinants of the stranger's plight lie beyond the reach of everything the stranger himself may do. The stranger's incongruence is born in the Procrustean bed of the binary opposition – the only hospitality the *relativ-natürliche Weltanschauung* of the natives can offer to the ambivalent world.

The first reason which renders the escape from strangerhood impossible is exactly the 'naturalness' of the native state. One is either 'situated' or not, either 'tuned' or not. The whole point of 'being tuned' is that it allows only one alternative state, or, rather, collapses all conceivable alternatives into one, and through that absolutizes its own condition. One stays 'being tuned' only as long as this one condition has no history – has not been brought into being or made up. One cannot 'situate oneself' or 'tune oneself in'. Or, rather, the very fact that 'situating' and 'tuning' are *performances* and not *fates*, deprives them of exactly this 'naturalness' which makes them what they are and effective as they are. The idea of 'self-tuning' is, for all practical intents and purposes, an oxymoron. The condition of 'being situated' or 'tuned' persists only as long as it is not brought into the focus of attention and does not become an object of manipulation (that is, remains fully under the spell of Heidegger's *das Man*, Sartre's *l'on*). Yet this – attending to and manipulating – is precisely what the stranger is forced to do, or – wilfully or obligingly – attempts to do. Either he is a newcomer to the group in a literal sense, and then what seems obvious to the natives looks hardly obvious to him, and what the natives do not give any thought to turns into a target of intense reflection for him; or the lifting of the 'graduated knowledge' from the grey area of 'evidencies' to the level of self-awareness is performed for the stranger by the native group itself, as they question his natural right to partake of what the in-group members are simply and with-no-questions-asked 'in'. Because of his ignorance, or because of the knowledge which has been forced upon him, the stranger cannot but call into question most of the things that the natives consider, or unthinkingly take as unquestionable. He has been defined *a priori* as a challenge to the clarity of the world and thus to the authority of reason. Now the *a priori* definition is confirmed by

³ Let us observe that the very constitution of the host population as 'the natives' – one conceivable only in as far as there is a vantage point which is *not native* – already reveals the corroding, relativizing gaze of the stranger. Obliquely, it reinforces the strangerhood of the latter. The stranger confirms the dominant definition of himself by the sheer acceptance of the other model as 'native', and so a model wielding authority to define the rules of the behavioural game and the meaning of properly human existence.

his action. His gaze solidifies, renders tangible the mode of life which is effective only in as far as it stays transparent, invisible, uncodified.

Another reason reaches deeper still. The stranger cannot adopt the native culture as it stands without first attempting to revise some of its precepts; perhaps even such among the precepts as are crucial for the native state of security and self-assurance. The native culture defines him and sets him apart as a miscreant – ‘neither friend nor foe’; as that ambivalent inside/outside which sets the limit of the life-world’s order. The stranger is assigned no status inside the cultural realm he wants to make his own. His entry will therefore signify a violation of the culture he enters. By the act of his entry, real or merely intended, the life-world of the natives that used to be a secure shelter is turned into a contested ground, insecure and problematic. By the same token, the very good will of the stranger turns against him; his effort to assimilate sets him further apart, bringing his strangeness into fuller than ever relief and supplying the proof of the threat it contains.

Exclusion into objectivity

One cannot knock on a door unless one is outside; and it is the act of knocking on the door which alerts the residents to the fact that one who knocks is indeed outside. ‘Being outside’ casts the stranger in the position of *objectivity*: his is an outside, detached and autonomous vantage-point from which the insiders (complete with their world-view, including their map of friends and enemies) may be looked upon, scrutinized and censored. The very awareness of such an outside point of view (a point of view epitomized by the stranger’s status) makes the natives feel uncomfortable, insecure in their home ways and truths. Besides, entry is always a passage, a changing of statuses – and this mysterious event of avatar more than anything else puts the ‘yesterday’s stranger – prospective native’ in conflict with the world he wishes to enter, a world which draws its confidence (and its attraction for the stranger in the first place) from the assumption that no one is ever transformed, no one moves and no one ever finds himself outside. The episode of entry brands the ‘former stranger’ forever – as a *changeling*, a person who can pick and choose, who has the freedom which the ‘just so natives’ do not possess, whose status can never have the same degree of solidity, finality and irreversibility as that of the natives. The loyalty which is simply taken for granted in the case of the natives (and then understood not as decision to be loyal, but as commonality of fate), calls for suspicious and vigilant scrutiny in the case of yesterday’s stranger; and forever so, as his commitment has been compromised from the start and beyond the hope of redemption by the

original sin of being freely chosen. Whatever has been chosen may be renounced. The loyalty of the stranger will always remain doubtful. The very zeal with which he identifies with the new home sets him apart. His insistence on being at home is taken down as admission of guilt.

The *objectivistic* (rootless, cosmopolitan or downright alien) bias of the stranger is the most serious of charges the native community holds against him. Indeed, it is through this grievance that the native form of life may best sustain and reproduce its own *naturalness*, its inwardness, its self-centredness – all the most solid pillars of its identity. In the native world-view, the essence of the stranger is homelessness. Unlike an alien or a foreigner, the stranger is not simply a newcomer, a person temporarily out of place. He is an *eternal wanderer*, homeless always and everywhere, without hope of ever ‘arriving’. The ‘objectivity’ (cosmopolitanism, antipatriotism, non-commitment, ‘turncoatism’) of his view consists precisely in his inability to make a distinction between the stations of his unstoppable pilgrimage: as far as he is concerned, all of them are just sites, confined in space, bound to become the past in the future. Passed by, and sooner or later left behind, they all look to him alike: they are all identical in their *negativity*, as none of them is a home. (‘We have been good Germans in Germany and therefore we shall be good Frenchmen in France.’ Hannah Arendt remembers this declaration of a refugee who just crossed the Rhine, escaping Hitler. He was earnestly applauded by his fellows in fate. No one laughed, Arendt comments.)

The natives may view the freedom they impute to the stranger with genuine horror, with a jaundiced eye, or (most commonly) with a mixture of both. To the stranger himself, however, freedom appears first of all as acute uncertainty. Unmitigated by at least a part-time availability of safe harbour, it tends to be experienced as a curse rather than a blessing. Freedom in the unalloyed state is lived as loneliness, and as a chronic condition is virtually unbearable. In the extreme case it verges on madness – but even in mild versions it tends to be medicalized as a mental problem. (Compare, for instance, Sander L. Gilman’s penetrating study of the history of *neurasthenia* – a psychiatric concept which in the late nineteenth century integrated, as one disease-unit, the heightened restlessness, frantic self-criticism and obsession with success and social acceptance, observed or anticipated among various categories of people – all poorly defined in terms of the accepted social categories or weakly anchored in the existing social divisions.)⁴ In each case, it is a state in which its occupier would not wish to remain permanently. Not of his own will, anyway.

⁴ Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 129–30, 162, 214–5.

It is mainly for this reason that – despite all its inner incongruence – the offer of 'turning native' through the adoption of native culture, of assimilation, seems to the stranger such an alluring proposition. It promises what the stranger misses most – an unambiguous placement, safe harbour, home. The missing magnifies the attractions of what is missed. One would therefore expect from the stranger a degree of earnestness, commitment and emotional identification seldom to be found among the natives. One would also expect a tendency to proclaim the aspired-to identity loudly and publicly. One would anticipate the praise of the symbols and the articles of faith of the aspired-to community to be lavish and flowery. All this follows naturally from a need to convince the audience of having *acquired* a quality which other people – simultaneously viewers and actors – *possess* of right. But to those other people – the 'natives' – all this may seem excessive, 'in bad taste', ludicrous or duplicitous. In each case, what they see will tend to disprove the very point that the stranger zealously tried to prove.

The strategy that follows the assimilatory offer has therefore its intrinsic limits, like the offer itself. More often than not, it is self-defeating; if anything, it renders the strangeness of the stranger yet more obtrusive and vexing. Unfailingly, it reveals this strangeness as irredeemable – the quality which the promise of assimilation attempted to hide. The stranger had been promised that full 'domestication' would follow cultural reform; that refinement of manners, correct and etiquette-conscious public demeanour, careful avoidance of everything even remotely alien-sounding would suffice as the membership tickets to the exclusive club of native trend-setters. The bluff of this promise is called the moment it has been taken seriously and matched with a behaviour it ostensibly required. The real obstacles guarding the entry are now revealed. They prove to be economic, political and above all social – and none of them is likely to be as malleable, as amenable to subjective intention as the 'merely cultural' obstacles pretended to be. It becomes apparent that social divisions are neither caused, nor sustained by the differences in the degree of civility and cultural polish; that the deceit of the etiquette consists precisely in the tacit acceptance, by those who gain and those who lose alike, of the injunction to hide and the prohibition to reveal the true grounds of distinction and privilege. At the same time, when the grounds of inequality are exposed as tough and inflexible, their favourite defences are exposed as sham. No wonder that acting on the offer of acculturation tends to trigger the defensive reactions of the native community, ranging all the way from the reintroduction of ascriptive criteria of difference (albeit in a modern, 'rational', racist garb), through the medicalization of the other-

ness as such, and up to the annihilation of the obstreperous residue of difference by eviction or destruction of the stranger.

If recourse to racism seems to be the natural way of salvaging the *objective* of 'assimilation programme' in the wake of the bankruptcy of its ostensible *means*, so the retreat into 'strangerhood' as a substitute home of rootedness and confidence seems to be an equally natural way of salvaging the *purpose* of the cultural self-adaptation once the *vehicle* offered by the programme have proved ineffective.

Hardly ever was a programme of such a retreat so blatantly spelled out as in the work of Russian-Jewish philosopher Lev Shestov, in his later life a professor at the Sorbonne and one of the pillars of religious existentialism. Branded with the stigma of a despised and resented minority, yet excelling in the very activity which the despising and resenting majority brandished as the sign of its superiority and excellence, having passed with flying colours all the entrance examinations and yet been refused entry to the academic world that defined itself as the guardian of the absolute, universal values and hence alien to all parochial difference, Shestov⁵ responded with a frontal assault against what was (as he set about to prove) an incurable *parochiality* of the very search for the *absolute* in general, and for the absolutely superior values in particular. The philosophers' search for the ultimate system, for complete order, for the extirpation of everything unknown and unruly – he declared – stems from the worship of firm soil and a secure home, and results in trimming down the infinite human potential. Such a search for the universal cannot but degenerate into a ruthless clamp-down on human possibilities. 'The solid ground sooner or later escapes from beneath man's feet, yet man continues to live without ground or with but a shaky ground under his feet, and then he stops counting the axioms as truths and instead calls them lies.' The bitter experience of a stranger chased away from the door at which he knocked comes out but thinly veiled from Shestov's own philosophical programme:

The settled man says: 'How can one live without certainty about the day to come, how can one sleep without a roof over his head!' But an accident threw him out of his home forever, and he spends his nights in the woods. He cannot sleep: he is afraid of wild animals, of his own brother the vagabond. In the end, however, he entrusts his life to contingency, starts living the vagabond's life and even, perhaps, sleeps quietly at night.

⁵ Lev Shestov, *Apotheosis bespochvennosti: Opyt adogmaticeskogo myshleniya* [Apotheosis of Rootlessness: An Essay in non-Dogmatic Thought] (Paris, YMCA Press, 1971), pp. 27, 32, 41, 49.

The task of philosophy, in sharp contrast to the entire philosophical tradition, is 'to teach men to live in uncertainty'; 'not to calm down, but to disturb'. 'Everywhere and with every step, on each or without any occasion, with or without reason, it is necessary to ridicule the most firmly accepted judgements and to state paradoxes. And then – one will see what happens.'

In an early display of the 'Black is beautiful' posture, Shestov does not deny the valour of all these things which the dominant thought made into the symbols of superiority. Philosophical orthodoxy stands accused of failing to deliver on its promise, of scoring miserably by its own standards. The promise and the standards are not questioned; on the contrary, Shestov insists that only his way of doing philosophy may do justice to both. Truth found inside a tightly sealed home is hardly of any use outside; judgements made inside a room which, for fear of draught, is never aired are blown away with the first gust of wind. The universality of truth and judgement born in confinement is but a cover for that constraint which feeds on the lust for domination and fear of the open space. A non-counterfeit universality may be born only of homelessness. 'As long as the truth is sought by the settled men – the apple of the Tree of Knowledge won't be eaten. The task can be performed only by homeless adventurers, by natural nomads ...'

The table has been turned. It is now the stranger who can find the truth the natives are looking for in vain. Far from being a mark of shame, the incurable foreignness of the stranger is now the sign of distinction. The power of the homeowners is but a sham. The powerlessness of the homeless is but an illusion.

After Shestov few new ideas may be gleaned from Karl Mannheim's fulsome accolade of the *freischwebende Intelligenz*. As in Shestov the lack of social acceptance turns into a condition of undistorted communication: the outcast becomes a hero, the ambivalence of social position is revealed as objectivity of thought. In Maurice Natanson's apt commentary the advantage of Mannheim's intrepid truth-trapper is his 'nomadic existence': 'Bound by no formal commitments, he can move lightly through traditional formulations of social causation, control, and prediction.' It is thanks to his perpetual and irreparable homelessness that Mannheim's intellectual becomes an 'unmasker, penetrator of lies and ideologies, relativizer and devaluator of immanent thought, disintegrator of *Weltanschauungen*'.⁶ Indeed, an awesome corrosive force; a creator who draws his strength from his power of destruction. If reality is so many fenced off and tightly

⁶ Maurice Natanson, *Literature, Philosophy and the Social Sciences* (The Hague, Martinus Nijhof, 1962), p. 170.

guarded private plots, claims to truth remain but excuses for exclusion and eviction orders. One needs to break down the fences first.

Point by point, Mannheim disavows every single property of the 'settled' from which they have drawn their pride, contentment and sense of security. Thus any well-integrated group is self-centred and hence selectively blind: 'not every possible aspect of the world comes within the purview of the members of the group, but only those out of which difficulties and problems for the group arise.' Solidity of roots is a recipe for parochial narrow-mindedness: 'It is clearly impossible to obtain an inclusive insight into problems if the observer or thinker is confined to a given place in society.' The distrust with which the group treats the 'unfit' testifies to the group's own disabilities, rather than to the sins of the stranger. It is the ability of the outsiders 'to attach themselves to classes to which they originally did not belong', the fact that they 'could adapt themselves to any viewpoint ... because they and they alone were in position to choose their affiliation' that the well-settled groups cannot stomach. 'Should the capacity to acquire a broader point of view be considered merely as a liability? Does it not rather present a mission?'⁷

The modern intellectual is a perpetual wanderer and a universal stranger. No one truly likes him for this very reason; in every place he is out of place. The continual rebuffs received everywhere and from everybody need not, however, result solely in fanaticism of desperation. The rejection may as well open the eyes of the rejected to the meaning and the value of the very position (or, rather, the 'un-position') which has been the source of their suffering. Rejection means, after all, freedom from obligations. Eviction means that group loyalties need not any more constrain vision, and thus 'the narrowness and the limitations which restrict one point of view' may be 'corrected by clashing with the opposite points of view'. The exile is a blessing; the outcasts have been banished to the only site 'from which a total perspective would be possible'. They are now ripe for the role of decision makers (or, more precisely, *good decisions* makers), as 'The formation of a decision is truly possible only under conditions of freedom based on the possibility of choice which continues to exist even after the decision has been made.'⁸

In other words, while making a bid for the unique and superior status of the modern intellectual, Mannheim draws on the popular fear of the

⁷ Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (London: Routledge, 1968), pp. 26, 72, 141, 144. For the intellectual the peripheral perspective is not a matter of choice; paradoxically this is because – as Ortega y Gasset remarked – 'the world appears to the Intellectual to be where he questions it' (quoted after *Juden in der Soziologie*, ed. Erhard R. Wiehn (Konstanz, Hartung-Gorre, 1989), p. 29).

⁸ Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, pp. 72, 143.

awesome power residing in the non-man's land outside the safe and habitual family or community plots. He embraces the finality of the native verdict, the perpetuity of the exile. He also accepts the native conviction that the stranger will never become like the native and will never see the world through native eyes. Finally, he agrees with the worst of the native suspicions: that estrangement breeds enmity to all local values. But he reforges the stigma of shame and the legal justification of eviction order into a militant, defiant bid to superiority. To paraphrase Goffman, 'instead of leaning on his crutch, he gets to play golf with it'.

Only on universal (read: non-parochial) foundations, he proclaims on behalf of the intellectual stranger, may truth be built; and universality, as any native would accept, arises out of estrangement. The standpoint of the exile is the only cognitive determinant of universally binding truth. The well-entrenched and self-centred groups inflated their narrow opinions to ostensibly universal proportions with the help of thought-constraints and the banishment of dissenters. By so doing they prevented themselves from finding what they sought, and on the way discredited the very purpose of their search. Now the banished must protect the supreme value of universal truth from all further harm. They will do what those who send them into exile failed to achieve. They will prove that against all odds (and particularly against the dominant, native opinion) they are the staunchest, the most loyal and the most reliable defenders and promoters of the dominant values. And this they can do as long as they refuse to efface their difference, and insist on *remaining strangers*. It is through their estrangement that they serve the values which the group needs and wants to possess. The assimilatory programme may well have failed to secure unification, but it was a false unification that it offered in the first place. The real one will be attained precisely by those whom the promise of acceptance has failed.

The process of self-construction sets the stranger even further apart from the native group with which he still wants to ingratiate himself, now as much as at the initial period of assimilatory dream. The stranger offers a unique, helplessly ambivalent blend of universalist programme and relativist practice. In order to secure true universality of form of life – a purpose he shares with the native group (with *any native group*) – he must expose as false, and thus undermine, the security of values the native group (*any native group*) has grown to consider absolute. The stranger aims at the effacement of all divisions which stand in the way of uniform, essential humanity; this is the last hope he entertains to efface his own outsidersness. To the native group, however, his thrust for *universality* means more than anything else a confrontation with the decomposing, corrosive power of *relativism*.

The intellectuals' neolithic revolution

The essence of the neolithic revolution was the passage from a nomadic to a settled life; or, what amounts to the same thing, from gathering the fruits of nature to growing such plants as nature itself failed to produce. If this was indeed the essence of the neolithic revolution, then we can say that its intellectual equivalent occurred in the years following Mannheim's depiction of the intelligentsia as the category of strangers who reforge the bane of their homelessness into the weapon of universal truth. Or, perhaps, this revolution took off well before that, only Mannheim failed to take note of it.

In America of the 1980s 'colleagues have replaced a public, and jargon has supplanted English', Russell Jacoby commented recently. 'American Marxists today have campus offices and assigned parking spaces.' Indeed,

'to be an intellectual requires a campus address'. Under such new conditions – both the opportunities and the constraints they augur – 'the Marxist theoretical "explosion" has the force of a seminar coffee break', while 'a critical vision is itself evidence of personal failings'.²¹ But Régis Debray²² has defined each successive period in the last hundred years of the French intellectuals' history by reference to the type of abode they occupied at the time (universities, publishing houses, mass media) – all different, but all equally homely, well furnished, safe, warm, accommodating and often even hospitable. Had they ever been nomads, the Intellectuals are not any more. They have arrived. They have settled. They have their own plots to till.

Indeed, an enormous road has been passed since that *milieu artificiel* of aggrieved, militant and resolute draftsmen of the *Grand Design*, who – in Augustin Cochin's opinion – made a 'society' all of their own, in which 'les participants figurent comme libres, libérés de toute attache, de toute obligation, de toute fonction sociale'.²³ The juggernaut of the scientific-technological revolution promoted by panoptical state crushed that quasi-society glued together of discussion and opinion – and sucked in the debris. Free Intellectuals of yore turned into university teachers, government consultants, experts and functionaries of warfare and welfare bureaucracies. The thought has emerged out of its estrangement. It has found the many homes it now inhabits cosy and comfortable. The knights of universality turned into the defenders of hospitals, colleges, opera houses and research institutes – of funds and jobs, of salaries and statute books. Long ago had they ceased to draw their ranks in a solidary opposition to the society which made them into strangers. Hardly ever do they draw their ranks together at all – unless the very right of the expert to rule within his own realm of expertise is at stake. Apart from this one issue on which they are all solidary, there is so much to divide them, so little to unite.

Mannheim's free-floating, estranged and inward-looking Intellectual did not disappear altogether, though most certainly he is now an exception – at war not so much with parochial society, as with parochiality of his better established, sated and self-satisfied colleagues. It was that parochiality which Theodore Adorno (one of the most notorious among 'persons with no permanent address', a prototypical free-floater, never and nowhere

²¹ Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), pp. 180, 220, 172, 203.

²² Cf. Régis Debray, *Le Pouvoir intellectuel en France* (Paris: Ramsay, 1979).

²³ Augustin Cochin, *La Révolution et la libre pensée* (Paris: Plon, 1924), p. xxxvi.

accommodated to his own and his hosts' satisfaction) construed as the staunchest enemy of the 'attempt to change the world' which 'miscarried':

What differs from the existent will strike the existent as witchcraft, while thought-figures such as proximity, home, security hold the faulty world under their spell. Men are afraid that in losing this magic they would lose everything, because the only happiness they know, even in thought, is to be able to hold on to something – the perpetuation of unfreedom.²⁴

His companion, Max Horkheimer, agreed: 'Among the vast majority of the ruled there is the unconscious fear that theoretical thinking might show their painfully won adaptation to reality to be perverse and unnecessary.'²⁵

Looking around at the rational world in which expertise and power merged and knowledge ceased to be the power of the powerless, Max Weber did not give much chance to people like Adorno and Horkheimer: 'The problem which besets us now is not: how can this evolution be changed? – for that is impossible, but ... what can we oppose to this machinery in order to keep a portion of mankind free from this parcelling-out of the soul, from this supreme mastery of the bureaucratic way of life.'²⁶ Long before Mannheim raised the spectre of the universal stranger as the Last Judge, Weber composed his funeral dirge for the free soul; keeping free a portion of mankind was the most he felt entitled to hope for. Adorno and Horkheimer represented such a portion; a very small portion, and to very small avail, to be sure. They were strangers many times over: unattached scholars in the world of well accommodated academics; Germans in a society which thought of them as Jews; exiles from a society which never fully became their home to a society which they never wished to make their home; European philosophers in a land of philistine anti-intellectualism.

They had other strangers like themselves for their only companions and reference. Theirs was the life of exile, with (in Robert Michels's memorable description) its 'brisk exchange of ideas on unoccupied evenings, the continued rubbing of shoulders between men of the most different tongues, the enforced isolation from the bourgeois world of their respective countries, and the utter impossibility of any "practical" action'.²⁷ Soon the impossible turned into the undesirable: what cannot be done is not

²⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), pp. 3, 33.

²⁵ Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell et al. (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), p. 232.

²⁶ Quoted after J.P. Mayer, *Max Weber and German Politics* (London: Faber & Faber, 1956), p. 128.

²⁷ Robert Michels, *Political Parties* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1919), p. 187.

worthy of doing. One can as well derive pride from one's impotence: deafness of the world testifies to the power of the message. With relish, Adorno and Horkheimer found in Paul Deussen's translation of *Upanishads* what they were groping for: a testimony of the irrevocable incompatibility between critical, uncompromising thought, and that effort aimed at the mobilization of popular consensus which practical action demands. To make such an effort, the idea needs to develop into a neat theoretical system. In the process, it cannot remain uncompromising for long; soon it stops to be critical either.²⁸ An active role in life is not compatible with the salvation of the soul; the search for logical cohesion that such an active role requires is not compatible with emancipatory critique. Upanishads (unlike Vedic religion), Cynics (unlike their Stoic successors), St John the Baptist (unlike St Paul) all refused to produce cohesive, harmonious, academically respectable systems, as they stoutly refused any track with politics in whose fetid atmosphere the unbound spirit cannot breathe.

The fewer and more exotic become the estranged, marginalized intellectuals in the world of well settled, practically engaged knowledge class, the more radical and otherworldly becomes their commitment to the universal and the absolute; the more jarring the contrast between the univocality of their loyalties and the ambivalence of their social location. They are strangers not just in relation to the 'natives' and their dominant values. First and foremost, most blatantly and most poignantly, they are strangers in relation to the *fellow members of the knowledge class*. They are traitors to their class loyalty, heretics to their church orthodoxy. The universality they seek is forged out of the opposition to that particularity for which their own knowledge class (the class they reject and by which they are rejected) serves them as the prototype. It is the 'academic science', the 'established wisdom', the 'bureaucratized knowledge' which now stands for the sin of surrender to selfish, parochial interests. It is against those tropes of fall that the wrath and the most poisonous arrows are now aimed.

Not that the arrows reach their intended targets. With knowledge effectively translated into institutionally entrenched expertise, Mannheim's vision of the homeless intelligentsia (an image which smacked of theoretical contrivance at the best of times) looks increasingly nebulous. The experts are anything but rootless. Nor can they be validly accused of *trahison des clercs*. They cannot betray commitments they have never

²⁸ Cf. the note attached to the American Edition of Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* trans. John Cumming (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972).

undertaken. Theirs are specific tasks arising from specific problems. Set in a clear-cut, institutionalized section of an overall division of labour, they have no time for the ancient *querelle* between the nativists and the universalists, and no use for the battle between eternal truths and the scepticism of the modern Pyrrhonians. Their praxis as experts generates neither lust for certainty nor relativist inclinations. If anything, it invalidates both, and above all the conflict between them and the need to choose. Unlike in the huge, society-size gardens eyed greedily by the free-floating intellectuals, each of the little allotments which the experts cultivate can accommodate quite considerable (and absolute) designing authority, without making their own rather confining boundaries into a problem. With the shrinking urge to expand, fades out the lust for universality. With wilting interest in the neighbour behind the partition, peters out the horror of relativity.

It seems that the cognitive perspective of the knowledge class, split as it now is into a multitude of but loosely connected expert sections, favours neither universalism nor relativism, and considerably cools down the controversy between the two. No wonder the most popular philosophies of today are those which humbly admit localized, communally based boundaries of truth while at the same time striving to protect their prerogative of distinguishing between right and wrong inside the accepted borderlines. One can say that in such philosophies *communities* (or forms of life, or traditions, or languages) have become synonymical with the idea of truth: community is the area in which a truth may be agreed as objective and binding, while truth is objective and binding in as far as there is a community which accepts this and thus makes it into a reality inside its boundaries. Community and truth are two rhetorical figures which refer to each other, each one legitimizing itself through the other in the world of experts and compartmentalized truth.

The universality of rootlessness

The 'neolithic revolution' of the spiritual elite, the wondrous transformation of rootless intellectuals into the established knowledge class, is just a more spectacular (perhaps more deeply felt because of being 'closer home') case of a wider process which can be called *the privatization of strangerhood*. A paradoxical corollary of *privatization* is the *universality* of strangerhood: the mode of 'being a stranger' is experienced, to a varying degree, by all and every member of contemporary society with its extreme division of labour and separation of functionally separated spheres. If the members of the knowledge class live through such an

experience, they do it as members of society at large, rather than as scientists, technologists, thinkers or artists. In these latter capacities, their specialized activities, firmly anchored with the help of productive and distributive companies, bureaucratic division of functions and hierarchy of command, institutionalized reward systems, 'networks', 'circles' and 'pegs' (like coffee-houses, clubs, journals) on which their group-identity is fastened²⁹ and which sustain, control and service them, are factors of integration and belonging, rather than estrangement. In their private capacities, however, – as individuals – the knowledge class members share in the universal existential mode, of which the experience of estrangement is a ubiquitous and important component. Strangerhood – more generally, the existential and mental ambivalence – has lost its particularity as human condition; with that loss, it has lost the once rebellious, potentially revolutionary, edge. Having become a *universal* human condition – a mode of 'existence as such' – it does not any more generate universality as dynamite about to explode the smug quotidianity of parochial life. Strangerhood is no more an insight into the other side of existence, a challenge to the here and now, a vantage point of utopia. It itself turned into quotidianity.

As Niklas Luhmann pointed out and convincingly argued, 'with the adoption of functional differentiation individual persons can no longer be firmly located in one single subsystem of society, but rather must be regarded a priori as socially displaced'.³⁰ That is, the individual is a 'displaced person' by definition: it is the very fact that he cannot be fully subsumed under any of the numerous functional subsystems which only in their combination constitute the fullness of his life process (the fact, in other words, that he does not belong fully to any of the subsystems and no subsystem can claim his sole allegiance) that makes him an individual. In relation to each of the subsystems, the individual is a unit of many meanings, an ambivalent compound – always a *partial stranger*. In relation to none of the subsystems is he completely a *native*. In terms of his biography, the contemporary individual passes a long string of widely divergent (uncoordinated at best, contradictory at worst) social worlds. At any single moment of his life, the individual inhabits simultaneously several such divergent worlds. The result is that he is 'uprooted' from each and not 'at home' in any. One may say that he is the *universal stranger*. One is tempted to say that he is 'fully at home' only with himself. (This

²⁹ Cf. Warren O. Hagstrom's and Charles Kadushin's contributions to *The Production of Culture*, ed. Richard A. Petersen (London: Sage, 1976).

³⁰ Niklas Luhmann, *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy*, trans. Jeremy Gaines and Doris L. Jones (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 15.

circumstance, let us note, sends the last nail into the coffin of the *compleat mappa mundi*; yet at the same time it draws the revolutionary sting out of the resistance to parochiality of home-baked mini-orders.) Indeed, as Luhmann would express it, for the contemporary individual the ego becomes the seat and the focal point of all inner experience, while environment, split into fragments with little lateral connection, loses most of its contours, and much of its meaning-defining authority.

And yet such 'being at home with oneself' is highly problematic. It may come to be, if at all, only as an achievement of protracted and tortuous effort. The poor co-ordination between subsystems is reflected in the heterogeneity of the self. Partial estrangements are incorporated and experienced as the self's resilience to integration. The self is burdened with the impossible task of rebuilding the lost integrity of the world; or, more modestly, with the task of sustaining the production of self-identity; doing on its own what was once entrusted to the native community. In fact, it is now inside the self that such a 'native community', as the frame of reference for self-identity, must be construed. And it is only within the self's work of imagination that such community has its, necessarily precarious, existence.

During the *Sturm und Drang* phase of modernity's being in a state of homelessness, non-belongingness, ambivalence required an apology. The absence of an address to which such apology could be sent is one of the most conspicuous and consequential features of our own part of the modern era. Individuals mostly turn to their private lives as the only location where they may hope to build a home amidst the *universal homelessness*. Their hope is dashed, however.

over and over again, the cold winds of 'homelessness' threaten these fragile constructions. It would be an overstatement to say that the 'solution' of the private sphere is a failure; there are too many individual successes. But it is always very precarious.³¹

And as far as the experience of estrangement is concerned, it is the fact that they are endemically *precarious*, even if they do not fail, which counts.

A world in which everything is in constant motion is a world in which certainties of any kind are hard to come by . . . What is truth in one context of the individual's social life may be error in another. What was considered right at one stage of the individual's social career becomes wrong in the next.³²

³¹ Peter L. Berger, Brigitte Berger and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 168.

³² Berger *et al.*, *The Homeless Mind*, p. 145.

Today's world does not abolish strangerhood and the existential ambivalence with which it is infused. But it does not offer any hope that the stranger can be redeemed. And as the condition of ambivalence turns into an ever more universal experience, and thus the prospect of redemption grows increasingly dim, the emancipatory urge peters out.

There is a substantive difference between being a stranger in a well settled native world, and a stranger in a world on the move. In the first case, misery comes complete with the promise, hope and a programme of its termination. The apparently clear-cut hierarchy of native values and norms defines what is to be done, and defines it with uncontested authority. The natives embody the human *universal* which renders the stranger's form of humanity parochial and shameful. It is easy (perhaps natural) to confuse then the effort of assimilation to the dominant native standards with the promotion of universal truth; to define the malaise of a particular strangerhood as the deformation, or paucity, of universality; to identify the urge to efface a specific difference with the need of clearing the site for the uniform and absolute rule of universal standards. In the second case, however, though the strangers remain strangers, they do not live any more among the natives; indeed, there are no such natives in sight. In the absence of uncontested standards, of such standards as may sensibly claim, or aspire to, ascendancy – strangerhood does not feel like a temporary condition. Much less than before does it feel like an unbearable condition, one from which one has the duty to redeem oneself. Difference now bears no guilt; and the shame of being guilty of difference no longer prompts the culprit to escape from estrangement.

The vision of universality is born of rootlessness – but its supplies are being replenished only as long as the rootlessness remains a *particular* condition, a handicap, a disadvantage. Once rootlessness itself turns into a universal condition, particularity has been effaced, though not in the way once seen in the dreams of the rootless. Relativity becomes now the great equalizer; it is through peculiarity that one escapes the stigma of difference. It is only through setting oneself apart that one can share in the predicament of others, and participate on equal footing in the universal human condition. Strangerhood has become universal. Or, rather, it has been dissolved; which, after all, amounts to the same. If everyone is a stranger, no one is.

It remains to be seen to what extent the widespread aversion to grand social designs, the loss of interest in absolute truths, privatization of redemptive urges, reconciliation with the relative – merely heuristic – value of all life techniques, acceptance of irredeemable plurality of the world, in short all these worrying yet nevertheless exhilarating trends which are usually subsumed under the name of *postmodernity*, are a

lasting consequence of that *abolition* of strangerhood which has been attained through raising it to the *status of a universal human condition*.

The threat and the chance

What the inherently polysemic and controversial idea of postmodernity most often refers to (even if only tacitly) is first and foremost an acceptance of ineradicable plurality of the world; plurality which is not a temporary station on the road to the not-yet attained perfection (imperfections are many and varied; perfection, by definition, is always one), a station sooner or later to be left behind – but the constitutive quality of existence. By the same token, postmodernity means a resolute emancipation from the characteristically modern urge to overcome ambivalence and promote the monosemic clarity of the sameness. Indeed, postmodernity reverses the signs of the values central to modernity, such as uniformity and universalism. And once it has been perceived as irreducible and unlikely to converge, neither to be dissolved in one life-form aiming at universality, nor degraded by one form aiming at universal domination, variety of life-forms is not merely grudgingly accepted, but lifted to the rank of a supreme positive value. Postmodernity is modernity that has admitted the non-feasibility of its original project. Postmodernity is modernity reconciled to its own impossibility – and determined, for better or worse, to live with it. Modern practice continues – now, however, devoid of the objective that once triggered it off.

In the absence of the intent to dominate, the presence of mutually exclusive standards neither offends the desire of logical congruity nor triggers off a remedial action. Ideally speaking, in the plural and pluralistic world of postmodernity, every form of life is permitted on principle, or, rather, no agreed principles are evident (or uncontestedly agreed) which may render any form of life impermissible. Once the difference ceases to be an oppression and is not construed as a problem calling for action and resolution, peaceful coexistence of distinct forms of life becomes *possible* in another sense than as a temporary equilibrium of hostile powers. The principle of coexistence may (just may) replace the principle of universalization, while the precept of tolerance may (just may) take place of those of conversion and subordination. Liberty, equality, brotherhood was the war-cry of modernity. *Liberty, diversity, tolerance* is the armistice formula of postmodernity. And with tolerance reforged into *solidarity* (see chapter 8), armistice may even turn into peace.

One can thus *hope* for the disappearance of one of the paramount grounds of the destructive urge as the self-assertion of different forms of

life loses the character of a zero-sum game. Room for new forms can be found without vacating the space occupied by the extant ones, and thus the most important reason for the rhetoric and practice of destruction loses a good deal of its past cogency. (So does, we may add, the romantic heroism of revolutionary novelty. Revolutions retain their appeal only as long as the experience of difference remains intolerable. The acceptance of relativity and reconciliation to ambivalence defuses the attraction of radical and condensed change; indeed, it renders revolution meaningless. If there are no standards to be preserved at the expense of others, there are no standards which need to be moved out of the way to enable others to exist. The strategy of innovation entails a strategy of destruction only if the novelty is meant to displace.)

The acceptance of the permanence of differentiation (and of plurality of principally co-ordinated actions which support it) is intimately related to the demise of the grand designs of social engineering. The latter amounts to the erosion of the gardening or surgical stance which throughout the modern age characterized the attitudes and the policies of institutionalized powers – and above all the powers of the nation-state. Modernity proclaimed the essential artificiality of the social order and the inability of society to attain an orderly existence on its own. It also proclaimed that the establishment of the social order requires the asymmetrical distribution of agency – that is, dividing the society into actors and the objects of their actions. The exclusive claim of elected agency to define the state of order as distinct from chaos was articulated in the ideology of reason's superiority over passions, rational conduct over irrational drives, and knowledge over ignorance or superstition. Opposition between such abstract values both generated and reflected practical social divisions. Most importantly, it serviced the perpetual condensation of autonomy and choice on one pole of the social division and delegitimation of the autonomous will of the other side. By the same token, this opposition may lose most of its cutting power once the impulse of domination melts in the atmosphere of coexistence and (chosen or enforced) toleration. It may (just may) not survive for long the fading of the engineering ambition that was its meaning and reason. It derived its sense from missionary projects and crusades; it can hardly outlive them.

The memory of the opposition, however, prompts one to conceive of its fall from grace as being one of the rehabilitation of irrationality and the surrender of reason. What is perceived in such a way, however, is merely the sudden and not-yet-fully grasped meaninglessness of the distinction at a time when the planned and designed, man-made fate ceased to differentiate between forms of life anointed to govern and those marked for colonization or extinction. Irrationality is the waste of rationality industry.

Chaos is the waste accumulating in the production of order. The frightening incongruity of the stranger is the refuse left after the world has been cleanly cut into a slice called 'us' and another labelled 'them'. Ambivalence is a toxic side-product in the production of semiotic transparency. Irrationality, chaos, strangerhood, ambivalence are all names for that nameless 'beyond' for which the dominant powers that identified themselves as reason, as forces of order, as natives, as meaning have no use. They are by-products of designing ambitions, in the same way that weeds are the products of garden designs. They have no other meaning but someone's refusal to tolerate them. Or, rather, once the empirical solvents has been evaporated and only hard crystals of value are left, all their manifold meanings turn out to be that difference which someone, somewhere, refused to live with.

There are, as Dick Higgins suggested a decade ago, *cognitive* and *post-cognitive* questions. The first have lost much of their allure; the second are asked with growing frequency. Cognitive questions stemmed from the axiom of the current or prospective *oneness* of the world. In the one and only world, a world that suffers no alternative to itself, the task is to fathom what this world demands of those who wish to find their place in it. The questions are, therefore: 'How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?' Post-cognitive questions do not enjoy the luxury that the old axiom offered. Indeed, they have hardly any axioms from which they may take off for a confident start. Nor do they have a clear address. Before they turn to exploring the world they must find out what world(s) is (are) there to be explored. Hence: 'Which world is it? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?' – in this order.

Projecting back later discursive usages, Brian McHale renames Higgins's questions as, respectively, *modernist* and *postmodernist*.³³ He observes as well that according to orthodox philosophical divisions, cognitive questions belong to epistemology, while post-cognitive questions are primarily ontological; thus the 'post-cognitive' questions are not *cognitive* at all; at least not in the strict sense. They reach beyond the boundaries of epistemology. Or, rather, they return to the fundamental issue of being, which is to be settled *before* the epistemology may approach its task in earnest, and which most epistemological questions asked during the modern era assumed settled. And so the typically modern questions are, among others: 'What is there to be known? Who knows it? How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?' The typically postmodern questions do not reach that far. Instead of locating the task for the knower, they attempt to locate the knower himself. 'What is a world? What kinds of

world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?' Even when sharing concern about knowledge, the two types of inquiry articulate their problems differently: 'How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another, and with what degree of reliability?'; as against: 'What happens when different worlds are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?' Note that postmodern questions have no use for 'certainty'; not even for 'reliability'. The oneupmanship of modernist epistemology looks hopelessly out of place in that pluralist reality to which the postmodern ontological inquiry is first reconciled, and then addressed. That overwhelming desire of power which animated the search for the ultimate (and which alone could animate it) raises here little passion. Only eyebrows are raised by the self-confidence which once made the pursuit of the absolute look like a plausible project.

It seems that in the world of universal ambivalence of strangerhood, the stranger is no more obsessed with the ambivalence of what is and the absoluteness of *what ought to be*. This is a new experience for the stranger. And since the stranger's experience is one most of us now share, this is also a new situation for the world. With such new experience, neither the stranger nor his world are likely to remain the same. But with what consequences?

Richard Rorty has recently summarized Proust's achievement in the following way:

Like Nietzsche, he rid himself of the fear that there was an antecedent truth about himself, a real essence which others must have detected. But Proust was able to do so without claiming to know the truth which was hidden from the authority figures of his earlier years. He managed to debunk authority without setting himself up as authority, to debunk the ambitions of the powerful without sharing them.³⁴

The great chance of postmodernity is to replicate on a massive scale Proust's personal achievement. The formidable danger of postmodernity is that – having failed the chance – it may resuscitate defunct (or merely hibernating?) ambitions of the adolescent modernity and feed into its own contemporaries desire to re-live them. History, Marx said, always occurs twice. First as a tragedy, later as a farce. But then, as in so many of his predictions, Marx could have erred as to the order in which the genres succeed each other.

³³Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1987), p. 10.

³⁴ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 103.

Postmodernity, or Living with Ambivalence

We could try to transform our contingency into our destiny.

Agnes Heller

In one respect the social sciences born in the age of Enlightenment have not failed – writes Agnes Heller: ‘they have indeed provided self-knowledge, and they never ceased providing self-knowledge of *modern* society, of a *contingent* society, of one society among many, *our society*’.¹ And yet, let us observe, this partial success was itself a failure, if judged by the standards of the social sciences’ ambition. Whatever modern social sciences did, they did not deliver *on their promise*; instead, with no knowing and even less intending, they delivered something they did not promise; to put it bluntly, they were delivering a reasonable product all along under the false pretences of supplying something else altogether . . . Awareness of contingency – of the contingency of the modern self, of the contingency of modern society – was not what they, their prophets, their apostles, their intended converts and aspiring beneficiaries bargained for. If one agrees with Heller that the social sciences, all their self-deception notwithstanding, did supply precious knowledge later to be appreciated as an insight into contingency, one must still insist that they did it while misconceiving the true nature of their business, or that they did it while trying to pass their products for something other than it was (thus remaining – knowingly or unknowingly – in breach of the official trading act . . .): that they informed of *contingency* while believing themselves to narrate *necessity*, of particular *locality* while believing themselves to narrate *universality*, of tradition-bound interpretation while believing

¹ Agnes Heller, ‘From Hermeneutics in Social Science toward a Hermeneutics of Social Science’, in *Theory and Society*, vol. 18 (1989), pp. 291–322. Other quotations from Heller that follow come from the same source.

themselves to narrate the extraterritorial and extratemporal truth, of undecidability while believing themselves to narrate transparency, of the provisionality of the human condition while believing themselves to narrate the certainty of the world, of the *ambivalence* of man-made design while believing themselves to narrate the *order* of nature.

It was all these beliefs (false beliefs), and not their deliveries (useful deliveries) that made the social sciences, and the mentality from which they arose, and the power structure that contemplated itself in that mentality, *modern*. For most of its history, modernity lived in and through self-deception. Concealment of its own parochiality, conviction that whatever is not universal in its particularity is but not-yet-universal, that the project of universality may be incomplete, but remains most definitely on, was the core of that self-deception. It was perhaps thanks to that self-deception that modernity could deliver both the wondrous and the gruesome things that it did; in this, as in so many other cases, ignorance, so to speak, turned out to be a privilege. The question is: is the fading of self-deception a final fulfilment, emancipation, or the end of modernity?

The distinctive feature of the belief in the truth of one's knowledge is not the conviction that the knowledge in question is satisfying, pleasing, useful, or otherwise worth holding to. Such a conviction does not require the belief in truth for support. More often than not, this conviction can be and is held without worry about authoritative confirmation that the belief in truth is sound. Where one cannot do without the 'well grounded concept of truth' is when it comes to tell others that they are in error and hence (1) ought or must change their minds, thus (2) confirming the superiority (read: right to command) of the holder of truth (read: the giver of command). The bid for truth as a claimed quality of knowledge arises therefore solely in the context of hegemony and proselytism; in the context of coexistence of autonomously sustained bodies of knowledge of which at least one refuses to coexist peacefully and respect the existing borders; in the context of plurality that is treated by at least one member as a vexing state to be rectified; in the context of a balance of forces under pressure to turn into asymmetry of power.

Truth is, in other words, a *social relation* (like *power*, *ownership* or *freedom*): an aspect of a hierarchy built of superiority-inferiority units; more precisely, an aspect of the hegemonic form of domination or of a bid for domination-through-hegemony. Modernity was, from its inception, such a form and such a bid. The part of the world that adopted modern civilization as its structural principle and constitutional value was bent on dominating the rest of the world by dissolving its alterity and assimilating the product of dissolution. The persevering alterity could not but be treated as a temporary nuisance; as an error, sooner or later bound to be

supplanted by truth. The battle of order against chaos in wordly affairs was replicated by the war of truth against error on the plane of consciousness. The order bound to be installed and made universal was a *rational* order; the truth bound to be made triumphant was the *universal* (hence apodictic and obligatory) truth. Together, political order and true knowledge blended into a design for *certainty*. The rational-universal world of order and truth would know of no contingency and no ambivalence. The target of certainty and of absolute truth was indistinguishable from the crusading spirit and the project of domination.

While setting itself apart, making itself distinct so that it would be possible to reserve a position of command toward the rest of the *oikoumene*, modernity thought of itself as of the seed of future universality, as of an entity destined to replace all other entities and thus to abolish the very difference between them. It thought of the *differentiation* it perpetrated as of *universalization*. This was modernity's self-deception. This was, however, a self-deception bound to disclose itself even without outside help (there was, anyway, no 'outside' left, allowed the legitimacy to disclose anything); a self-deception that could last only as long as it worked toward that disclosure. The self-deception supplied the courage and the confidence to pursue that lonely work of universality that spawned ever more difference; to persevere in such a chase of uniformity as was bound to result in more ambivalence. The self-deception of modernity was pregnant with its self-disclosure.

It is perhaps the fruit of that pregnancy that Agnes Heller dubbed the 'death wish' that was to be found at the other end of the long march toward 'wish-fulfillment'; that was to be, as we tried to argue here, the latter's inescapable heir and successor. Awareness of contingency, though a prodigal child, was a fully legitimate offspring of blind self-confidence; it could not but be born of it and it could not be born of any other parent. The residents of the house of modernity had been continuously trained to feel at home under conditions of necessity and to feel unhappy at the face of contingency; contingency, they had been told, was that state of discomfort and anxiety from which one needed to escape by making oneself into a binding norm and thus doing away with difference. Present unhappiness is the realization that this is not to be, that the hope will not come true and hence one needs to live without the hope that supplied the meaning – the only meaning – to life. As Richard Rorty observed: 'The vocabularies are, typically, parasitic on the hopes – in the sense that the principal function of the vocabularies is to tell stories about future outcomes which compensate for present sacrifices'² – and, let us add, give

² Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 86.

name to present sufferings; they narrate the present as *specific* suffering that needs a *concrete* sacrifice to cease to be a suffering *as such*. We are unhappy today, as we have been left with the old vocabulary but without the hope that fed it with life juices. The rustle of desiccated, sapless words reminds us ceaselessly, obtrusively of the void that is where hope once was.

Having been trained to live in necessity, we have found ourselves living in contingency. And yet, being bound to live in contingency, we can, as Heller suggests, make 'an attempt to transform it into our destiny'. One makes something a destiny by embracing the fate: by an act of choice and the will to remain loyal to the choice made. Abandoning the vocabulary parasitic on the hope of (or determination for) universality, certainty and transparency is the first choice to be made; the first step on the road to emancipation. We cannot forget contingency any more; were it able to speak, contingency would repeat what Nietzsche wrote to his discoverer, friend and prophet Georg Brandes on 4 January 1889 (the day he finally withdrew from the concerns of mundane life): 'After you had discovered me, it was no trick to find me; the difficulty now is to lose me . . .'³ But we can transfer contingency from the vocabulary of dashed hopes into that of the opportunity, from the language of domination into that of emancipation. Heller writes:

An individual has transformed his or her contingency into his or her destiny if this person has arrived at the consciousness of having made the *best* out of his or her practically infinite possibilities. A society has transformed its contingency into its destiny if the members of this society arrive at the awareness that they would prefer to live at no other place and at no other time than the here and now.

From tolerance to solidarity

But, let us comment, that awareness that ushers into emancipation is not the only thing that happens on the road to contingency as destiny. The emancipation which contingency as destiny makes possible (one of those 'practically infinite possibilities') entails the *acceptance* that there are other places and other times that may be with equal justification (or equal absence of good reason) preferred by members of other societies, and that

³ Quoted after Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking*, trans. F.D. Wieck and J.G. Gray (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 53. Cf. also Shoshana Felman, *Writing and Madness*, trans. Martha Noel Evans and author (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 62.

however different they are, the choices cannot be disputed by reference to anything more solid and binding than preference and the determination to stick to the preferred. The preference for one's own, communally shared form of life must therefore be immune to the temptation of cultural crusade. Emancipation means such acceptance of one's own contingency as is grounded in recognition of contingency as the sufficient reason to live and to be allowed to live. It signals the end to the horror of alterity and to the abhorrence of ambivalence. Like truth, emancipation is not a quality of objects, but of the *relation* between them. The relation opened up by the act of emancipation is marked by the end of fear and the beginning of *tolerance*. It is on tolerance that the vocabulary of contingency-as-destiny is bound to be parasitic to allow emancipation to articulate.

As Rorty convincingly explains, the language of necessity, certainty and absolute truth cannot but articulate humiliation – humiliation of the other, of the different, of the not-up-to-the-standard. The language of contingency, on the contrary, creates a chance 'of being kind, by avoiding humiliation of others'.⁴ Let us observe, however, that 'being kind' is not the end of the story either – not the final station on the road to emancipation. 'Being kind' and the tolerance for which it stands as a locutionary and behavioural symbol may well mean mere indifference and unconcern deriving from resignation (that is, from *fate*, not *destiny*): the Other will not go away and would not become like me, but then I have no means (at the moment, at least, or in the foreseeable future) to force him to go or to change. As we are doomed to share space and time, let us make our coexistence bearable and somewhat less dangerous. By being kind I invite kindness. I hope that my offer of reciprocity will be taken up; such a hope is my sole weapon. Being kind is but a way to keep the danger at a distance; like the proselytizing urge of yore, it arises out of fear.

To unravel the emancipatory potential of contingency-as-destiny, it would not suffice to avoid humiliating the others. One needs also to *respect* them – and respect them precisely in their otherness, in the preferences they have made, in their right to make preferences. One needs to honour the otherness in the other, the strangeness in the stranger, remembering – with Edmond Jabès – that 'the unique is universal', that it is being different that makes us resemble each other and that I cannot respect my own difference but by respecting the difference of the

⁴ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 91. But remember the inherent dangers of toleration discussed in the introduction. The kindness of the tolerant attitude does not by itself exclude the worst there is in humiliation: the assumption of inherent inferiority of the tolerated object. By itself, toleration may well be just another form in which virtues of the tolerant are re-asserted.

other. 'The case of the stranger concerns me not just because I myself am a stranger, but because it raises, for itself, the problems that we confront in principle and in daily applications of liberty, power, duty and fraternity: in the first place, the problem of equality of men; secondly, of our responsibility towards them and towards ourselves.'⁵ My link with the stranger is revealed as *responsibility*, not just indifferent neutrality or even cognitive acceptance of the similarity of condition (and certainly not through the disdainful version of tolerance: 'It serves him well to be like that, and let him be, though I cannot imagine to be such myself'). It is revealed, in other words, as commonality of destiny, not mere resemblance of fate. Shared fate would do with mutual *tolerance*; joint destiny requires *solidarity*.

The right of the Other to his strangerhood is the only way in which my own right may express, establish and defend itself. It is from the right of the Other that my right is put together. The 'I am responsible for the Other', and 'I am responsible for myself', come to mean the same thing. Having chosen them both, and having them chosen as one thing, one indivisible attitude, not as two correlated, yet separate stances, is the meaning of the reforging contingency from fate into destiny. Call this as you like: fellow-feeling, imaginative identification, empathy; one thing you cannot say about such a choice is that it follows a rule or a command – be it an injunction of reason, a rule empirically demonstrated by truth-seeking knowledge, a command of God or a legal precept.

As a matter of fact, there is not much you can say about the cause of it at all. The new solidarity of the contingent is grounded in silence. Its hopes lie in refraining from asking certain questions and seeking certain answers; it is satisfied with its own contingency and does not wish to be elevated to the status of truth, necessity or certainty, knowing too well (or, rather, feeling intuitively) that it would not survive the promotion. Solidarity comes into its own when the language of necessity – the language of estrangement, discrimination and humiliation, falls out of use. Trying to pinpoint the most decisive mark of the ideal society – in his rendition, the ideal *liberal* society – Richard Rorty settled for people who 'would feel no more need to answer the question "Why are you a liberal?"'. In such a society a person 'would not need a justification for her sense of human solidarity, for she was not raised to play the language game in which one asks and gets justifications for that sort of belief'.⁶

Contingent existence means existence devoid of certainty, and one certainty that is missing at this desolate site of ours, or difficult to be

⁵ Cf. Jabès, *Un Étranger avec, sous le bras, un livre de petit format*, pp. 112–15.

⁶ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 87.

excavated from beneath the debris of modern truths, is the certainty of solidarity. The road from tolerance to solidarity, like any other road, is undetermined; it is itself contingent. And so is the other road, one leading from tolerance to indifference and estrangement; it is equally contingent, and thus equally plausible. The state of tolerance is intrinsically and incurably ambivalent. It lends itself with equal ease, or equal difficulty, to celebratory praise and scornful condemnation; it may give occasion to joy as much as to despair. Living in contingency means living without a guarantee, with just a provisional, pragmatic, Pyrrhonic, until-further-notice certainty, and this includes the emancipatory effect of solidarity.

Modernity could dismiss its own uncertainty as a temporary affliction. Each uncertainty came complete with the recipe for curing it: just one more problem, and problems were defined by their solutions. (Societies, Marx insisted, never put before themselves tasks until means for their execution are available.) The passage from uncertainty to certainty, from ambivalence to transparency seemed to be a matter of time, of resolve, of resources, of *knowledge*. It is an entirely different matter to live with the postmodern awareness of no certain exit from uncertainty; of the escape from contingency being as contingent as the condition from which escape is sought. The discomfort such awareness brings about is the source of specifically postmodern discontents: discontent against the condition fraught with ambivalence, against the contingency that refuses to go away, and against the messengers of the news – those who attempt to spell out and articulate what is new and what is unlikely ever to return to the old: those who, to use again Agnes Heller's terms, call to turn the fate into destiny. What the recipients of the news find difficult to accept is that whatever they resolve to do would lack the comfort of having the truth, or the laws of history, or the unambiguous verdict of reason on its side.

Indeed, anyone seeking practical success would gain little from an insight into the postmodern condition. It cannot be denied that knowledge of this condition fails abominably by the standards set by modern knowledge (or, rather, by the promise that knowledge made and turned into the foundation of its elevated social standing). Awareness of contingency does not 'empower': its acquisition does not give the owner advantage over the protagonists in the struggle of wills and purposes, or in the game of cunning and luck. It does not lead to, or sustains, domination. As if to make the score even, it does not aid the struggle against domination either. It is, to put it bluntly, indifferent to the current or prospective structures of domination. Whoever is after domination – current or prospective (or whoever is just prompted to evaluate the quality of knowledge by the power to do things it promises to supply or make respectable) must be infuriated by the blandness of the refusal of that knowledge to validate all

claims to superiority. Equally furious must be he who wishes to explode the domination that is.

And yet it is just a matter of perspective whether a trait is seen as an affliction or sign of soundness, a vice or a virtue. Dashing the hope of empowerment-through-knowledge amounts to the emphatic disavowal and rebuttal of the power struggle aimed at ultimate domination. It also amounts to the promotion of coexistence: the only condition whose stability, nay permanence, it allows. The awareness of the postmodern condition discloses tolerance as fate. It also makes possible – just possible – the long road from fate to destiny, from tolerance to solidarity.

The antinomies of postmodernity

The collapse of 'grand narratives' (as Lyotard put it) – the dissipation of trust in supra-individual and supra-communal courts of appeal – has been eyed by many observers with fear, as an invitation to the 'everything goes' situation, to universal permissiveness and hence, in the end, to the demise of all moral, and thus social, order. Mindful of Dostoyevsky's dictum 'If there is no God, everything is permitted', and of Durkheim's identification of asocial behaviour with the weakening of collective consensus, we have grown to believe that unless an awesome and incontestable authority – sacred or secular, political or philosophical – hangs over each and every

human individual, then anarchy and universal carnage are likely to follow. This belief supported well the modern determination to install an artificial order: a project that made all spontaneity suspect until proven innocent, that proscribed everything not explicitly prescribed and identified ambivalence with chaos, with 'the end of civilization' as we know it and as it could be imagined. Perhaps the fear emanated from the suppressed knowledge that the project was doomed from the start; perhaps it was cultivated deliberately, since it served a useful role as an emotional bulwark against dissent; perhaps it was just a side-effect, an intellectual afterthought born of the socio-political practice of cultural crusade and enforced assimilation. One way or the other, modernity bent on the bulldozing of all unauthorized difference and all wayward life-patterns could not but gestate the horror of deviation and render deviation synonymous with diversity. As Adorno and Horkheimer commented, the lasting intellectual and emotional scar left by the philosophical project and political practice of modernity was the fear of the void; and the void was the absence of a universally binding, unambiguous and enforceable standard.

Of the popular fear of the void, of the anxiety born of the absence of clear instruction that leaves nothing to the harrowing necessity of choice, we know from the worried accounts narrated by intellectuals, the appointed or self-appointed interpreters of social experience. The narrators are never absent from their narration, though, and it is a hopeless task to try to sift out their presence from their stories. It may well be that at all times there was life outside philosophy, and that such life did not share the worries of the narrators; that it did quite well without being regimented by rationally proved and philosophically approved universal standards of truth, goodness and beauty. It may well be even that much of that life was liveable, orderly and moral *because* it was *not* tinkered with, manipulated and corrupted by the self-acclaimed agents of the 'universal ought'.¹⁹

¹⁹ It is a prominent feature of the postmodern mentality that these and similar doubts are more and more widely shared by intellectual observers. Suddenly a growing number of social scientists discover that normative regulation of daily life is often sustained through 'grass roots' initiative frequently of a heterodox ('deviationary' in official parlance) nature, and has to be protected against encroachments from above. Compare, for example, Michel de Certeau's analysis of *la peruque* (*The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 25ff) as the tool of defence of the self-regulated sphere of autonomy; or Hebdidge's brilliant characterization of subculture (normally the object of officially inspired 'moral panics' and detracted as a hiccup of barbarism, as a product of disintegration of order) as a phenomenon which 'forms up in the space between surveillance and the evasion of surveillance' and 'translates the fact of being under scrutiny into the pleasure of being watched. It is a hiding in the light.' Subculture,

There is hardly any doubt, however, that one form of life can fare but badly without the prop of universally binding and apodictically valid standards: the form of life of the narrators themselves (more precisely, such form of life as contains the stories those narrators were telling through most of modern history).

It was that form of life first and foremost that lost its foundation once social powers abandoned their ecumenical ambitions, and felt therefore more than anyone else threatened by the fading out of universalistic expectations. As long as modern powers clung resolutely to their intention of constructing a better, reason-guided, and thus ultimately universal order, intellectuals had little difficulty in articulating their own claim to the crucial role in the process: universality was their domain and their field of expertise. As long as the modern powers insisted on the elimination of ambivalence as the measure of social improvement, intellectuals could consider their own work – the promotion of universally valid rationality – as a major vehicle and driving force of progress. As long as the modern powers continued to decry and banish and evict the Other, the different, the ambivalent – intellectuals could rely on mighty support for their authority of passing judgement and sorting out truth from falsity, knowledge from mere opinion. Like the adolescent hero of Cocteau's *Orphée*, convinced that the sun would not rise without his guitar and serenade, the intellectuals grew convinced that the fate of morality, civilized life and social order hangs on their solution of the problem of universality: on their clinching and final proof that the human 'ought' is unambiguous, and that its non-ambiguity has unshakeable and totally reliable foundations.

This conviction translated into two complementary beliefs: that there will be no good in the world *unless* its necessity has been proven; and that proving such a necessity, if and when accomplished, will have a similar effect on the world as that imputed to the legislative acts of a ruler: it will replace chaos with order and make the opaque transparent. Husserl was

in Hebdidge's interpretation, is a 'declaration of independence, of otherness, of alien intent, a refusal of anonymity, of subordinate status. It is an *in*subordination. And at the same time it is also a confirmation of the fact of powerlessness, a celebration of impotence. Subcultures are both a play for attention and a refusal, once attention has been granted, to be read according to the book.' (*Hiding in the Light* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 35.) Subculture is deliberate or semi-deliberate politics; it has its conscious or subconscious motive, programme and strategy. It often reaches its purpose: it gains attention, and then it is closely scrutinized so that its inner nature as a defence of autonomy can be gleaned. There are, however, much more massive though less vociferous and hence less visible territories of daily life that do not attract the obtrusive attention of the law-enforcing authorities and thus also the curiosity of intellectual commentators.

perhaps the last great philosopher of the modern era spurred into action by those twin beliefs. Appalled by the idea that whatever we see as truth may be founded but in beliefs, that our knowledge has merely a psychological grounding, that we might have adopted logic as a secure guide to correct thinking simply because this is how people happen on the whole to think, Husserl (like Descartes, Kant and other recognized giants of modern thought before him) made a gigantic effort to cut reason free from its worldly habitat (or was it prison?): to return it to where it belonged – a *transcendental*, out-worldly region, towering above the daily human bustle at a height at which it cannot be reached – neither glimpsed nor tarnished – from the lowly world of common daily experience. The latter could not be the domicile of reason, as it was precisely the world of the common and the ordinary and the spontaneous that was to be remade and reformed and transformed by the verdicts of reason. Only the few, capable of the formidable effort of transcendental reduction (an experience not unlike the shaman's trances, or forty days of desert meditation) can travel to those esoteric places where truth comes into view. For the time of their journey, they must forget – suspend and bracket out – the 'mere existing', so that they may become one with the transcendental subject – that thinking subject that thinks the truth because it does not think anything else, because it is free from its worldly interests and the common errors of the worldly way.

The world which Husserl left behind while embarking on his solitary expedition to the sources of certainty and truth took little note. This was a world of evil on the loose, of concentration camps and of growing stockpiles of bombs and poison gas. The most spectacular and lasting effect of absolute truth's last stand was not so much its *inconclusiveness*, stemming as some would say from the errors of design, but its utter *irrelevance* to the worldly fate of truth and goodness. The latter fate was decided far away from philosophers' desks, down in the world of daily life where struggles for political freedom raged and the limits of the state ambition to legislate social order, to define, to segregate, to organize, to constrain and to suppress were pushed forward and rolled backwards.

It seems that the more advanced is the cause of freedom at home the less demand there is for the services of explorers of distant lands where absolute truth is reputed to reside. When one's own truth seems secure and the truth of the other does not seem to be a challenge or a threat, truth can live well without sycophants assuring it of being 'the truest of them all' and the warlords determined to make sure that no one disagrees. Once the difference ceases to be a crime, it may be enjoyed at peace, and enjoyed for what it is, rather than for what it represents or what it is destined to become. Once the politicians abandon their search for

empires, there is little demand for the philosophers' search for universality.²⁰ Empires of unconfined and unchallenged sovereignty, and the truth of unlimited and uncontested universality were the two arms with which modernity wished to remould the world according to the design of perfect order. Once the intention is no more, both arms find themselves without use.

In all probability the diversity of truths, standards of goodness and beauty does not grow once the intention is gone; neither does it become more resilient and stubborn than before; it only looks less alarming. It was, after all, the modern intention that made difference into an offence: *the* offence, the most mortal and least forgivable sin, to be precise. The pre-modern eye viewed difference with equanimity; as if it was in the pre-ordained order of things that they are and should remain different. Being unemotional, difference was also safely out of the cognitive focus. After a few centuries during which human diversity lived in hiding (a concealment enforced by the threat of exile) and it learned to be embarrassed about its stigma of iniquity, the postmodern eye (that is, the modern eye liberated from modern fears and inhibitions) views difference with zest and glee: difference is beautiful and no less good for that.

The appearance of sequence is, to be sure, itself an effect of the modern knack for neat divisions, clean breaks and pure substances. The postmodern celebration of difference and contingency has not displaced the modern lust for uniformity and certainty. Moreover, it is unlikely ever to do it; it has no capacity of doing so. Being what it is, postmodern mentality and practice cannot displace or eliminate or even marginalize anything. As it is always the case with the notoriously ambivalent (multi-final: opening more than one option, pointing to more than one line of future change) human condition, the gains of postmodernity are simultaneously its losses; what gives it its strength and attraction is also the source of its weakness and vulnerability.

²⁰ Emperor Shih Huang Ti, the hero of Borges's story, was credited with ordering the construction of the Chinese Wall *and* the burning of all the books that had been written before his time. He also boasted in his inscriptions that all things under his reign had the names that befitted them. And he decreed that his heirs should be called Second Emperor, Third Emperor, Fourth Emperor, and so on to infinity (Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Walls and the Books', in *Other Inquisitions, 1937–1952*, trans. Ruth L.C. Simms (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), pp. 1–2.) The four decrees of Shih Huang Ti represent modern ambition at its fullest and most logically coherent. The Wall guarded the perfect kingdom against interference by other coercive pressures; the destruction of books stopped infiltration of other ideas. With the kingdom secure on both fronts, no wonder all things finally received their right and proper names, and, starting with Shih Huang Ti's reign, future history was to be only more of the same.

There is no clean break or unambiguous sequence. Postmodernity is weak on exclusion. Having declared limits off limits, it cannot but include and incorporate modernity into the very diversity that is its distinctive mark. It cannot refuse admission lest it should lose its identity. (Paradoxically, refusal would be equivalent to the ceding of the whole real estate to the rejected applicant.) It cannot but admit the rights of a legitimate resident even to such a lodger as denies its right to admit residents and the right of other residents to share its accommodation. Modern mentality is a born litigant and an old hand in lawsuits. Postmodernity cannot defend its case in court, as there is no court whose authority it would recognize. It might be forced instead to follow the Christian injunction of offering another cheek to the assailant's blows. It certainly is doomed to a long and hard life of cohabitation with its sworn enemy as a room-mate.

To the modern determination to seek or enforce consensus, postmodern mentality may only respond with its habitual tolerance of dissent. This makes the antagonists' chances unequal, with the odds heavily on the side of the resolute and strong-willed. Tolerance is too wan a defence against willfulness and lack of scruples. By itself, tolerance remains a sitting target – an easy prey for the unscrupulous. It can repulse assaults only when reforged into solidarity: into the universal recognition that difference is one universality that is not open to negotiation and that attack against the universal right to be different is the only departure from universality that none of the solidary agents, however different, may tolerate otherwise than at its own, and all the other agents', peril.

And so the transformation of the *fate* into a *destiny*, of tolerance into solidarity, is not just a matter of moral perfection, but a condition of survival. Tolerance as 'mere tolerance' is moribund; it can survive only in the form of solidarity. It just would not do to rest satisfied that the other's difference does not confine or harm my own – as some differences, of some others, are most evidently bent on constraining and damaging. Survival in the world of contingency and diversity is possible only if each difference recognizes another difference as the necessary condition of the preservation of its own. Solidarity, unlike tolerance, its weaker version, means readiness to fight; and joining the battle for the sake of the other's difference, not one's own. Tolerance is ego-centred and contemplative; solidarity is socially oriented and militant.

Like all other human conditions, postmodern tolerance and diversity has its dangers and its fears. Its survival is not guaranteed – not by God's design, universal reason, laws of history, or any other supra-human force. In this respect, of course, the postmodern condition does not differ at all from all other conditions; it differs only by knowing about it, by its

knowledge of living without guarantee, of being on its own. This makes it exceedingly anxiety-prone. And this also gives it a chance.

The futures of solidarity

Postmodernity is a chance of modernity. Tolerance is a chance of postmodernity. Solidarity is the chance of tolerance. Solidarity is a third-degree chance. This does not sound reassuring for one wishing solidarity well. Solidarity cannot draw its confidence from anything remotely as solid and thereby as comforting as social structures, laws of history or the destination of nations and races from which modern projects derived their optimism, self-confidence and determination.

The bridge leading from the postmodern condition to solidarity is not built of necessities. It is not even certain whether there is such a bridge at all. Emancipated from modern hubris, the postmodern mind has less need for cruelty and humiliating the Other; it can afford Richard Rorty's 'kindness'. But kindness may be, and often is, superior, lofty and detached – frequently it feels more like a snub than sympathy. On its own, kindness would not beget solidarity – much as solidarity is not the only possible outcome (not even the most probable outcome) of the collapse of the modern romance with 'designer society'.

More than from anything else, modern designs of global perfection drew their animus from the horror of difference and impatience with otherness. And yet they also offered a chance for genuine concern with the plight of the wretched and miserable (it was this chance that attracted to the modern promise the spokesmen for the underdog). The modern conviction that society need not be as it happens to be, that it might be made better than it was, made each case of individual and group unhappiness into a challenge and a task. As long as the decent life of everybody was, by common consent, a feasible proposition, the administrators of social order felt the need to apologise for their sloth or ineptitude in bringing about a decent life for everybody.

It is not that the likes of Mayhew or Booth or Riis are not with us any more; there are in all probability more of them now than at any other time. The real difference is between the explosive effect that the revelation of human misery once had – and the equanimity with which it is received today. Today the news of human poverty and distress come as more colourful accounts among the many images of the many ways people choose or are fated (by their history, by their religion, by their culture) to live. For a mentality trained to treat society as an unfinished project for the

managers to complete, poverty was an abomination; its life-expectation depended solely on the managerial resolve. For mentality repelled by global visions and wary of all prospects of societal engineering, that poverty is but an element in the infinite variety of existence. Once more, as in pre-modern times convinced of the inscrutable and timeless wisdom of divine order, one can live with daily sights of hunger, homelessness, life without future and dignity; live happily, enjoy the day and sleep quietly at night.

At the height of the modern dream of the perfect society round the corner and of the determination to turn that corner as soon as resources allowed, a tacit agreement had been reached between the managers and the managed as to the priorities to be observed on the way to global happiness. Last time, says J.K. Galbraith, such an agreement – a kind of unwritten 'social contract' (we would rather speak of a promise taken up and trusted) – came into being in Britain under Lloyd George and was agreed in the United States under Roosevelt. But, Galbraith says, 'In the 1980s this understanding was, at a minimum, put in abeyance.' That those who cannot avail themselves of the glittering prizes of rampant consumerism deserve our care and have the right to compensation is no more a matter of silent consent.

Our poor in the US have remained poor, and the number so classified has substantially increased, as has, more markedly, the share of income going to the very rich. The conditions of life in the centres of our large cities is – the word is carefully chosen – appalling. Housing is bad and getting worse. Many of our citizens are without even the barest element of shelter, their income at near starvation levels. Schools are also bad, and young and old, sustained often by crime, contrive a temporary escape from despair with drugs.²¹

That things are bad is not news; for a great many people things used to be bad at the best of times. What is truly new is that things that are bad for some people are seldom a worry for those for whom things are good. The latter have accepted and declared that little they can do may improve the lot of the others. And they even managed to convince themselves that since social engineering has been proved rotten at the core, whatever they decide to do may only make things worse still. The promise has not just been broken. It has been withdrawn.

Kindness may be an opposite of cruelty. Both are, however, sentiments of the interested and the involved; attitudes of *concerned* people – of people who not only look but see, and who worry about what they have

²¹ J.K. Galbraith, 'Assault on Ideology in the Last Decade Hit not only East but also West'. *The Guardian*, 16–17 December 1989, p. 17.

seen. Alternatives of kindness and cruelty both serve the engagement with the Other; they remain on this side of the mutual bond. Outside such an engagement, as the '*otherwise than engagement*', the otherwise than both kindness and cruelty, stands the attitude of *indifference-fed callousness*: a sort of tolerance which to its objects looks more like a life-sentence than a hope of freedom.

It is only too easy for postmodern tolerance to degenerate into the selfishness of the rich and resourceful. Such selfishness is indeed its most immediate and daily manifestation. There seems to be a direct relation between exuberant and expanding freedom of the 'competent consumer' and the remorseless shrinking of the world inhabited by the disqualified one.²² The postmodern condition has split society into the happy seduced and unhappy oppressed halves – with postmodern mentality celebrated by the first half of the division while adding to the misery of the second. The first half may abandon itself to the carefree celebration only because it has satisfied itself that the misery of the second half is their rightful *choice*, or at least a legitimate part of the world's exhilarating diversity. For the first half, misery is the 'form of life' the second half had selected – if only through carrying on a happy-go-lucky style of existence and neglecting the duty of selection.

There is no shortage of postmodern formulae meant to make the conscience of the seduced spotless. Disciples of the Hayeks and Friedmans are around in growing numbers, ready to prove that the rich must be given ever greater prizes so that they may wish to be rich, while for the poor rich rewards are only an encouragement to wallow in poverty; and that enriching themselves ('creating material wealth') is the only service the rich may render to the poor (that is, if service is to be rendered). There are economists, political scientists, sociologists and of course politicians to reassure the rich that the poverty of the poor is their – the poor's – problem, while the resistance of the poor against poverty is the problem for the organs of law and order. There are 'photo opportunities' obligingly provided by the police to inform the public about the bottomless depravity and iniquity of the drug-infested poor. (One cannot help recalling (Goebbels's cameramen avidly recording the filthy ugliness of lice-infested ghetto Jews.) With bated breath, residents of the theft-proof, fortified homes glue themselves to their TV screens for the spectacle of brutality that is the mark of the brutalized. And there are also boffins and moral preachers to remind the shocked voyeurs that there is a 'problem' of how to prevent single mothers from breeding football hooligans, and that

²² I have discussed this effect at greater length in *Freedom* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1988) chap. 4, and of *Legislators and Interpreters*, chap. 11.

scientific studies once conducted by the expert racial hygienists may perhaps – who knows? – tell us something about its rational solution.²³

A long and tortuous way led historically from cruelty to kindness, but there is just a small step to be taken on the return trip. The postmodern world of joyful messiness is carefully guarded at the borders by mercenaries no less cruel than those hired by the managers of the now abandoned global order. Smiling banks beam only at their present and prospective customers. The playgrounds of happy shoppers are surrounded by thick walls, electronic spies and sharp-toothed guard-dogs. Polite tolerance applies only to those allowed inside. And thus drawing the line between the inside and the outside seems to have lost nothing of its violence and genocidal potency. If anything, the potency has grown, as no missionary, proselytizing prospects salvage the outsiders from total and final condemnation. Indeed, it is not clear any more why the useless and troublesome outsiders, whose bodies no one needs and whose souls no one wants to win or convert (as they are no longer the 'reserve army of labour', nor the prospective objects of exploitation or cannon-fodder), should not be removed by force ('repatriated') if there is a place to which they can be removed, or barred from propagating if the graveyard is the only place to which they can be moved.

In *Modernity and the Holocaust* I suggested that the unprecedented condensation of cruelty which marked the twentieth-century genocides could be the result of the application of modern management and technology to the unresolved pre-modern tensions and conflicts. A similar dialectic encounter is not to be ruled out lightly under emerging postmodern circumstances. The unfinished business of modern social engineering may well erupt in a new outburst of savage misanthropy, assisted rather than impeded by the newly legalized postmodern self-centredness and indifference. The protective wall of playful unconcern that the postmodern style offers was precisely what the perpetrators of modern mass cruelties missed, and what they had to replace with custom-made artifices by stretching their cunning and ingenuity to the utmost. Since then unconcern has made tremendous advances – the other people's misery having been dissolved in the incessant flow of mildly worrying and mildly amusing (amusing *because* mildly worrying) spectacles, and become indistinguishable from other Buadrillardian simulacra; while the mental technique through which life is cut into a series of cases each to be dealt

²³ 'The word *problem*' – wrote Jorge Luis Borges – 'may be an insidious *petitto principi*. To speak of the *Jewish problem* is to postulate that the Jews are a problem; it is to predict (and recommend) persecution, plunder, shooting, beheading, rape, and the reading of Dr. Rosenberg prose.' ('Dr. Américo Castro is Alarmed', in *Other Inquisitions*, 1937–1952, p. 26.)

with separately 'as it deserves' radically removed 'the need of the other' (not to mention such abstract and by now largely discredited notions as 'the responsibility for the other') from relevant 'factors of the case'. For most pursuers of a better world, the vision of a universal paradise has been reduced to the attempts to dump the vexing aspects of life (a silo for toxic waste, an air-polluting plant, a noxious bypass or a noisy airport) in other people's backyards.

Thorough, adamant and uncompromising *privatization* of all concerns has been the main factor that has rendered postmodern society so spectacularly immune to systemic critique and radical social dissent with revolutionary potential. It is not necessarily the case that the denizens of postmodern – privatized and commodified – society enjoy the sum-total of greater happiness (one would still wish to know how to measure happiness objectively and compare it), and that they experience their worries as less serious and painful; what does truly matter is that it would not occur to them to lay the blame for such troubles they may suffer at the door of the state, and even less to expect the remedies to be handed over through that door. Postmodern society proved to be a well-nigh perfect translating machine – one that interprets any extant and prospective *social* issue as *private* concern (as if in a direct defiance of C. Wright Mills' very modern, very pre-postmodern description of, simultaneously, good democracy and good social science). It is not the 'ownership of the means of production' that has been privatized (its 'private' character, to be sure, is ever more in doubt at the age of the mergers and the multinationals). The most seminal of privatizations was that of human problems and of the responsibility for their resolution. The politics that reduced its acknowledged responsibilities to the matters of public safety and otherwise declared its retreat from the tasks of social management, effectively desocialized the ills of society and translated social injustice as individual ineptitude or neglect. Such politics is insufficiently attractive to awaken the *citizen* in a *consumer*; its stakes are not impressive enough to make it an object of the kind of anger that would be amenable to collectivization. In the postmodern society of consumers, failure rebounds in guilt and *shame*, not in political *protest*. Frustration breeds embarrassment, not dissent. Perhaps it triggers off all the familiar behavioural symptoms of Nietzsche–Scheler's *ressentiment*, but politically it disarms and gestates apathy.

The systemic consequence of the privatization of ambivalence is a dependency that does not need either coercion-supported dictatorship or ideological indoctrination; a dependency that is sustained, reproduced and reinforced by mostly DIY methods, that is embraced willingly and is not felt as dependence at all – one may even say: that is experienced as freedom and a triumph of individual autonomy. The coveted freedom of the consumer is, after all, the right to choose 'of one's own will' life.

purpose and life-methodology that the supra-individual market mechanics has already defined and determined for the consumer. Consumer freedom means orientation of life towards market-approved commodities and thereby precludes one crucial freedom: freedom from the market, freedom that means anything else but the choice between standard commercial products. Above all, consumer freedom successfully deflects aspirations of human liberty from communal affairs and the management of collective life.

All possible dissent is therefore depoliticized beforehand; it is dissolved into yet more personal anxieties and concerns and thus deflected from the centres of societal power to private suppliers of consumer goods. The gap between desirable and achieved states of happiness results in the increased fascination with the allurements of the market and the appropriation of commodities; the wheels of the self-perpetuating mechanism of the consumer-oriented economy are thereby lubricated, while political and social structures emerge unscathed and intact. With the definitions and particularly the avenues and mechanisms of social mobility privatized, all potentially explosive troubles like frustrated personal ambitions, humiliating refusals of the public confirmation of self-definitions, clogged channels of advancement, even eviction from the sphere in which job-ascribed, publicly recognized meanings and identities are distributed, lead at best to a still more feverish search for market-supplied prescriptions, skills and tools of self- or image-improvement, or finish up in the disconsolate resignation of the welfare recipient – that socially confirmed paragon of personal incompetence and impotence. In neither case are the outcomes invested with political meanings. Privatized ambitions predefine frustration as an equally private matter, singularly unfit to be reformed into a collective grievance.

There is no solidarity without the tolerance for the otherness of the other. But tolerance is not solidarity's sufficient condition. Nor is solidarity tolerance's predetermined consequence. True, one cannot conceive of cruelty perpetrated *in the name* of tolerance; but there is a lot of cruelty that tolerance, through the lofty unconcern it feeds, makes *easier to commit*. Postmodernity is a site of opportunity and a site of danger; and it is both for the same set of reasons.

Socialism: modernity's last stand

Since its inception, modern socialism was and remained the counter-culture of modernity.

Like all counter-cultures, modern socialism performed a triple function

in relation to the society it opposed and serviced: it exposed the deceit of representing the achieved state of society as the fulfilment of its promise; it resisted the suppression or concealment of the possibility to implement the promise better; and it pressed the society toward such better implementation of its potential. In the loyalty with which it performed this triple function lies the secret of both its glory and its misery.

Like all counter-cultures, modern socialism belonged to one historical formation with the society it opposed. That togetherness showed itself in the indispensable service socialism rendered to the dynamism and durability of modern society. By acquitting itself well of its counter-cultural role, socialism kept that society constantly on the move, articulating the problems it had to resolve to stay alive, endorsing and sustaining the attractiveness of its promise and thus securing perpetual support for its works, and in the end adding to its crisis-mangement potential and overall viability. That togetherness showed itself also in the virtually complete reliance of socialism on the programme set by modernity. Socialism's own programme was a version of the modernity project; it sharpened and radicalized the promise the whole of modern society vowed to keep. Socialism was not obliged to prove the worthiness and desirability of the modern project as such. These had already been amply demonstrated by the practice of modernity – and firmly set in public consciousness thanks to the eulogies of its official champions. Thus Marx and Engels could in clear conscience praise the admirable job performed by the capitalist administrators of modernity in melting all solids, profaning all sacraments and pushing the creative force of mankind to unheard-of limits. Lassalle could thank *Herren Kapitalisten* for doing the socialist job by clearing the site for the kind of society they only promised to build but the socialists most certainly would.

That society, the enthusiasm for which modern socialism wholeheartedly shared with modernity, was *to be built*. It was to be artificially designed and constructed, by freeing humankind from constraints of scarcity, ending human dependence on the limited gifts of nature, subordinating miserly nature to human needs – and forcing it to deliver more with the help of political will, science and technology, working in unison to magnify human *productive forces*. Socialism had no other ends but those to which the whole of modern society paid tribute, at least in public. Neither did it suggest means to those ends different from the design and management of rationally conceived social institutions already approved of and put to a daily test in the practice of modernity. What socialism did was to reconfirm the ends as worthy of pursuing, and the means as worthy of applying – by laying the blame for the 'poor showing thus far' at the door of the current, capitalist managers of the house of modernity.

The originality, uniqueness and indispensability of socialism did not consist in the invention of ends and means different from those of modernity as a whole, but in promoting the idea that like the carrying capacity of a bridge (which is measured neither by the strongest of its pillars nor by the average strength of its supports, but by the endurance of its weakest pillar), the quality of society is to be measured by the welfare of its weakest member. By socialist standards of measurement, the performance of modernity was constantly found falling short of the declared ends, and efficiency of means was found wanting. Modernity under capitalist management stood accused of underperformance and inefficiency.

The way in which socialism explained that mismanagement was kept strictly within the idiom that modern mentality conceived and understood: beneath all these failures and deceitful promises lay a spectacular ineptitude in converting nature to human uses. In proffering these charges, socialism was scathing and uncompromising. Whatever the capitalists had done to conquer nature, the socialist managers would have done or would do better. More growth, more machines, more machine operators. Capitalism was the fetter of modernity. Under capitalist management, modernity forfeited its chance to remake the world from top to bottom, to make nature pliant, malleable, obedient to human will. Private property and confined resources and the narrow vision that went with it cramped and dwarfed the unlimited potential of the tools and techniques that modernity made available. Competition gagged the reason that could speak in full voice only through global planning – only if allowed to design freely and to command without constraint. Because under capitalism private, local, not-fully-extirpated interests were allowed to interfere, more waste was produced at the end of the day than useful products. Under capitalism, modernity was inefficient, profligate and destructive. The modern style of administration could be more effective, reasonable, creative – more *productive*. More social engineering, on a grander scale, was needed to make it so.

Socialism found nothing wrong with the project of modernity. All that was wrong was the outcome of the capitalist distortion. One needs to rescue the audacity of vision and the wondrous reality-sculpting tools from the capitalist fetters so that they may show their true potential and so that everybody may enjoy the fruits. Between socialism and modernity there was no quarrel of principle. Throughout its history, socialism was modernity's most vigorous and gallant champion. It also claimed to be its only *true* champion. The more the claim was believed, the less the practical test of modernity conducted under capitalist auspices seemed conclusive. Practical defeats did not rub off on the seamliness and propriety of the project. Whatever the ugliness of its capitalist edition, modernity need not

be disparaged. One could still hope for a more carefully and pleasingly edited version. The socialist critic of capitalism was modernity's most faithful and effective friend.

In the end, though, the friend proved to be the grave-digger. The alternative edition did little to correct the errors and nothing could any more protect the beauty of the project against the ugliness of its fulfilment. It did everything to make obvious what otherwise would have remained perhaps but a sinister, yet contested guess. It so happened that under socialist, not capitalist, auspices the project was pushed to its radical limits: grand designs, unlimited social engineering, huge and bulky technology, total transformation of nature. Deserts were irrigated (but they turned into salinated bogs); marshlands were dried (but they turned into deserts); massive gas-pipes criss-crossed the land to remedy the illogicality with which nature distributed its resources (but they kept exploding with the force unequalled by natural disasters of yore); millions were lifted from the 'idiocy of rural life' (but they got poisoned by the effluvia of rationally designed industry, if did not first perish on the way). Raped and crippled, nature failed to deliver the riches one hoped it would; the total scale of design only made the devastation total. Worse still, all that raping and crippling proved to be in vain. Little equality followed, still less freedom. And as for the brotherhood – it proved to be of the kind that wilts with the first breeze of liberty.²⁴ Socialism put modernity to its ultimate test. The failure was as ultimate as the test itself.

The cogency of the socialist message was an intellectual reflection of the entrenchment of the modern order. The persuasiveness of the socialist promise derived from the popularity of the values modernity championed and the credibility of means it supplied. For better or worse, richer or poorer, till death do them part, modern socialism wedded its fate to that of the modern project. They grew together. They triumphed together. Together they travelled to the brink of disaster.

²⁴ In the current Soviet re-evaluation of the 'communism construction project' the theme of pushing the inanities of modern world-remaking zeal to their most grotesque and horrifying extremes is harped on ceaselessly. Nikolai Skatov, one of the leading contributors to the debate, wrote recently that 'three main disasters and dangers that threaten mankind concentrated and manifested themselves in our country with exceptional force. First, Chernobyl occurred here, after all. Second, it is us who almost destroyed the most fertile black earth of the world, raped Volga (Volga!), and spat in our main wells (Baikal, Aral, Ladoga), having forgotten that, perhaps, these are the last wells from which we will drink our water. Third (or is it first?) – culture . . . Never before was culture so helpless and vulnerable, and its present tragic fate stands in the rank of global crises and catastrophes that afflict mankind as a whole.' ('Dukh vzyskuyushchij' ['The Searching Spirit'], *Pravda*, 13 November 1989, p. 4.)

The present crisis of socialism is as derivative as its past triumphs. The present crisis is not of socialism's sole making. It is the crisis of socialism as a distorted and, in the end, an ineffective form of modernity; but it is also a reflection of the crisis of the modern project as such. Socialist counter-culture outlived the culture it opposed. Through a paradox of history, it stayed for a while alone in the field defending the ramparts vacated by other troops. By the logic of historical memory, socialism went on, unthinkingly, to offer its traditional services as the counter-culture of modernity at a time when the world around questioned ever louder the values and the strategies that served as the trademark of the modern era. Like the contemporary remake of Don Quixote, it went on fighting old battles at a time when for many they had been already lost, while for the thinking minority they were not worth fighting in the first place.

Socialism's younger, hot-headed and impatient brother, communism, whole-heartedly shared in the family trust in the wonderful promises and prospects of modernity, and was awestruck by the breath-taking vistas of society doing away with historical and natural necessity, and by the idea of the ultimate subordination of nature to human needs and desires. But unlike the elder brother, it did not trust history to find the way to the millenium. Neither was it prepared to wait till history proved this mistrust wrong. Its war-cry was: 'Kingdom of Reason – now!'

Like socialism (and all other staunch believers in modern values of technological progress, transformation of nature and a society of plenty), communism was thoroughly modern in its passionate conviction that good society can only be a society carefully designed, rationally managed and thoroughly industrialized. It was in the name of those shared modern values that socialism charged the capitalist administrators of modern progress with mismanagement, inefficiency and wastefulness. Communism accused socialism of failing to draw conclusions from the charges: stopping at critique, denunciations, prodding – where an instant dismissal of inept and corrupt administrators was in order.

Lenin's redefining of the socialist revolution as a *substitution for*, instead of *continuation of*, the bourgeois revolution, was the founding act of communism. According to the new creed, capitalism was a cancerous growth on the healthy body of modern progress; no more a necessary stage on the road to a society that will embody modern dreams. Capitalists could not be entrusted (as once they were by the founders of modern socialism, Marx and Engels) with even the preliminary job of site-clearing: 'melting the solids and profaning the sacred'. As a matter of fact, the site-clearing itself was neither a necessity nor a job useful enough to justify the waste of time needed for its performance. As the principles of rationally organized, good society (more factories, more machines, more control

over nature) were well known and agreed upon, one could proceed directly to usher any society (and particularly a society without factories, without machines, without the capitalists eager to build them, without the workers oppressed and exploited in the process of building) into a state designed by those principles. There was no point in waiting till the good society arrived through the action of workers, fed up with the sufferings caused by the capitalist mismanagement of the progress. As one knew what the good society would be like, to delay or even slow down its construction was an unforgiveable crime. Good society could be, had to be, constructed right away, before the capitalists had a chance to mismanage and the workers to sample the outcomes of their mismanagement; or, rather, its designers should take over the management of society right away, without waiting for the consequences of mismanagement to show up. Capitalism was an unnecessary deflection from the path of Reason. Communism was a straight road to its kingdom. Communism, Lenin would say, is Soviet power together with the 'electrification of the whole country': that is, modern technology and modern industry under a power conscious of its purpose in advance and leaving nothing to chance. Communism was modernity in its most determined mood and most decisive posture; modernity streamlined, purified of the last shred of the chaotic, the irrational, the spontaneous, the unpredictable.

In those now uncannily distant times the audacious communist project seemed to make a lot of sense and was taken quite seriously by friends and the foes alike. Communism promised (or threatened, depending on the eye of the beholder) to do what anyone else was doing, only faster (remember the alluring charm of convergence theories?). The real doubts appeared when the others stopped doing it, while communism went on chasing now abandoned targets; partly by inertia, but mostly because of the fact that – being communism in action – it could not do anything else.

In its practical implementation, communism was a system one-sidedly adapted to the task of mobilizing social and natural resources in the name of modernization: the nineteenth-century steam-and-iron ideal of modern plenty. It could – at least in its own conviction – compete with capitalists, but solely with the capitalist engaged in the same pursuits. What it could not do and did not brace itself for doing was to match the performance of the capitalist, market-centred society once that society abandoned its steel mills and coal mines and moved into the postmodern age (once it had passed over, in Jean Baudrillard's apt aphorism, from *metallurgy* to *semiturgy*; stuck at its metallurgical stage, Soviet communism, as if to cast out devils, spent its energy on fighting wide trousers, long hair, rock music and any other manifestations of semiurgical initiative).

This is what Gorbachev seemed to have in mind when he spoke

obsessively of the 'lost Brezhnev years': at the crucial period when the West turned its back on the steel-and-concrete dreams of the past and moved on to a softer and more light-hearted version of human happiness, the communist elite – ageing as rapidly as the project that had once kept them in power – went on drying up rivers and flooding fields. All this has been done before by the capitalist, Western modernizers – and done as mercilessly and sometimes more thoroughly. The point was, however, that the gerontocracy of the 'age of stagnation' went on doing it a bit too long ... 'postmodern values' had already discredited such deeds in the affluent West, now resourceful and wise enough to call filth filth, and thus busy exiling its own waste to distant places and the homes of less fortunate peoples. The communist modernizing adventure shared in all the inner incongruities of modernity in general; to its general weaknesses, it added absurdities and hardships of its own making. But not in the remotest way was it geared to serve the new, postmodern expectations. The advent of the postmodern condition and postmodern mentality rubbed salt in the open wounds: not only the human objects of modernizing designs discovered their fate as misery, but they stopped comprehending the reasons in the name of which they had entered the road of misery in the first place.

The communist dictatorship over needs and monopoly over the means and procedures of needs-satisfaction makes the communist state an obvious target of individual disaffection; it cannot but collectivize individual frustrations in the same way it collectivized the vehicles of gratification. The same personal frustrations and grievances which in a market society (society that successfully privatized life responsibilities and consciences) are diffused and scattered as well as depoliticized, in a 'warden state' communist style are condensed into a system-shattering political protest. Here, the state is the agency to which complaints are addressed as naturally and matter-of-factly as have been the expectations of a better life. Unlike in the postmodern world of privatized choices, the sources of diffuse unhappiness are not themselves diffuse and cannot be kept ex-directory; they are publicly announced, conspicuous and easy to locate. Admittedly, the communist regimes excelled in stifling the flow of information and pushed to elsewhere unknown heights the art of state secrecy; and yet they proved to be much less successful than market-oriented societies in dissipating and hiding the responsibility for socially produced ills, for irrational consequences of rational decisions and for overall mismanagement of social processes. They even failed to hide the fact of hiding information and thus stood accused, as of political crimes, of the kind of 'cover-up' which market agencies of the consumer society practice daily, effortlessly and without attracting attention (less still a public outcry).

Has social engineering a future?

Social engineering lay in disgrace. Few would dare to defend its reason and moral integrity after the inglorious end to the communist experiment. Preachers of the maxims of 'Everyone for himself' and 'The state helps those who help themselves' are triumphant: did we not tell you? All the signs on earth show that once you start healing society you may well end up murdering people and never letting those who stay alive out of the intensive care units. Even if you stop short of such nasty things, you will still turn out more dependence than freedom, and once you reach your goal – give people resources to make their own way – they find out that making one's own way is one move the game does not allow. The odds are, then, that they will see no reason (not now, when they are resourceful again) to be thankful for your gifts.

Such and similar conclusions can boast a solid measure of historical experience to support them, and the jubilation of the free-for-all ideologists is not easy to counter: theirs seem to be the only voices heard. The days of grand social engineering projects seem to be over. And so are the times when dreams of a better society could not be dismissed offhand as either flights of fancy or declarations of subversive intent, but had to be treated seriously as a challenge to social practice and, above all, a meaningful critique of the present which the powers that be could not beat and thus had to join.

To abandon social engineering as a valid means of political practice means to discard (and, by the same token, discredit) all visions of a different society; even a sort of intellectual prohibition of the very consideration of a social model different from the extant one. The critique of inanities and injustices of present society, however obvious they may be, is disqualified by a simple reminder that remaking society by design may only make it worse than it was. Alternative ends are invalidated on the strength of the proved ineffectuality of means. Society in its present shape, it would seem, has reached the acme of stability: it has destroyed all alternatives to itself. And so we hear of the end of history, of the ultimate triumph of one social order that has conclusively proved its superiority over past competitors (a superiority even the competitors had to admit). We are told that from now on there will be no qualitative change, but only more of the same.

This is, obviously, good news for the seduced who find the extant order well geared to their desires; who can hope that their desires will be satisfied through the resources they possess or can reasonably expect to acquire; who therefore justifiably view their condition as one of freedom

and would naturally conceive of any modification to the rules of the game as an undue interference and noxious constraint. This is, simultaneously, bad news for the oppressed, who find the extant rules of the game working against their well-being, threatening perhaps their very existence, and thus view their condition as constraining and in urgent need of repair. These would find it hard to believe that the present rules are impartial and give everyone an equal chance. Even less believable for them will be the assertion that the present state of the world cannot be improved upon, as this is the kind of world that can be trusted with rectifying its own ills.

Even if one agrees with Rorty that providing we take care of freedom then truth and beauty will take care of themselves, the idea that social justice will equally take care of itself is less easy to agree with. Leaving the case of justice alone means refusing assistance to those who need it, or at any rate cannot cope in its absence. It means to condone the split into the freely seduced and the oppressed, the squalor of life without prospects, the agony of feeling that 'I and others like me' have been passed by and left behind. This also means to rejoice in the collective privilege of the rich, postmodern world, and have one's mirth untainted by the wretchedness of the rest of the globe that has been kept outside the vigilantly guarded gate so that the feast inside may go on.

Social engineering has proved to be a costly ambition; the grander, the costlier. This does not mean, however, that refraining from social engineering comes free. The illusion of gain comes from a changed distribution of costs. And those who bear the costs are not those who count them. One can even say that prohibition of social engineering is itself a social engineering of sorts, once one knows (and we have such knowledge now) what consequences the 'natural' trends, if unattended and uncorrected, are likely to bring. Thus the choice is not as straightforward as the discreditation of modern designing ambitions could suggest. One thing is certain – that the choice is hardly ever politically and socially neutral. Balancing of costs and gains of, respectively, action and non-action is not just an exercise in non-partisan expertise and dry, dispassionate accountancy, but a political decision between alternatives burdened with prospectless lives and dashed hopes.

The postmodern political agenda

Nothing merely ends in history, no project is ever finished and done with. Clean borders between epochs are but projections of our relentless urge to separate the inseparable and order the flux. Modernity is still with us. It lives as the pressure of unfulfilled hopes and interests ossified in self-

reproducing institutions; as the zeal of perforce belated imitators, wishing to join the feast that those who are now leaving it with distaste once proudly enjoyed; as the shape of the world modern labours have left behind – for us to inhabit; as the 'problems' those labours spawned and defined for us, as well as our historically trained, yet by now instinctive way of thinking about problems and reacting to them. This is, perhaps, what people like Habermas refer to when they speak of the 'unfinished project of modernity'.

And yet – whether or not the project keeps its remembered shape – something has surely occurred to us, to the people who undertake and finish projects. The very fact that we now speak of modernity as a *project* (a design with intentions, ends and means) testifies most convincingly to the change that happened in us. Our ancestors did not talk of the 'project' when they were busily engaged in what now looks to us like unfinished business.

Michael Phillipson gave his recently published book the title *In Modernity's Wake*. A felicitous phrase, evoking a powerful image: the ship has passed by; its passage roughened the waters, left a turbulence so that all sailors around have to rework the course of their boats – while those who fell into the water must swim hard to reach them. Once the waters quieten down again, though, we, the sailors and former passengers alike, can have a closer look at the ship that caused this all. That ship is still quite near, huge and clearly visible in all its weighty bulk, but we are now *behind* it and we do not stand any more on its deck. Thus we can see it in all its impressive shape, fore to aft, scan it, appreciate it, plot the direction it takes. We may now decide whether to follow its course. We may also better judge the wisdom of its navigation, and even protest against the captain's commands.

Living 'in the wake' means turbulence, but also wider vistas and the new wisdom they offer. In modernity's wake, its passengers become aware of serious faults in the design of the ship that brought them where they are now. They also are reconciled to the fact that it could not bring them to a more pleasant destination, and are ready to look again, with a fresh and critical eye, at the old navigatory principles.

What is truly new in our situation today is, in other words, our vantage point. While still in the close neighbourhood of the modern era, and feeling the effects of the turbulence it caused on its way, we *can* now (better still, we are *prepared* and *willing to*) take a cool and critical view of modernity in its totality, evaluate its performance, pass judgement on the solidity and congruence of its construction. This is ultimately what the idea of *postmodernity* stands for: an existence fully determined and defined by the fact of being '*post*' (coming *after*) and overwhelmed by the awareness

of being in such a condition. Postmodernity does not necessarily mean the end, the discreditation or the rejection of modernity. Postmodernity is no more (but no less either) than the modern mind taking a long, attentive and sober look at itself, at its condition and its past works, not fully liking what it sees and sensing the urge to change. Postmodernity is modernity coming of age: modernity looking at itself at a distance rather than from inside, making a full inventory of its gains and losses, psychoanalysing itself, discovering the intentions it never before spelled out, finding them mutually cancelling and incongruous. Postmodernity is modernity coming to terms with its own impossibility; a self-monitoring modernity, one that consciously discards what it was once unconsciously doing.

In the process, the triple alliance of the values of liberty, equality and brotherhood that dominated the modern political battlefield did not escape scrutiny and the ensuing censure. No wonder; however hard political designers tried, they found themselves constantly in a trade-off situation, vainly struggling to reach all three at the same time. They found liberty militating against equality, equality giving short shrift to the dream of liberty, and brotherhood of doubtful virtue as long as the other two values failed to find a *modus coexistendi*. They came also to think that – given the huge and yet untapped energy of human liberty – the objectives of equality and brotherhood sold human potential too cheaply. Equality could not be easily distanced from the prospect of uniformity. Brotherhood smacked all too often of enforced unity and a demand that the ostensible siblings should sacrifice individuality in the name of a putative common cause. Not that the means fared better than the values. The conquest of nature brought more waste than human happiness. One thing in which industrial expansion succeeded most spectacularly was the multiplication of risks: more risks, bigger risks, unheard-of risks. For some time now, most 'economic growth' has been propelled by the need to defuse the risks it manufactured: risks of overpopulation, undernourishment, losing the climatically indispensable rain forests and creating socially devastating urban jungles, overheating the atmosphere, contaminating water supplies, poisoning food and air, spreading 'new and improved' diseases. More and more, the conquest of nature looked like the very illness it was alleged to cure.

And so the values began to shift. First at the bizarre, idiosyncratic margins, easy to pooh-pooh and dismiss as 'untypical' or downright loony. But then the slow movement turned into a stampede. It can be ignored no more that the new triple-value alliance gains in popularity at the expense of the old one. The new horizons that seem to inflame today human imagination and inspire human action are those of *liberty, diversity* and *tolerance*. These are new values that inform the postmodern *mentality*. As

for postmodern *practice*, however, it does not look a whit less flawed than its predecessor.

Liberty is as truncated as before – though the parts of its body that have now been amputated are different from those that were removed in the past. In postmodern practice, liberty boils down to consumer choice. To enjoy it, one must be a consumer first. This preliminary condition leaves out millions. As throughout the modern era, in the postmodern world poverty disqualifies. Freedom in its new, market interpretation is as much a privilege as it was in its old versions. But there are new problems as well: with communal needs translated into individual acts of acquisition, the maiming of liberty cannot but affect *everybody*, rich and poor alike, exemplary or flawed consumers: there are needs that cannot be met by no matter how many personal purchases, and so anybody's freedom of choice looks severely limited. One cannot buy privately one's way out from polluted air, a broken ozone layer or a rising radiation level; one cannot buy one's way into the forest immune to acid rain or seacoast protected against toxic algae thriving on the lush nourishment of chemically processed sewage. In the few instances when buying oneself out seems plausible – like escaping dilapidated public transport in a private car, or running away from the squalor of public health into a private clinic – the choice only adds to the problem that made it necessary in the first place, adding to the misery that prompted the escape. The choice therefore becomes ineffective the moment it is taken, at best a few moments later. There are plenty of flawed, weak consumers or disqualified consumers who must yet gain that freedom that the consumer society officially recognizes; but there are also weak, uncared for, deprived aspects of *everybody's* life (including the life of the ostensibly free consumers) yet to be protected by communal effort.

Diversity thrives; and the market-place thrives with it. More precisely, only such diversity is allowed to thrive as benefits the market. As the humourless, power-greedy and jealous national state did before, the market abhors self-management and autonomy – the wilderness it cannot control. As before, autonomy has to be fought for, if diversity is to mean anything but variety of marketable life-styles – a thin varnish of changeable fashions meant to hide the uniformly market-dependent condition. What is to be fought for is above all the right to secure communal, as distinct from individual, diversity; a diversity stemming from a communally chosen and communally serviced form of life. Such diversity can struggle for recognition and its share of services, but cannot (unless proved profitable) hope to be supported, let alone guaranteed, by the cornucopia of merchandised identities. If the standards of marketability are not met, the best one can count on is the market's indifference. At worst, the hostility of the market is

to be reckoned with. Communally managed collective identities may jar with the idea of individually chosen life-styles – an idea that the market must hold tight to, with the most sincere and unqualified sympathy.

If the slogan of brotherhood is translated as the practice of pastoral power, as obtrusive interference with alternative ways of life, as insistence on uniformity, as defining all difference as a sign of retardation, deviation and a 'problem' requiring 'solutions' – *tolerance* translates as 'Let's live and let others live'. Where tolerance rules, difference is no more bizarre or challenging. Difference has been, so to speak, privatized. The urge to proselytize has wilted, the crusader spirit has dissipated. The age of cultural hegemony seems to have passed: cultures are meant to be enjoyed, not fought for. In our type of society, economic and political domination may well do without hegemony; it found the way of reproducing itself under conditions of cultural variety. The new tolerance means irrelevance of cultural choice for the stability of domination. And irrelevance rebounds in *indifference*. Alternative forms of life arouse but spectator interest of the type offered by a sparkling and spicy variety show; they may even trigger less resentment (particularly if viewed at a safe distance or through the secure shield of the TV screen), but no fellow-feeling either; they belong to the outer world of theatre and entertainment, not to the inner world of the politics of life. They stand beside each other, yet do not belong together. Like the market-promoted life-styles they bear no other value than one inserted by free choice. Most certainly, their presence imposes no obligation, breeds no responsibility. As practised by market-led postmodernity, tolerance degenerates into estrangement; the growth of spectator curiosity means fading of human interest. When alien forms of life descend from the safe seclusion of the TV screens or congeal into live and self-assertive communities next door instead of confining their existence to the multi-cultural cookbooks, ethnic restaurants and fashionable trinkets, they transgress their province of meaning: the province of theatre, of entertainment, of variety show – the only one that contains the precept of tolerance, of suspension of estrangement. A sudden jump from one province of meaning to another is at all times shocking – and so forms of life previously regarded as picturesque and amusing are now experienced as a threat. They arouse anger and hostility.

In other words, market-promoted tolerance does not lead to solidarity: it *fragments*, instead of uniting. It services well communal separation and the reduction of the social bond to a surface gloss. It survives as long as it remains to be lived in the airy world of the symbolic game of representation and does not spill over into the realm of daily coexistence thanks to the expedient of territorial and functional segregation. Most importantly, such tolerance is fully compatible with the practice of social domination. It

may be preached and exercised without fear because it reaffirms rather than questions the superiority and privilege of the tolerant: the other, by being different, loses the entitlement to equal treatment – indeed, inferiority of the other is fully justified by the difference. Abandonment of the converting zeal comes together with the withdrawal of the very promise of equality. With mutual links reduced to tolerance, difference means perpetual distance, non-cooperation, and hierarchy. The 'fusion of horizons' hardly steps beyond the widening range of ethnic take-aways.

This much for the values postmodernity promotes. As to the means – the rape of nature has been replaced by the concern with the preservation of natural balance; reason-induced artificiality, the warring cry of modernity is fast losing an audience, and as an object of popular cult is equally fast replaced by the wisdom of nature. Fewer people believe today in the magical capacity of economic growth and technological expansion. One thing people trust technology to deliver without fail and on a growing pace is yet more discomfort and more danger – new, less calculable, less curable risks.

Under the power-politics management, and operated by market forces, new concerns and new sensitivities are used, however, to reinforce the very processes they abhor and condemn. The clash between the social nature of risks and privatized means of their containment is the postmodern version of the old contradiction of capitalism (one between the social means of production and their private ownership) singled out by Marx as the main cause of the system's imminent downfall. In the result of this clash, risks are not reduced, let alone extinguished. They are only removed from public sight and thus made, at least for a time, safe from criticism. (Risks tend to travel over the globe in a direction opposite to that of riches; the rich countries have an awesome capacity to sell out their own poison as the poor people's meat; the only meat the poor can hope for.) Such technology-generated risks as cannot be moved are subdued with more technology – to (at least temporary) public applause. 'Nature conscious', 'ozone friendly' and 'green' petrol, aerosols, detergents or bleaches turn into big business and bring 'new and improved' profits. Ecology-conscious designers reduce the amount of carbon dioxide released by existing car engines so that more cars can be released onto more roads. (By 2015, Europe expects four times more cars than today; it is difficult to imagine a prosperous Europe without them, as one in every seven persons derives his or her livelihood from car production. It is equally difficult to imagine Europe with cars multiplying at the present speed, as the Acropolis has decayed more in the last twenty years than it did in the previous twenty-four centuries, and as Alpine forests which experts protect are fast sharing the fate of the rain forests of the upper

Amazon which experts destroy.) As before, problems are formulated as demands for new (marketable, of course) technical gadgets and stuffs; as before, those desirous to be free from discomfort and risks are reminded that such freedom 'must pay for itself' and the big bills of social catastrophe are alleged to be cleared with the small change of private shopping concerns. In the process, the global origin of problems is effectively hidden from view, and the crusade against known risks may go on producing more and more sinister – yet unknown – risks, thus undermining its own future chance of success.

This is, though, but a minor part of the deception. Another, still greater and more seminal part, is the confinement of new sensitivity in the frame of technological discourse: both the salvation and the grudgingly admitted sins are hermetically sealed in the depoliticized ('politically neutral') discourse of technology and expertise, thereby reinforcing the social framework which makes sins inevitable and salvation unattainable. What is left outside the confines of rational discourse is the very issue that stands a chance of making the discourse rational and perhaps even practically effective: the *political* issue of democratic control over technology and expertise, their purposes and their desirable limits – the issue of politics as self-management and collectively made choices.

Whatever value or means championed by postmodernity we consider, they all point (if only tacitly or by elimination) to politics, democracy, full-blown citizenship as the sole vehicles of their implementation. With politics those values and means look like a chance of a better society; without politics, abandoned fully to the care of the market, they look more like deceitful slogans at best, sources of new and yet unfathomed dangers at worst. Postmodernity is not the end of politics, as it is not an end of history. On the contrary, whatever may be attractive in the postmodern promise calls for more politics, more political engagement, more political effectivity of individual and communal action (however much the call is stifled by the hubbub of consumer bustle, and however inaudible it becomes in a world made up of shopping malls and Disneylands, where all that matters is an enjoyable piece of theatre, and thus nothing matters really much).

Thus far, the postmodern condition has brought a massive withdrawal of would-be citizenry from the traditional (or at least traditionally lauded, if not always practised) form of politics. The seduced – those who benefit or believe to benefit – call for more small change in their pockets and would not listen to the reminders of unpaid social bills. The repressed accept the majority verdict that casts them as flawed consumers and believe much as everyone else that social bills are best cleared with small change in private pockets. Their sufferings do not add up, do not cumulate; the remedy, like

the ailment, appears thoroughly privatized. The illness is the dearth of shopping; the cure is shopping unlimited. The combined result is massive political indifference. Its pressure flattens the political process into the screen-deep contest of show-business personalities, with election results replicating popularity ratings. Does all this augur the end of politics?

There are signs that the postmodern era may generate political forms of its own. The way in which many an old-style, absolutist regime collapsed in recent years in parts of the world as distant from each other and apparently unconnected as Chile and Czechoslovakia, hints at such a possibility. Without any anterior theoretical articulation, rebellions that led to the collapse seemed to manifest in practice a new vision of politics and political power: a vision in which the traditional modern imagery of solid and tough 'materiality' of political domination was bafflingly yet blatantly absent.

Let us name just a few common features of such rebellions. First, they were not 'designed revolutions', planned and prepared by an organized core of conspirators with a clandestine network of alternative leadership and a blueprint for future policies. Leadership, if any surfaced in the course of the events, followed rather than anticipated the popular movement. Second, events unravelled without plan, following solely the logic of episodic succession and taking by surprise both the protesters and the targets of popular ire. Much as the battle gestated its own troops, the gradually opening possibilities generated their own strategies. Third, few if any buildings were targeted, stormed or taken, before their occupants left them or their occupancy lost political meaning; it was as if the actors did not see power as 'thing-like', residing in a specific location where it can be stored and from which it can be taken; as if instead they intuited government, rule, domination as an on-going process of communicative exchange, a series of acts rather than a set of possessions; something that can be interrupted, dismantled and later returned to and reassembled, rather than expropriated and redistributed. Fourth, the decisive blow and the ultimate cause of the collapse was not an overwhelming force of the rebels and military defeat of the rulers, but the uncompromising irony of the protesters reluctant to be manoeuvred out of their carnival-like mood of insouciant, obstreperous disrespect for the high and mighty. Single shots, when fired, met with universal outcry not just because of the suffering they caused the individual victims, but for their outlandishness, for their complete lack of resonance with the character of the event; echoes of another era, they sounded jarringly out of tune with the mood of a popular festival, celebrating the rediscovered freedom of the streets.

What the described events might have demonstrated is that even if state power does not need popular consent for its daily operation, it cannot

survive an explicit refusal of such consent: means of coercion are not substitutes for consent; it is the availability of consent that makes such means effective in the first place. This could be a revelation to enlighten the era of new *postmodern* politics: armed with such new knowledge politics may turn into an entirely new kind of game, with consequences as yet exceedingly difficult to predict. This is, however, but one of the possible interpretations. The obliging speed with which the seemingly cast-iron edifices of oppressive power crumbled at the first whiff of popular refusal of meekness might have been a *local* phenomenon: a testimony to the obsolescence of the modern state, for too long kept artificially alive by equally ageing and jaded communist regimes, and now brought into sudden relief by the practices of postmodern societies.

It is possible that what we have witnessed was the collapse of a *patronage state* – a social/political/economic formation singularly unfit for an era dominated by the postmodern values of novelty, of rapid (preferably inconsequential and episodic) change, of individual enjoyment and consumer choice. In exchange for the promise of personal provision and security, the patronage state demands surrender of the right to choose and to self-determine. The patronage state strives to be a monopolistic source of needs-satisfaction, social status and self-esteem; it transforms its subjects into clients and asks them to be grateful for what they have received today and will receive tomorrow. But for the same reason for which he feels entitled to demand gratitude, the patron cannot shake off his responsibility for the misfortune of his clients. Frustration is immediately reformed into a grievance which 'naturally' hits the patron, and his policy, as the obvious cause of suffering. Under postmodern conditions, when the exhilarating experience of ever-new needs rather than the satisfaction of the extant ones becomes the main measure of a happy life (and thus the production of new enticements turns to be the major vehicle of social integration and peaceful coexistence), the patronage state, adjusted to the task of defining and circumscribing the needs of its subjects, cannot stand competition with systems operated by the consumer market. And as it remains the only target within sight of the discontent that results, the odds are that the accumulated dissent will soon outweigh its capacity for purchasing consent and resolving conflicts. No wonder that the managers of the patronage state have apparently lost their determination to perpetuate a system geared to dictatorship over needs and the state's responsibility for their satisfaction – alongside their ability to govern.

Writing from the depth of a dissenting artist's experience, the Hungarian author Miklós Haraszti observed that in a society where the major (the only?) constraint shackling artistic freedom came from the market, 'The artist could express hatred, even towards this constraint, as long as his

work was marketable ... [but] planning, unlike the market, is not a placid sacred cow. It cannot tolerate contempt.'²⁵ The all-consuming ambition of the planning, designing, gardening state of modernity (one of which the communist state was a faithful disciple, even if a disciple who through his very diligence inadvertently exposed the inanity of the teaching) proved to be in the end its main drawback and fatal calamity. It kept embroiling it in potentially incapacitating crises.

The successor of the modern state places its bet on the expedient of privatizing and diffusing dissent, rather than collectivizing it and prompting it to accumulate. Having abandoned the designing ambitions, it can do with less coercion and little if any ideological mobilization. It seems to count on popular disaffection to remain scattered and to pass it by; to pass it by because it has been scattered. It may even be counting on such disaffection, as long as it stays scattered, to take care of the system's reproduction. Once declared to be a mortal danger to all social and political order, ambivalence is not an 'enemy at the gate' any more. On the contrary: like everything else, it has been made into one of the stage props in the play called postmodernity.

²⁵ Miklós Haraszti, *The Velvet Prison: Artists under State Socialism*, trans. Katalin and Stephen Landesmann with the help of Steve Wasserman (London: Penguin, 1989), pp. 80–1. Haraszti observes that the existence of censorship in state socialism is based on identity of interests between censor and censored (p. 8). Writing at the early 1980s, Haraszti added the adjective 'lasting' to the noun 'identity': a system that successfully 'absorbed the language of its victims' seemed then to Haraszti, like to virtually everybody else, destined to last forever. With the benefit of retrospective wisdom we may say that what seemed to be the strongest foundation of the system's security proved to be its undoing. Having assumed full charge of 'common interests' the communist power put its fate into the hands of its subjects; it could not survive the latter's withdrawal of consent. If in the unwritten yet binding contract between the communist rulers and the ruled one could not 'note any distinction drawn between the authorization for the domination of values and the domination of the valuable ones' (p. 26), then any protest against the type of values enforced by the rulers must immediately have turned into a protest against the principle of value-enforcement as such. All dissent turned into *systemic* crisis (whereas in a society where needs, values and dissent itself are privatized similar dissent would reinforce the market-based mechanism of systemic reproduction).