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Postmodernism, Protest, and the New Social Movements

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My subject is postmodern politics and law, protest from below, and the “new” social movements. The question I am concerned with is the value of postmodernism for transformative politics.

Scholars concerned with the struggles of subordinate groups have long emphasized protest from below. Accounts of the resistance of blacks and poor people became prominent in the 1960s. This tradition, joined by feminists, gays and lesbians, as well as others, continued in the 1980s. The new social movements are, roughly, environmental, antinuclear, peace, feminist, and gay and lesbian. Whether these broad movements are “new” or variations of older movements is much debated. For our purposes, they are included here insofar as they are antimaterialist, antistatist, antibureaucratic; they seek to cross traditional class lines in favor of humanistic, interpersonal, and communitarian values.

There have always been protest movements and struggle on the part of oppressed peoples. What has this to do with postmodernism? And what does postmodernism have to do with politics and law? The major theme in postmodernism that I emphasize is subversion, the commitment to undermine dominant discourse. The subversion theme—variously described as deconstruction, radical indeterminacy, anti-essentialism, or antifoundationalism—whether in art, architecture, literature, or philosophy—seeks to demonstrate the inherent instability of seemingly hegemonic structures, that power is diffused throughout society, and that there are multiple possibilities for

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resistance by oppressed people. The postmodern conception of subversion is a key part of the explanations and ideological commitments of contemporary theorists of protest from below and the new social movements.

I first describe postmodernism's theory of subversion in the broader culture. The starting point is deconstruction. Deconstruction, developed first in literary theory, then applied in art, architecture, and philosophy, seeks to destabilize dominant or privileged interpretations. Then I discuss deconstruction or subversion in postmodern political and legal theory. The goal, say postmodern political theorists, is radical, plural democracy. A major criticism of postmodern politics is that deconstruction amounts to relativism or radical indeterminacy, which, at best, results in passive, status quo politics and, at worst, fails to defend against fascism and terrorism. Postmodern political theorists rely on American pragmatism to meet the challenge of relativism.

Postmodernism, naturally, covers a large territory. To try to assess what postmodern politics means, I look at scholars of protest from below in the 1960s and compare their work to contemporary stories of protest from below that I think are in the postmodern tradition. While both sets of scholars are concerned with the struggles of oppressed peoples, they tell very different stories. The commonality of struggle and social vision of the 1960s disappears in the contemporary message. There are some exceptions, and I use some contemporary feminist and minority scholars to contrast the structuralist tradition. I then look at the new social movements and review the reasons for their lack of success. The key, I argue, to the distinctiveness of postmodern politics lies in deconstruction. My thesis is that deconstruction, as a form of politics, is ultimately disabling. In the final section, I speculate on the reasons for the attractiveness of deconstruction politics.

The grand theories of the Left have collapsed. The humane side of the Enlightenment is under attack. However, I question the value of postmodernism as transformative politics.

I. Postmodern Theory

Deconstruction as Subversion

The postmodern concept of subversion developed first in language and literary theory, art, and architecture and then spread into politics and law. Deconstruction, which may be considered the parent of postmodernism, starts with Wittgenstein's proposition that there is no logical correspondence between language and the "objective" world. There are no clear-cut logical explanatory concepts; rather, there are many uses or

“grammars” or “enabling conventions as diverse in nature as the jobs that they are required to do.” If one accepts this idea—that while one cannot dispense with language, there is no necessary, logical connection between the use of language and what it purports to describe—then it follows that there is no self-authenticating truth or method or reason that is independent of language. As applied to literature, there is no one *authentic* reading or meaning of a given text; as applied to philosophy, claims of pure reason are likewise subject to rhetorical questioning—to *deconstruction* (Norris 1991:18–21, 129).

Nevertheless, we do read, interpret, and make claims about the world. What “grammar” are we using? Here enters the second idea, which is probably the foundation concept of deconstruction: It is Derrida’s critique of identity—that every “identity” necessarily suppresses an alternative identity. When we define something—anything—we are necessarily excluding or “repressing” something else. Thus, all meaning has a “surplus,” that which is repressed along with that which is articulated. All meaning, then, is always deferred; there is never a conceptual closure because language can never offer a “*total and immediate* access to the thoughts that occasioned its utterance” (*ibid.*, pp. 46, 64).

But why is this “deconstruction”? Deconstruction “is a matter of taking a repressed or subjugated theme . . . , pursuing its various textual ramifications and showing how these subvert the very order that strives to hold them in check” (*ibid.*, p. 39).

However, even though identity represses an alternative meaning, what if the articulated interpretation is *privileged*, that is, apparently (normatively) preferred or dominant or totalizing? Postmodernists deny that either the dominant or the suppressed meaning *ought* to be privileged. The very point of deconstruction, it is insisted, is to deny, to subvert, privileged discourses. “Deconstruction tears a text apart, reveals its contradictions and assumptions; its intent, however, is not to improve, revise, or offer a better version of the text” (Rosenau 1992:xi). In postmodern art, popular forms are freely mixed with “fine” art as a method of internal critique, to *decanonize* fine art (Wicke 1991). However, while the suppressed or alternative meaning (popular art) subverts or reorders the dominant priorities, it is also in complicity with the dominant form by taking advantage of it (Deutsche 1991:21; Thomas 1991:4).

In architecture, postmodernists rebelled against modernism. Modernism was obsessed with form; a form, moreover, dictated by function. Postmodernists viewed the relationship of function to form as a “tragic” or false “necessity”—another key idea—that unnecessarily limits, confines, and distorts the fullness of human experience. However, postmodern architecture does not totally reject modern architecture; that would also be

a futile attempt at a privileged, totalizing meaning. Rather, postmodern architecture challenges the modern tradition by using that tradition and simultaneously questioning it. Perhaps the most famous example is Philip Johnson's AT&T building. The repressed meaning—in this case, the decorative pediment—sits on top of the classic modernist, sleek skyscraper in “ironic juxtaposition.” Ironic juxtaposition is used by postmodernists to clarify simultaneously both the meaning and the suppressed meaning of the modernist form (Boyle 1991).

Postmodern Politics

Derrida's critique of identity describes the organization of society itself. The constitution of a social identity is an act of power. Accordingly, postmodernists consider foundationalism or essentialism—whether liberal capitalism or Marxism—a fundamental obstacle to the deepening and extension of democracy throughout civil society (Laclau & Mouffe 1985:19; Thomas 1991). In contrast, deconstruction refers back to the contingency, the contextual determinant of all meaning.

The rejection of foundationalist theories is based on two key ideas: the decentered subject and a reconceptualization of the theory of hegemony (Hunt 1990). The postmodern subject is not defined either by particular values such as possessive individualism or by class, or by race, ethnicity, or gender. There is no unified essence. Rather, the postmodern subject is a plurality of contingent social, political, and epistemic relations. Moreover, these relations are constantly subject to rearticulation. Because there are no a priori relations based on hegemonic practices, agents are only contingently allied in more or less stable arrangements (Deutsche 1991:21; Laclau & Mouffe 1985:27, 28; Thomas 1991:2, 4).

Hegemonic structures—that is, the processes of mobilizing consent—are also contingent. Social relations are constructed and transformed through discourse and articulation that are never complete, never totalizing, even if not contested. In contrast to the Frankfurt school, the postmoderns believe that hegemony is never stable. People are never merely passively subordinated, never totally manipulated. Opposition is always possible within alternative practices, structures, and spaces (Deutsche 1991:20; Grossberg 1988:52–53; Laclau & Mouffe 1985:30).

Postmodernists think that the potential for subversive struggle today is especially propitious because of the discrediting of Marxism, the instabilities of late capitalism, and the contradictions of the bureaucratic welfare state. Interpersonal relations have been commodified and bureaucratized. Post-

modernists see these negative effects as a source of resistance and freedom (Laclau & Mouffe 1985:36, 37).

Change will be brought about through small-scale transformation. By increasing the plasticity of social structures, the state itself will be converted from a source of stability to a source of change (Boyle 1985). Change will be in the democratic direction. Equality and rights discourse play a fundamental role in reconstructing collective identities. When people accept the legitimacy of the principle of equality in one sphere, they will attempt to extend it to other spheres (Laclau & Mouffe 1985:39). In this way, the contradictions and instabilities of late capitalism can be subverted from within (Thomas 1991:2). Subversion from “within” usually means from “below.” “Below” could encompass geographically situated communities, such as factories, offices, neighborhoods or “intentional” communities (Aronowitz 1988:47).

The theoretical elements of postmodern philosophy link together to form the basis for a postmodern political theory: through deconstruction, hegemonic structures are destabilized, making resistance always possible. The ideology of equality transforms subordinate relations into oppression and then resistance. However, while subversive groups need a conception of the social order, postmodernists, in contrast to foundationalists, insist that this conception must always be unstable, contested, and open. The task is to “institutionalize *discursive discontinuity*” (Laclau & Mouffe 1985:30).

What, then, is the project? The goals of postmodern politics are stated in terms of a *radical* and *plural* democracy. The contemporary state, reflecting the logic of modernity, is characterized by extreme centralizing tendencies; it is colonizing, totalizing, bureaucratic. In contrast, the postmodern state is minimalist because radical democracy depends on the proliferation of public spaces where social agents become increasingly capable of self-management (Aronowitz 1988:45). The postmodern goals are extensive citizen participation in free democratic egalitarian societies.

A *democratic plurality* follows from the concept of radical contingency. Rather than privileged positions, there is only a discontinuous series of social formations. Struggle can arise out of a variety of practices from a variety of political spaces. This will be a *radical* pluralism because there are no *necessary* connections between various interests; there is no unitary subject and therefore no common or totalizing discourse (e.g., class). Rather, the links between the various interests have to be articulated from moment to moment (Laclau & Mouffe 1985:22; Thomas 1991:5). Postmodern politics would not permit domination between groups. Rather, there has to be a “democratic equivalence” in that demands must be articulated in a new “common-

sense” equivalence of competing demands. The articulation of different demands according to democratic equivalences means not merely establishing alliances but actually modifying the very identity of these forces. The ethical principle of defending individual liberty thus becomes more important than ever, but liberty is not bourgeois, possessive individualism. Rather, postmodernists see individual liberty and rights as relational, as collectively exercised, which means recognizing the rights of others (Mouffe 1988:45).

Critics of this political vision of postmodernists have argued that without foundationalism, moral judgments cannot be made, and progressive politics becomes impossible. Instead of extending democracy, postmodernism’s radical pluralism amounts to unbridled relativism; politics becomes either passive or regressive or provides no defense against fascism and terrorism (Harvey 1989). While many postmoderns admit that deconstruction does not *necessarily* lead to beneficent outcomes, two strategies are used to avoid the harmful turn. One is to adhere to the humanist values of the Enlightenment without embracing the transcendental part.¹ The other is embracing the American pragmatism of James and Dewey.²

Pragmatism

Pragmatism is attractive to postmodernists for a number of reasons. It rejects foundationalism; all knowledge, including science, is historical, contextual, language-dependent, and therefore radically contingent (Grey 1989; West 1989:192). The test of knowledge is efficacy, whether it *works* according to

¹ “Postmodernity does not imply a *change* in the values of the Enlightenment modernity but rather a particular weakening of their absolutist character” (Laclau 1988).

This is where postmodernists differ with Habermas (1987). Habermas’s project is to preserve and enhance progress toward the liberal, humanistic values of liberty, autonomy, respect, dignity, justice. The quarrel is not with this part of his conceptualization. The quarrel comes, rather, on Habermas’s transcendental or foundational views. Habermas argues that through rational discourse (the ideal speech situation), rational agreement (reason) can be reached that transcends, both in time and space, the immediate interests of the participants. And it is only through reason that the liberal, humane values can be saved from the forces of darkness. Postmoderns reject the notion that any politics can generate another meta-narrative. Consensus is always temporary, merely a phase in the discourse. The legitimacy that Habermas thinks can be achieved through consensus that will emerge from discussion “does violence to the heterogeneity of language games”; it is a “coercive code” (Hassan 1987:199, 222; Deutsche 1991:21).

² Ihab Hassan (1987) in *The Postmodern Turn* quotes William James:

“No one of us ought to issue vetoes to the other, nor should we bandy words of abuse. We ought, on the contrary, delicately and profoundly to respect one another’s mental freedom: then only shall we bring about the intellectual republic; then only shall we have that spirit of inner tolerance without which all our outer tolerance is soulless, and which is empiricism’s glory; then only shall we live and let live, in speculative as well as in practical things.”

Hassan (p. 187) comments on this passage: “How far, beyond this, does any postmodern pluralist go?”

human goals and aspirations. Inquiry is practical in two senses. First, thinking is always contextual and situated; it is always embodied in habits, in practices of perceiving and conceiving. And because of the crucial importance of language, these habits are collectively developed. Pragmatists reject methodological individualism (Grey 1989).³ Second, thinking is instrumental, adaptive, functional, problem-solving (West 1989:5).

Significant among pragmatism's attractions is its normative, progressive cast.⁴ Pragmatists believe in the uniqueness of individuals, collective democracy, and the possibility in goodness and greatness through the application of human intelligence (Grey 1989; West 1989; Westbrook 1991). The pragmatists are concerned about the relationship between knowledge, power, and economic organization and the ways in which discourses, whether in science, politics, or ethics, are linked to structures of domination (Grey 1989). Dewey's emphasis on the role of critical intelligence was inseparable from his promotion of creative democracy (Putnam 1991; Westbrook 1991). He believed that social conflict could be resolved through consensus and that creative democracy could be furthered by education and discussion. His vision was a radical democracy in which self-creation and communal participation could flourish in diversity and plurality (West 1989:103). The renaissance and contemporary reinterpretation of American pragmatism to fulfill progressive, emancipatory, democratic goals is well illustrated in Cornel West's (p. 223) "prophetic pragmatism" which emphasizes the central role of human agency.

Pragmatists deny that antifoundationalism necessarily means relativism. Hypotheses, systematic thought, evidence, and inference are taken seriously. "All the major pragmatist figures accepted and asserted the importance of general principles and systematic thought; they insisted only that the test of abstractions must be their usefulness for action and concrete inquiry" (Grey 1989:824). On the other hand, they would not privilege any procedure as having access to truth or reality, including science. While truth is contingent and subject to revision, the "best available truths are warranted and acceptable" (West 1989:67).⁵

³ Wrote Dewey: "Of all affairs, communication is the most wonderful . . . and that the fruit of communication should be participation, sharing. . . . Shared experience is the greatest of human goods" (quoted in Westbrook 1991:337, 365; see also Menand 1992).

⁴ There is dispute with this proposition (e.g., Baker 1991, Fish 1991, Menand 1992, Rorty 1992, Singer 1990).

⁵ Minow and Spelman (1990) argue that there is a false distinction between abstraction and context. Abstractions, or any theoretical statement, are born in context. There is "no view from nowhere" (ibid., p. 1627, quoting Nagel). The very process of categorization, of selecting some facts and not others, involves choices, values, judgments, preconceptions, and moral positions. These categories can be generalized. In other words, just as abstract theories are rooted in particular contexts, so, too, contex-

Postmodernists use pragmatism to deny that contingency is the equivalent of indeterminacy. Just because a “*rational*” motive for a decision cannot be established does not mean a decision is not “*reasonable*” (Laclau & Mouffe 1985:35). How does one decide what is “reasonable”? The process is essentially open. Consensus is reached by discursive and argumentative practices. Judgment avoids the false dilemmas between universal criteria and arbitrariness. Reasonable opinions can be formed within a given tradition. Liberal democracy is the main tradition in our societies (*ibid.*, p. 39; Mouffe 1988:42). Postmodernism, by tolerating alternative contingent rationalities, only appears irrationalist by comparison to a universal rationality that purports to legitimize “truths.”

But what kind of politics do pragmatists offer? The experimental attitude of pragmatism means questioning the existing structures of power, gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality. It is a *critical* rather than a passive or complacent posture (Grey 1989:814; Minow & Spelman 1990:1647–51; Singer 1989). It means questioning the views of the most powerful, those who have silently structured the agenda and the terms of the debate. Critical contemporary pragmatists would apply the same stance to what they see as a danger of pragmatism. By emphasizing “common sense,” pragmatism runs the temptation of accepting the status quo (Singer 1989, 1990; Radin 1990; West 1989). What is called for is the recognition that there are multiple, even conflicting, points of view or common senses. When pragmatists (or anyone else, for that matter) ask whether a particular practice works, “we must ask ourselves, ‘works for whom?’ Who benefits and who loses from existing political, economic, and legal structures?” (Singer 1990:1841). “Pragmatism is a form of cultural criticism and locates politics in the everyday experience of ordinary people” (West 1989:213).

The attractiveness of pragmatism for postmodern politics is apparent—the rejection of meta-narratives or foundationalism, its focus on language, power, and context, its experimentalism, and its progressivism. However, postmodernism is selective in its use of pragmatism. What it chooses to emphasize and what it chooses to ignore will be discussed in the sections on protest from below and the new social movements.

Postmodern Law

The failure of contemporary bureaucratic capitalism translates into the “legitimation crisis” in postmodern law. It is ar-

tual observations are expressive of more general values. These more general values can then be applied to the *universe* of other particular cases that are similar. Thus, “contextualism,” while eschewing the ideal of generality, does embody the idea of universality (p. 1646). We make “situated judgments based on the values accepted by particular communities” (Singer 1990:1822).

gued that the modern regulatory state has become dysfunctional either by “colonizing other life-worlds” (Habermas 1987) or because it has inappropriately interfered with the functioning of other subsystems (Luhmann 1985; Teubner 1986). The result has been inefficiencies in managing economic and social problems and the distortion of human relations (A. Scott 1990:70–75).

The postmodern alternative combines legal pluralism with postmodern conceptions of the diffusion of power. The state is not the only source of rules of law. People operate in several spheres simultaneously—in the market, at work, in the family, as consumers; hence, there is an uneven and unstable, nonsynchronous mixing of types of rules, some of which may be empowering, others oppressive. However, state law, while not exclusive, “is still a decisive political factor,” dominating and exploitive (Santos 1990; Hunt 1990:315; Hutchinson 1989: 568).

Santos (1990) argues that the modern idea of global rationality has disintegrated into a multitude of uncontrollable, irrational mini-rationalities. What is needed is to reinvent these mini-rationalities so that they form a new totality. The postmodern struggle of mini-rationalities will be different from that of modernity because of the nature of postmodern knowledge. Postmodern knowledge is “situational, empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced”; it is “local, but being local, it is also total.” Postmodern critical theory is different from modern critical theory in that it arises out of “emancipatory everyday practices.” Politics and law in the postmodern transition is “the emergence of a new legal minimalism and of micro-revolutionary practices.” Because we are in an increasingly complex network of subjectivities, a proliferation of political and legal “interpretive communities” will emerge out of the struggle against the “monopolies of interpretation.” These postmodern communities, based on a new political common sense (local knowledge), represent the only way of defending the accomplishments of modernity—a fairer distribution of economic resources and a significant democratization of the political system. The political agenda will emphasize postmaterialist goods (e.g., ecology and peace) and participatory democracy to prevent the demise of representative democracy. As the domination of bureaucratic capitalism is exposed, victimized groups will be empowered. Law will be decanonized as it proves ineffective, opening a “gap in social imagination.” Social change will come about as “autonomous subjectivities . . . free themselves from the prejudices of legal fetishism.”

Feminism

The ideals as well as the tensions in postmodernism can be illustrated in selected aspects of feminist and race theories.

There is, by now, a wide range of feminist theory and jurisprudence. Women's rights feminists would be analogous to the liberal legal conception. Communitarian feminists, who hold that women are ontologically different from men because they are epistemologically and morally connected to life from the very beginning, have been criticized as essentialist (Radin 1990:1707 n.20).⁶

The postmodern conception of feminism argues that there is no such thing as a generic "woman" (Spelman 1988). Such talk masks the heterogeneity of women and perpetuates the privileged position and domination of white middle-class feminists. There is a difference between sex and gender, and it is an error to focus on gender in isolation from identity. Identity is constructed by race, ethnicity, class, community, nation; it is both multiple and unstable.

Margaret Radin (1990) draws the connections between contemporary pragmatism and her view of feminism. She argues that the feminist commitment to learning through consciousness raising—its "concrete methodology"—is squarely in the pragmatist tradition. For pragmatists, "for consciousness to exist at all, there must be shared meaning arising out of shared interactions with the world. . . . Dewey's treatment is suffused with the interrelationship of communication, meaning, and shared group experience" (p. 1708). Further, argues Radin, it is the methodology of consciousness raising that supplies the distinctive critical dimension of feminism to pragmatism, because there cannot be communication where there is oppression (p. 1708).

On the other hand, some prominent feminists question the value of postmodern politics for feminism. While Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson (1988) applaud the critique of foundationalism and essentialism, they find the postmodern conception of social criticism to be "anemic." Rather than speaking of an "overarching theory of justice," postmodernist theorists (e.g., Lyotard) speak of a "'justice of multiplicities'" (p. 87, quoting Lyotard). Because Lyotard rejects the idea of a common consciousness or social identity, "he rules out the sort of critical social theory that employs general categories like gender, race, and class" as being too reductive (pp. 88–89). Instead, there are "smallish, localized narrative[s]." Thus, ac-

⁶ On the other hand, communitarian feminists move toward the postmodern conception of identity by emphasizing the constitutive and transformative nature of the social bond. Identity is not a priori to context. Those who are part of the social bond constitute and transform one another (Radin 1991).

ording to postmodernists, there “are no large scale, systemic problems that resist local, ad hoc, ameliorative initiatives” (p. 89).

Fraser and Nicholson say that one cannot grasp the full dimensions of the subordination of women without

large narratives about changes in social organization and ideology, empirical and social-theoretical analyses of macrostructures and institutions, interactionist analyses of the micropolitics of everyday life, critical-hermeneutical and institutional analyses of cultural production, historically and culturally specific sociologies of gender. . . . The list could go on. (Pp. 90–91)

Many of these approaches are essential to feminist criticism, but they do not mean a return to foundationalism. They call for a more “robust” theories of social criticism that would be more useful for contemporary feminist political practice (p. 100).

Critical Race Theory

The questions Fraser and Nicholson (1988) raise about the usefulness of postmodern political theory for feminists have been a major concern of critical race theorists. As with feminist theory, there is a large scholarly literature dealing with race and ethnicity. There are important postmodern influences in critical race theory. Nevertheless, at least in the area of law and politics, race theorists, while avoiding essentialism, such as biology, are quite firm about rejecting deconstructive politics (for literary theory, see Fuss 1989).

At the 1987 Critical Legal Studies Conference, minority scholars presented their critique of deconstruction politics. The conference took place during the “trashing” period of Critical Legal Studies, when the regime of civil rights was subject to a withering deconstructive attack. CLSers argued that rights were malleable and manipulative, that in practice they served to isolate and marginalize rather than empower and connect people, and that progressive people should emphasize needs, informality, and connectedness rather than rights. CLSers (with some notable exceptions) avoided constructive programs, arguing instead that the repressive structures of liberal capitalism first had to be exposed and dismantled before progressive constructive work could begin (Dalton 1987).

As I recall, virtually all minority scholars raised serious criticisms of the CLS position. Patricia Williams (1991) said that whites misunderstood the African-American experience. Although blacks have no illusions about the efficacy of rights, most blacks have not turned away from the pursuit of the rights “‘governing narrative’ or metalanguage about the significance of rights which is quite different for whites and blacks.” For

blacks, the assertion of rights “affords at least a modicum of protection.” “To say that blacks never fully believed in rights is true. Yet it is also true that blacks believed in them so much and so hard that we gave them life where there was none before. . . . This was the resurrection of life from ashes four hundred years old” (p. 163). This was the product of a “whole nation and the kindling of several generations” (p. 163). “The concept of rights, both positive and negative, is the marker of our citizenship, our relation to others” (p. 164). Instead of deconstructing the “myth of rights,” Williams sees such deconstruction as threatening blacks’ fragile empowerment. Therefore, “rights rhetoric has been and continues to be an effective form of discourse for blacks.” Although rights can be isolating or disabling for whites, for blacks “the experience of rights-assertion has been one of both solidarity and freedom, of empowerment of an internal and very personal sort; it has been a process of finding the self.” These differences between blacks and whites, says Williams, “are differences rooted firmly in race, and in the unconsciousness of racism.” She calls the difference between the radical left and the “historically oppressed” an “essential difference.” “Whites . . . must learn to appreciate the communion of blacks in more than body, as more than the perpetually neotenzed, mothering non-mother. They must recognize us as kin.”

In the postmodern tradition, Williams acknowledges the richness of ethnic and political diversity; nevertheless, “I do believe . . . that the simple matter of the color of one’s skin so profoundly affects the way one is treated, so radically shapes what one is allowed to think and feel about this society, that the decision to generalize from this deviation is valid.” “[T]he term ‘black’ . . . accentuate[s] the unshaded monolithism of color itself as a social force.”

Harlon Dalton (1987) expressed similar themes. One of the central differences that people of color have with Critical Legal Studies is “rooted in biography, in specific history.” CLSers, he points out, were organized by white males out of their experience of the 1960s. “And by the term ‘white male,’ I mean to capture the social meaning that attaches to being part of the master race, and that flow from being one of those for whose benefit patriarchy exists.” Further, CLSers are members of the white intellectual elites; their world is books and ideas. He contrast these CLSers with the “biography of the black, brown, red, and yellow.”

No matter how smart or bookish we were, we could not retreat from the sights, sounds, and smells of the communities from which we came. We learned from life as well as from books. We learned about injustice, social cruelty, political hy-

pocrisy and sanctioned terrorism from the mouths of our mothers and fathers and from our very own experiences.

We learned that “our fate and that of all persons of similar hue were inseparably intertwined. That fundamental connectedness, together with our distinctive subcultures, nourished and sustained us, created in us an unshakeable sense of community.” “A thorough-going familiarity with Foucault, Derrida, Habermas and Gramsci will not save us from the ‘the fishy stare on the bus.’”

Dalton says that it is this difference between the “classic CLSers” and “us pretenders” that helps explain why CLS “patriarchs (again, with notable exceptions)” feel no need to articulate specific programs, whereas people of color continue the search, and why the deconstructive critique of rights is “oblivious to, and potentially disruptive of, the interests of people of color.”

For Dalton, a key difference between people of color and whites is the role of community. Community is a source of strength, a resource for people of color. It is also a source of racial oppression. But for people of color there is no choice. “We can’t choose to be part of the community; we can’t choose not to be part of the community.”

Williams emphasizes the importance of rights for people of color and Dalton the need for programs to deal with the immediate as well as long-range problems.⁷ These authors (as well as many others) are clearly aware of postmodern intellectual developments. They are sensitive to context, the diversity of influences, the multidimensionality of experience.⁸ As we shall see, they use narrative. However, their basic methodology and policy prescriptions are distinctly nonpostmodern. In terms like those of Fraser and Nicholson, they deny that the experience of people of color can be understood without discussing the large narratives of societal racism in its full historical, ubiquitous,

⁷ Not surprisingly, contemporary race scholarship pursues both of these lines. While space does not permit a full survey, two prominent examples are Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1989) work on discrimination law and Chuck Lawrence’s (1987, 1990) and Mari Matsuda’s (1989) work on hate speech. Crenshaw argues that black women are burdened by both race and patriarchy, which is not taken account of in either antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, or antiracist policies. Although she talks about the multidimensionality of black women’s experiences, she considers black women as a group sharing a common experience of both race and gender discrimination that is not sufficiently understood or recognized. Black women face a “distinct set of issues” (p. 159). “Black women, like Black men, live in a community that has been defined and subordinated by color and culture” (p. 162).

Lawrence (1990) and Matsuda (1989), in arguing for the regulation of hate speech, stress the power and the uniqueness of the injury that people of color suffer, and argue that this amounts to a denial of equality.

⁸ Matsuda (1989:2323–24) calls the contemporary critical race theory “outsider jurisprudence.” It is the “new jurisprudence of people of color. . . . [It] is a methodology grounded in the particulars of their social reality and experience. This method is consciously both historical and revisionist, attempting to know history from the bottom.”

structural manifestations. They speak of the deeply rooted, profound common experiences of people of color. And they propose broadly based, state-enforced remedies (e.g., Delgado et al. 1985).

II. Protest from Below

I illustrate the tensions with postmodern politics by turning first to stories of protest from below and then to accounts of the new social movements. Here I compare contemporary stories of protest from below with works written in a more structuralist tradition. Authors tell stories to make a point. In so doing, they write both *for* and *against* something; they suggest that prior interpretations are wrong or misleading or incomplete. Both sets of authors write about the struggles of oppressed people, but, as we shall see, they tell very different stories. By comparing the two sets of authors, I hope to illustrate what is distinctive about postmodern politics. I think that this will shed light on the problems of the new social movements and on the transformative potential of postmodern politics.

Stories Predating Postmodernism

The 1950s and 1960s were a period of protest and social movements. The rise of African nation states and Pan-Africanism had a deep influence on African-American consciousness. There were tremendous black migrations. Along with the rise of black electoral politics, there were increases in poverty and crime, the urban riots of the 1960s, and rising welfare rolls. The country experienced a legal rights revolution on behalf of minorities, the poor, women, children, and the disabled.

Two major issues of that era were the identity of African-Americans and the role of protest. At the risk of oversimplification, I suggest that the dominant approach of the civil rights struggle has been integration and assimilation. At the same time, African-Americans have always fought to preserve and enhance of their separate identity. The tensions and ambiguities of African-American aspirations and politics were reflected in the differing leadership roles of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X. This was the general context within which Eugene Genovese (1972), Carol Stack (1974), and Piven and Cloward (1977) wrote.

Historical scholarship on American slavery had developed two lines of argument—the Southern apologists and the liberal, integrationists who believed in the basic irrelevance of race (Oliver 1976). Both lines of thought were unsatisfactory to Genovese (1972). He sought to establish that African-Ameri-

cans, despite the horrors of slavery, were able to preserve and forge their own identity in opposition to the slaveholders.

Genovese's basic argument is that the hegemonic system of the slaveholders was not that complete. It allowed some space, however fragmentary and minute, for resistance. In a variety of ways, the slaves were able to reinterpret the masters' code to assert their identity, to counterpoise themselves as autonomous human beings. They could shirk, manage, or otherwise negate, however minor, the work. There were ways of learning to read, to visit, to take care of one another.

The slaves did more than resist. They laid the foundations of a collective identity. The slaves managed to adapt Christianity into their own version of black Christianity. Christian love and human dignity, individual moral worth, spiritual freedom and equality, and a sense of community all denied the slaveholder code. The intense struggle for literacy was based, for the most part, on religion. The African-American religion laid the foundation for building a "nation within a nation," the creation of a "protonational black consciousness," a collective identity and pride (p. 168).

In addition, the slaves developed their own language. Pidgin or "Black English" was their unique form of communication, separate from that of the master. The slave language was more than a tool of resistance; it built bonds of identity, constructed their community. Then, there was the pull of the family. The slaves, against great odds, built powerful norms of family life and struggled to maintain their families.

In one sense, Genovese's account adumbrates postmodernism's version of protest from below. Despite the efforts of the slaveholders, oppression was never complete; the hegemonic system, manifesting the dialectic of accommodation and resistance, reflected deep contradictions. In these spaces, the slaves were able to develop a sense of moral worth by asserting their rights, thus rejecting slavery itself (p. 658). On the other hand, Genovese's analysis is decidedly unpostmodern. Despite the great variety among the slaves as well as free African-Americans, he emphasizes commonalities—particularly the development of religion and language. The emphasis on building a nation within a nation contrasts with the postmodern view that the subject is composed of many influences that are in flux and that alliances are always temporary. Genovese's message is different: African-Americans created a unique community of shared experiences, forged out of a great struggle. African-Americans have a common identity; they are a "nation within a nation."

Carol Stack (1974), in her study of African-Americans in a Midwest city in the 1960s, was writing against the culture of poverty literature, which characterized changes in the African-

American family as the generational transmission of “maladaptive” values and behaviors. Stack’s argument is that, in contrast, this was a highly adaptive community struggling to survive in an extremely hostile environment. She found an extensive network of cooperation and mutual aid as strategies for coping with severe poverty that constituted an underlying element of black identity in the community.

Piven and Cloward (1977) looked at more overt, direct conflicts between oppressed people and the state. Protest movements emerge when there is a transformation of both consciousness and behavior, when people believe that they have been wronged and develop a sense of efficacy. Defiance is acted out collectively rather than individually. Piven and Cloward’s major example is the poor people’s movement of the 1960s. The National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) developed out of the activities of the War on Poverty’s neighborhood service centers: groups of African-American welfare recipients meeting in the centers, helping each other, working with the activist workers and professionals, strategizing, and engaging in direct action. Although NWRO attracted civil rights activists, professionals, religious leaders, and middle-class organizers, its core strength and driving energy came from African-American welfare recipients; this was a poor minority women’s campaign (Katz 1986:253).

Stories in the Postmodern Era

Accounts of protest from below written during the post-modern period tell a different story.

Linda Gordon (1988, 1990), on the basis of her study of family violence in Boston, 1870–1960, says that urban poor mothers were not always victims of social control; they often used social control agencies to defend children’s rights, especially against abusive husbands and fathers. Clients were active bargainers in complex negotiations. Of course, in seeking agency help, the women paid a price; they did not necessarily get what they needed but rather what the professionals interpreted as their needs. But the important point is that the actual policies were “the results of contestation, not only between organized political forces but also between individuals at the level of ‘social work’ encounters” (Gordon 1990:5).

Lucie White (1990) tells the story of Mrs. G., her client, a welfare recipient, in a small North Carolina town. Mrs. G. received a lump sum payment as a result of a personal injury. Her caseworker told her that she could spend the money without any deductions from her welfare check. Later, the welfare department decided that this advice was in error. The lump sum was to be counted against the welfare grant, and thus Mrs. G.

had received overpayments. The department sent her a routine overpayment notice instructing her to come to the department to sign a repayment contract with the county fraud investigator. Mrs. G. was quite upset. White, on the basis of her experience in such matters, advised Mrs. G. that she did not have to attend the meeting or sign the contract. Nevertheless, Mrs. G. did both. It was decided that Mrs. G. could still appeal. White outlined two choices for her. She could claim estoppel on the part of the department; this would require her to challenge her caseworker. Or she could claim “necessities”—overpayments would not be charged if in fact the client spent the money on necessary items. This story would require Mrs. G. to beg for mercy.

At the hearing, Mrs. G., to White’s surprise, refused to confront her caseworker. She did describe the necessities that she used the money for, but, without warning, she defiantly said that she spent some of the money for Sunday shoes so that her children could attend church. The county won. On appeal, without explanation, the state reversed and Mrs. G. was not charged with overpayments.

White interprets these events as resistance from below. Why? Even though Mrs. G. knew that her only means of protection was in “speaking female . . . to reflect what she senses that the Other—‘the Man’—wanted her to say,” nevertheless, Mrs. G. stepped “out of the role of the supplicant. . . . She demanded *meaningful* participation in the hearing and the right to define her needs.” White’s interpretation: “Although dominant groups may control the *social institutions* that regulate these languages, those groups cannot control the *capacity* of subordinated peoples to speak” (p. 50). Yet, White acknowledges that Mrs. G. remained an impoverished African-American woman on welfare—“poor, dependent, despised” (p. 52).

White concludes by exploring the possibilities of supporting “such fragile moments of dignity.” She asks, can we create “post-bureaucratic institution[s]”? “Can we reimagine the economy as a network of face-to-face deliberations, among citizens, about the production and allocation of social wealth?” White is cautious. She warns about “ideological suppositions” in deciding the future and “misguided leaps.” For a post-modern, she says, “rather, the relocation of bureaucratized governance in participatory institutions must proceed cautiously, experimentally, guided by local knowledge rather than grand design. . . . [T]he shape of post-bureaucratic institutions will come . . . from the diverse, localized institution-building activities that poor Black single women with children—citizens—undertake for themselves, on their own ground” (pp. 57–58).

Ewick and Silbey (1992) tell a similar story. Millie Simpson

(a pseudonym), a middle-aged African-American woman who worked as a maid, was erroneously charged with a traffic crime. Simpson goes to court; there are the usual bureaucratic mystifications; the public defender shows up too late; she is fined, temporarily loses her license, and is ordered to perform 15 hours of community service. It turns out that the church that was selected (at her suggestion) was, unbeknownst to the court, the church where she was already doing volunteer work. Shortly thereafter, her employer learned of her misfortune. The family lawyer was able to get the case reopened, the misunderstanding was cleared up, the fine was repaid, and the case was dismissed.

Ewick and Silbey are concerned with legal consciousness—the “ways in which the law is experienced and understood by ordinary citizens as they choose to invoke the law, to avoid it, or to resist it” (p. 11). In the postmodern tradition, they argue, legal consciousness is local, contextual, contingent, and contradictory.

In Simpson’s story, there is acquiescence, resistance, and contestation. Legal consciousness varies accordingly. During the first period—acquiescence—there is compliance with the state and more or less passive mystification about the process. During the last period—contestation—there is withdrawal; Simpson was barely a subject as elites decided her fate. The authors emphasize the resistance. In arranging for the community service, Simpson “successfully insinuated her life into the space of the law and . . . reversed for a moment the trajectory of power” (p. 26). “Thus, with her ruse, she succeeded, where earlier she had failed, to infiltrate the dominant text” (p. 27).

The authors admit that in one sense not much changed—the laws and the sentencing practices remained intact. Yet, the act of resistance was “not inconsequential.” Why? Simpson took “immense pleasure”; she was “triumphant in her private victory won within the cracks of the institution.” It is a mistake, say the authors, to dismiss these victories as trivial and without political significance. They still may have “transformative potential,” which “may prefigure more formidable and strategic challenges to power” (p. 33).

Austin Sarat (1990) explores the varieties of legal consciousness of the welfare poor. “While the welfare poor are surrounded and entrapped by legal rules as well as by officials and institutions which claim authority to say what the law is and what the rules mean,” there are ways in which those at the bottom were able to find spaces and opportunities to resist. Some used legal services lawyers. In going to legal services, some felt “no more in control of their own destiny than when dealing with the welfare bureaucracy.” Many suffered additional humiliations and burdens at another public office. But “they went

because they have exhausted other possibilities and were at the “‘end.’” Consciousness and senses of efficacy varied. Some pleaded; others tried to “‘work the angles’” or “‘beat the system at its own game’” (p. 373). Nevertheless, “because the welfare poor are in positions of continuing dependency, they must engage in an uphill struggle to make their voices heard and their understandings of right and justice part of the legal order.” They are not “paralyzed”; “they struggle to resist the official definition of their subjectivity,” but they also have “little hope of success” (pp. 377–79).

All the authors—two decades ago and now—celebrate the acts of resistance by the most marginalized people in society. Yet, one cannot help but be struck by the difference in tone. The authors of the 1960s and 1970s speak of solidarity and struggle with an optimism reflecting the dreams of that era. In contrast, Gordon (1988) says, “Most of this book is sad. Most of the individual stories had bad endings.” Gordon and White (1990) speak vaguely of common concerns of the poor, of women, and of people of color. Sarat (1990) is pessimistic about the welfare poor; it is an “uphill struggle to make their voices heard”; they have “little hope of success.” And Ewick and Silbey (1992) only hint that these acts may be important for social change.

The stories that Genovese, Stack, and Piven and Cloward choose to tell are about groups, communities, and movements. While considerable attention is paid to context and individual self-identity, the stories are about *collective* identity and *collective* strength.

In contrast, the heroes of the contemporary authors are isolated. Interactions are hierarchical rather than lateral. This is ironic, and puzzling. Pragmatism interpreted the importance of language and identity as a *collective* act; it rejected methodological individualism. Emancipatory democracy is based on communication. Radin (1991), in her interpretation of feminism and pragmatism, emphasizes the “shared group experience.” Yet, in the stories told by the contemporary authors, commonalities are in the minds of the narrator only.

Nancy Fraser (1989), who questions the rejection of large narratives, tells different stories, stories of groups and social movements. Her examples include the political struggle to transform wife beating into wife battery, the resistance of black pregnant teenagers to white, therapeutic family planning counseling norms, and the welfare rights campaigns of the 1960s. Fraser emphasizes collective efforts. The feminist insistence on the new term “wife battery” invoked not only the criminal law but also the claim that this was a systemic, pervasive public problem reflecting societal female subordination. Activists engaged in consciousness raising, establishing shelters, and coun-

selling; bonds were forged, contributing to political identification (Fraser 1989:213–14).

In the family planning counseling example, the African-Americans were able to resist what they perceived as white, middle-class norms. They resented the therapeutic approach, the social worker's seemingly nondirectiveness and moral neutrality, and what they regarded as her overly personal questions when they could not ask her questions in return. They were able to resist through open challenges, humor, and "quasi-deliberately" misunderstanding the social worker's questions. The African-American women were able to use those aspects of a health service program that they considered appropriate to their needs as they defined them while avoiding other aspects. The black teenage response is not so much a rejection of conventional morality as an example of adaptation to the stress of extreme poverty. Without meaningful prospects of marriage or steady employment until they reach their mid-20s, young African-American women have their children early, use mothers and other kin for child care while many complete their education, and then they enter the labor market when child care costs are much reduced. Much as Stack (1974) had found in the 1970s, they opted for an "alternative life course" (Testa 1992).

Stories from Minority Scholars

Among contemporary African-American stories of struggle, two of the most prominent are Derrick Bell's chronicles (1987, 1992) and Patricia Williams's *Alchemy of Race and Rights* (1991).

Bell tells a series of metaphorical tales covering major legal-political battles for civil rights (1987). He starts with the framing of the Constitution and proceeds through several issues of the civil rights campaigns (e.g., voting rights, education, reparations, employment) and moves into issues facing the black community (male-female relationships, self-help). He questions the use of conventional legal strategies. In some respects, Bell reflects postmodernism: his exposition is narrative. He uses allegory, fantasy, metaphor, and irony, rather than legal abstraction. He presents multiple paths to the truth. He is an astute observer of the varieties of white cultural and political power as manifested in the subtle, informal processes of everyday life. He emphasizes the experience of the law rather than doctrine. The malleability of doctrine and ideology is a key element in Bell's interpretation of black history as well as in his program for the future. In urging the Third Way, in which blacks continue to seek a just society despite their repeated setbacks, he makes the telling point that just as blacks were able to use the Christian Bible for their salvation, so, too, they eventu-

ally will be able to use the values in the Constitution for their continued struggle.

However, while these are postmodern elements, Bell's stories in his first collection *And We Are not Saved* are about the *collective* struggles of blacks. While recognizing differences among blacks, his emphasis is on the commonality of black identity. Bell continues these themes in his latest collection, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* (1992) with even more allegorical stories. Despite the failures and defeats, the tone is optimistic. Again, the emphasis is on commonalities—history, identity, struggle, and hope for freedom. In the search for Afrolantica, “black people . . . did not rely on one leader or seek deliverance through one organization. Rather, they worked together in communities” (p. 44). The failed search did not lead to despair. Instead, “the miracle of Afrolantica was replaced by a greater miracle. Blacks discovered that they themselves actually possessed the qualities of liberation they had hoped to realize on their new homeland. . . . Feeling this was . . . a liberation—not of place, but of mind” (pp. 45–46). Bell's concluding chapter, called “Beyond Despair,” calls for “an unremitting struggle that leaves no room for giving up. We are all part of that history, and it is still unfolding” (p. 200).

Patricia Williams (1991) also uses postmodern techniques—narrative, the multiple uses of language, the layering juxtaposition of tales in irony, paradox, parable, and contradiction—“that forces the reader both to participate in the construction of meaning and to be conscious of that process” (pp. 7–8). Her themes are power relations, domination and submission, deference. Her stories, though, are about being black, being black in contemporary America. Significantly, Williams begins with her great-great-grandmother—her sale as an 11-year-old, her rape by the slave owner (a “self-centered child molester”) and the birth of Williams's great-grandmother, and continues with the careers of her children and their children as they struggled to survive. Her stories often start with individuals—for example, a white teenage clerk in a fancy retail store who, after looking Williams over, refused to press the buzzer to admit her, and her feelings of alienation as a black female law professor—but they are about the common experience of racism—blacks humiliated in stores, in restaurants, by the police, physically attacked and murdered by whites when they dare to venture into white neighborhoods (Howard Beach), the stereotypical justification for violence (Bernard Goetz, Eleanor Bumpers), the suffering of racial indignities of everyday life. Williams believes that skin color so profoundly affects people's lives that generalizations are valid.

The other minority scholars—Dalton (1987), Delgado et al. (1985), Lawrence (1987, 1990), Matsuda (1989), Torres

(1991), and many others—also use narrative to illustrate the pain of discrimination. But they emphasize the themes found in the authors predating the postmodern era—commonality, the struggle to resist and survive as a people, the bonds of solidarity. While the stories themselves are often about individuals suffering from specific acts of discrimination, their most significant point is to deny individualism. Acts of racism are not individual aberrations; rather, they are manifestations of our society's major structural characteristics. The victims of racism are more than individuals. As Dalton says, they are inextricably rooted in their communities, which are sources of oppression and a source of strength.

Regina Austin develops these themes in a remarkable statement on the centrality of community for African-Americans (1992a, 1992b). Without romanticizing, Austin looks at the varieties and range of black lawbreaking not only in terms of struggle and resistance (“oppressed people need to know when to obey the law and when to ignore it”; 1992b:1799) but also in terms of solidarity and identification. She urges the creation of bridges between straight people and street people to foster an understanding of an “appropriate balance of the modes and mores of each” (*ibid.*). Austin talks about the sharing of benefits and earnings from the informal economy in much the same terms as did Stack (1974)—both in economic and social importance. Austin's politics of identification is founded on the understanding that “blacks from different classes have talents and strengths to contribute to ‘a revitalized black community’ ” and requires “a legal agenda tied to a politics of identification” that would “make the legal system more sensitive to the social connection that links ‘the community’ and its lawbreakers and affects black assessments of black criminality” (p. 1815). Austin recognizes the great variety of blacks and that differences of gender, class, geography, and politics keep blacks apart. Nevertheless, “to be a part of a real black community requires that one go Home every once in a while and interact with the folks” (p. 1817).

In trying to define what a critical social agenda would like, Fraser and Nicholson (1988) and the minority scholars look to larger stories both to describe the plight of oppressed peoples and to frame an agenda for struggle. This brings us to the new social movements. They, too, emphasize solidarity and the common struggle. At the same time, they are infused with the values of postmodern politics—antifoundationalism, antimaterialism, antibureaucracy, antistatism. They reject bourgeois hegemony. They emphasize grass-roots democracy, experimentation, and social change at the local level. To what extent are the new social movements vehicles for transformative politics?

III. The New Social Movements

The origins of the “new” social movements are said to arise from the student movement of the 1960s, which spread from Berkeley to Paris and Berlin. It marked the beginning of a broader wave of social protest—environmental, feminist, gay and lesbian, consumer, antinuclear, and peace groups—and change that affected virtually all advanced industrial democracies (Tarrow 1989).

The new social movements can be considered the archetypal form of postmodern politics—grass roots, protest from below, solidarity, collective identity, affective processes—all in the struggle against the established order outside the “normal” channels (A. Scott 1990; Tarrow 1989).

These movements advocate a new form of citizen politics based on direct action, participatory decisionmaking, decentralized structures, and opposition to bureaucracy. They advocate greater attention to the cultural and quality-of-life issues rather than material well-being. They advocate greater opportunities to participate in the decisions affecting one’s life, whether through direct democracy or increased reliance on self-help groups and cooperative styles of social organization. They appeal to value- and issue-based cleavages instead of group-based or interest group issues. While the new movements envision a better society for all, there is no inclination to withdraw into a spiritual refuge. They are determined to fight for a better world here. While the humanistic component is not new—there have been repeated criticisms of modernization—the willingness to challenge the existing order in practical ways claiming to represent the interests of the population at large sets them apart from historical predecessors (Dalton et al. 1990; Offe 1990).

On the other hand, there is no grandiose plan for a better society. These movements critique modernity’s institutionalized patterns of rationality. They reject both the liberal and the Marxist traditions. Their concept of the future society is largely negatively defined. They know what they do not want, but they are unsure and inconsistent about what they want in operational detail. While they oppose modernity, they do not advocate a return to an idealized version of traditional institutions such as the family, religious values, or the nation. They are clearly different from “reactionary” forms of social protest; instead, they represent a universal critique of modernity and modernization by challenging institutionalized patterns of technical, economic, political, and cultural rationality. These movements are also distinguished from both the liberal and Marxist traditions because of their lack of a comprehensive vision or institutional theory for a new society. The “enemy” is

not a social class but rather a kind of dominant rationality. Because of the absence of strict doctrine, these movements have been called “post-ideological” which is probably the most significant reason why they deserve to be called “new” (Kuechler & Dalton 1990; Offe 1990).⁹

Although these “post-ideological” characteristics are distinctive, Claus Offe (1990) believes that they make it extremely difficult for new social movements to develop the necessary institutional forms to achieve their demands. Because of the lack of a comprehensive vision or institutional design for a new society, the new social movements are incapable of using the language of the liberal and the socialist traditions. The scattered set of issues, complaints, and demands do not constitute a unified force or vision. Rather than a social class or other essentialist category, the “enemy” is a more abstract kind of dominant rationality. There is no notion of a universal class which, by establishing its own institutions, would perform a civilizing and liberating mission for society. There is no comprehensive design of a just order as the necessary and desirable outcome of revolutionary or reformist change. Under such conditions, the absence of a basic and global “alternative” is not just a matter of the failure of intellectual imagination and political vision; it is, rather, a result of substantive difficulties that do not easily lead to feasible and attractive transformative strategies.

Drawing on the experience of the Green Party in Germany, Offe (1990) describes the dilemmas that social movements face when the initial burst of enthusiasm begins to fade. The use of the political institutions of liberal representative democracy appeared rational. In 1989, the pragmatists gained control and led the Greens into a formal coalition with the Social Democrats in Berlin. Despite a great many conditions—all of which were quickly abandoned—designed to make the Green parliamentary members unlike regular members—all of which were quickly abandoned—Green members quickly and effectively substituted all the essential elements of the parliamentary discourse for much of the discourse of anti-institutional movement politics and gradually abandoned their original promise to be a party of a “new type.” While it is claimed that the Greens are the only movement party that has gained a “significant success,” they have not produced any significant restructuring of German politics. Rather, the requirements of coalition politics have resulted in splits within the Greens of suicidal proportions (pp. 248–49).

Offe’s point is that the transformation of the movement happened because of the deliberate rejection of a global revo-

⁹ There is a dispute about whether these social movements are “new” or how “new” they are (A. Scott 1990; Tarrow 1990).

lutionary critique. There was no vision of alternative relations of production or political authority. In these circumstances, accommodation with the political institutions of liberal democracy appears pragmatically attractive because there hardly seems anything else. Faced with these dilemmas, movements often act in uneasy coalitions with traditional parties. The outcome is often, at best, reform—partial, disappointing, incremental (Tarrow 1990:267–68).

Carl Boggs (1986) offers a similar analysis concerning the “new populism” in the United States. The focus of these movements is on the local level—neighborhoods, local communities, local governments—to begin the process of popular involvement in the workplace, the community, and the political system. The populists today consider themselves the heirs of the 1960s. But rather than continuing the traditional struggle of labor and capital, they anticipate social change through a broad citizens’ movement—a grass-roots revolt—opposing elite domination. Such a movement would fill the void left by the erosion of corporate liberalism and the marginalization of the Marxist left.

New social movements have won important local victories. As Boggs (1986) tells us, in Santa Monica, California, a broad-based tenants’ organization, SMRR, elected the mayor and the majority of the city council. In addition to rent control, SMRR favored “human-scale” development in a city long dominated by conservative, development interests. To encourage and maintain grass-roots democracy, SMRR proposed a network of neighborhood councils. In its initial year, there was a great deal of enthusiasm and a flurry of reforms. The city council did enact and implement a radical rent-control law, imposed limits on high-rise developments and condominium conversion, and set up a task force to propose a variety of projects, including setting up neighborhood councils. But none of these projects materialized because, beyond the issue of tenants’ rights, the new populist agenda lacked coherence. Instead of a comprehensive theory or program, there were only visionary statements. Once the rent-control struggle was won, popular interest faded, forward motion slowed, and within three years, SMRR, including the mayor, lost power.

Boggs attributes the decline of the Santa Monica populists to the failure to resolve three dilemmas of democratic reform: (1) politics, (2) the bureaucracy, and (3) the workplace. There is a disjuncture between the populists’ view of postmodern issues and their theory of structural reform. The new populists see the full range of power and domination—in the economy, the community, and the family as well as the state—and therefore correctly conclude that all these structures must be democratized, but they lack strategies for pursuing these goals. Thus

far, populists have only engaged in traditional politics—courting elites, building alliances, and working with or around bureaucracies. Instead of seeking to undermine the existing institutions, the populists collaborate. Access and influence inevitably mean integration rather than opposition (Boggs 1986:148).

Similar dilemmas apply to the bureaucracy and the workplace. In the absence of concrete democratic alternatives, the promise of nonbureaucratic social arrangements remains unfilled. In the absence of alternatives to the control of wage labor by capital, cooperatives and worker-owned firms will always be marginal. There is nothing to distinguish the present-day community-based efforts from those that have either failed in the past or have been coopted. So far, the new populists not only have not offered an alternative politics, but because they participate in traditional pluralist rules, they might actually contribute to the status quo (*ibid.*, p. 153).

In Boggs's opinion, the Santa Monica experience (as well as other examples he discusses) demonstrates that "economic democracy" and "citizen empowerment" require more than social engineering and legislative reform; rather, to transform society, what is needed are reconstituted beliefs, values, and lifestyles. It is not enough merely to challenge bourgeois hegemony; the Left must create a counter- or alternative hegemony; otherwise, there will always be assimilation and cooptation. He is contemptuous of a popular version of the new populism "neither left nor right." The use of this "meaningless slogan" avoids the issues of capital accumulation and political power and "looks to an illusory solution attached to the limited reality of small-scale communities." The new populism seeks to avoid the dilemmas international issues pose by pursuing an essentially localist strategy. But even local power cannot be confronted without a comprehensive political and economic plan.

IV. Conclusion

The contemporary stories are not happy. Yet, it may be too early to tell. This century is ending in a period of great uncertainty. Since the past is still very much a part of us, efforts at significant social change are bound to be fragile and often doomed. The bonds of liberal capitalism, the state, racism, and patriarchy will not be brushed aside quickly.

In addition, it is in the nature of transitions that the future is cloudy. It is not clear where society is going, which directions will emerge. Postmodernists are the first to admit that future can hold despotism as well as freedom. There seem to be very strong countermovements—ecology, feminism, perhaps peace.

On the other hand, the course of American racism, homophobia, and now worldwide ethnic killing is, to say the least, sobering.

But do the problems of postmodernism go deeper? Is postmodern politics a reliable guide for transformative politics?

Both Offe (1990) and Boggs (1986) argue that the dilemmas of the new social movements stem from the core beliefs of antistatism, antibureaucracy, and antipower as well as their rejection of large-scale social theories. Yet, these beliefs are regarded as fundamental to the postmodern project. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe—considered by many to be among the more prominent of the postmodern political theorists (Thomas 1991)—reject the possibility that a coherent politics can be based either on class or social movements (Laclau & Mouffe 1985). They reject capitalism because of the inherent coercive relations between capital and labor. They reject socialism on the grounds that it is essentially teleological. Instead, there are varieties of social conflicts, none more valid than any other; there is no way to predetermine the outcome of these struggles (A. Scott 1990). Consider Rosenau's (1992:144) description of "affirmative post-modernists" (as compared to "skeptical post-modernists"):

They . . . agree on several politically relevant dimensions: a rejection of modern science, a questioning of the modern idea of progress, a refusal to affiliate with any traditional, institutionalized political movements that have what they consider a "totalizing ideology" and an abandonment of logocentric foundational projects with comprehensive solutions—be they liberal, centrist, or conservative. . . . They are "post-proletarian, post-industrial, post-socialist, post-Marxist, and post distributional."

Laclau and Mouffe's notion of "radical, plural democracy," like Habermas's (1987) ideal speech situation, is purely formal; it says nothing about the positive outcomes of the historical struggle. For Laclau and Mouffe, this vagueness is precisely the attraction (A. Scott 1990). Instead, they propose "discourse theory." But discourse theory is not really theory. Rather, it is a method or process for raising questions and criticizing the presumptions of theory. It is a "kind of anti-theory theory" (A. Scott 1990:103–5; Rosenau 1992:176).

Discourse theory brings us to the starting point—the importance of deconstruction to postmodern politics. Allan Hutchinson (1988:288), in his book on deconstruction politics, states the point well: Language is an act of power, a form of social action. "To acquire and exercise a language is to engage in the most profound of political acts; to name the world is to control it." It is through democratic dialogue that the powerless become engaged. Democratic dialogue denies closure.

Thus, “democracy is the appropriate institutional complement to deconstruction.” Just as deconstruction subverts the oppressive culture of rationality, democracy is “antithetical to traditional styles of political theory and practice” (p. 290). The two go together.

Postmodern politics is the politics of discourse. The actors are detached from institutional constraints. Anti-institutionalism is a necessary condition of postmodern political theory. However, without a positive theory of institutions, postmodernism cannot come to grips with institutionally based power. And that, according to Offe and Boggs, is the more fundamental problem.

Consider again the stories of protest from below and the new social movements. What do they tell us about the postmodern account of struggle and the production of knowledge? The contemporary stories are about *individuals*, in the most marginalized spaces, engaging in very small acts of defiance, and, for the most part, very little if anything happens. The authors, at best, are extremely reluctant to draw common connections, to talk about the possibilities of collective action in any concrete manner, or even to suggest middle-level reforms, let alone reforms at a more societal level. The contemporary stories are stories of resistance, but they are also stories of despair (Rosenau 1992:11). When we turn to the new social movements, we find the Greens riven and the Santa Monica coalition defunct.

What accounts, then, for the difference between the stories written today and those of two decades ago? Why the attraction of discourse theory or deconstruction politics?

It is always hazardous to try to “account” for the emergence of large, cultural influences, but let me suggest two reasons. One is the collapse of European socialism, and the other is the intellectual impasse of modernity.

Space does not permit a detailed discussion, but consider three examples. In Sweden, social democracy presented a viable alternative to neoliberalism—a high standard of living, a liberal community, and an unemployment rate of less than 2%. But this was a corporatist state—the antithesis of postmodernism: top-down, bureaucratic, technical, rational, planned. The Swedish way is now being abandoned, by the Social Democrats as well as the conservatives, in favor of liberal capitalism (Pontusson in press). “The age of collectivism is at an end now,” says the new Swedish prime minister (Fisher 1992).

Another example, of course, is France. The right turn by the Socialists in the early 1980s is familiar. Recently, in a desperate effort to save the Socialist party, French President Mitterand appointed as prime minister a lifelong Socialist, who as

finance minister enjoyed such enormous respect in the financial community that the Paris Bourse jumped (Riding 1992).

Then, there is England. Despite Labour's right turn, its continental model of social democracy was obsolete. For the first time since the French Revolution there is no plausible social vision on the left (Jenkins 1992). In the United States, there is Bill Clinton and, for a moment, Ross Perot.

In short, since the late 1970s, the Western alternative vision of society—whether socialist or social welfare corporatist—has disappeared, leaving the field to liberal capitalism.

The connection between the collapse of the Left and the attraction of deconstruction politics came to mind when I read Susan Handelman's arresting book, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (1982). Her argument is that the theory and practice of post-modern literary theory has "striking and profound *structural* affinities" with the Rabbinic interpretive tradition of the Talmud (p. xv; emphasis original). Although the Jewish concentration on the Torah had a long development, starting with the destruction of the First Temple (586 B.C.), it became coextensive with Judaism after the destruction of the Second Temple, when the Jewish state ceased to exist in antiquity and Judaism was no longer a national religion in any physical sense. "After 135, [The Torah's] rule became complete because there was nothing else left" (Johnson 1987:147).

One doesn't want to press the analogy too far, but it is curious that the rise of deconstruction, as a broad cultural movement, coincided with the death of Marx and the rise of Thatcher and Reagan. Is there a parallel in the turn to the text?¹⁰

The analogy breaks down because Rabbinic Judaism, even though interpreting the text, does have a coherent vision, which brings me to my second suggestion—the intellectual impasse of modernity.

Anthony Giddens (1990) argues that the rise of antifounda-

¹⁰ Writes Handelman (1982:39): "[A]ll aspects of existence can be seen as ramifications of and connected to the Torah. Nothing is allowed to be 'irrelevant' or outside its scope. (As Derrida or Barthes would say: 'There is nothing outside the Text.')." Cf. "The Rabbis' interpretation subtly takes primacy over the text in a way unprecedented in the history of religion: human interpretation becomes divine" (p. 42).

Handelman says further (p. 49):

The text [of the Torah] which gives rise to the interpretation is so intertwined with the interpretation that one cannot really separate the description of the process, the rules which govern the process, from the process itself. . . . There is, then, no ultimate outside point of view. The text continues to develop each time it is studied, with each new interpretation, for the interpretation is an uncovering of what was latent in the text, and thus only an extension of it; the text is a self-regenerating process.

For a different account of the rise of deconstruction, see Post 1992 and perhaps Pecora 1992.

tionalism is not postmodernism but actually the fulfillment of modernity. The distinguishing epistemological characteristic of modernity is reflexivity. All knowledge claims are, in principle, revisable. Reason is no longer certain. Doubt has been institutionalized. Modernity is endlessly open. There is no stable social world to know. We are left with questions where once there appeared to be answers. Yet, modernity has not brought us peace; the 20th century is the century of war. We have lost our belief in "progress." We have lost our faith in knowledge.

Reflexivity is the hallmark of postmodernism. Postmodern intellectuals and academics focus on language. They believe in the inherent power of language—"to name the world is to control it," they say. But at the same time, language is inherently malleable. How can you control the world if your construction is unstable?

The struggle is about power and politics. Yet, the postmodernists' conception of language sets up the opposition between discourse and action. We are warned against "ideological suppositions" and "misguided leaps." "Post-modernism," says Rosenau, "questions causality, determinism, egalitarianism, humanism, liberal democracy, necessity, objectivity, rationality, responsibility, and truth. . . . [It] makes any belief in the idea of progress or faith in the future seem questionable" (1992:ix, 5). Reflexivity becomes disabling.

The results of deconstruction politics are serious. Postmodernism celebrates its lack of global vision. The postmodernists defend their position with the claim, "But there *are* no Grand Narratives." However, the opposition is not playing that game. It has belief systems, meta-narratives that allow theories of power, of action.

When we look around, everyone else is operating *as if* there were Grand Narratives. In the West, we see the ideological and political sweep of liberal capitalism. Much of the world adheres to religious fundamentalism. Major economic powers are communal, authoritarian societies. We see the rise of ethnic nationalism.

Without going into the details of the causes of these changes, I do want to mention two seemingly inevitable consequences. In Western Europe and the United States, a permanent large class of unemployed and only marginally employed citizens has developed. This has particularly serious consequences for the young, for women, for the disabled, for those of color, and for other ethnics who are considered strangers. People who cannot establish a meaningful connection to the labor market not only suffer from grinding poverty but are also excluded from the community (Dahrendorf 1988). Nevertheless, this development is met with equanimity—the "price one

has to pay” in a world market. I regard this as a major tragedy. These are the marginalized people.

What is the response of the new social movements? To quote Rosenau:

Post-modern social movements are not interested in speaking for the working class, which they consider reactionary or obsolete. The politics of redistribution is not part of their program. Nor do they struggle for the social benefits that were central to the old left, such as welfare or unemployment insurance. Such assistance, these post-modernists contend, just creates problems. They look to new forms of politics that go beyond emancipation because the “enemies,” if they exist at all, are no longer the bourgeoisie or the boss so much as the bureaucracy, centralized government, and “democratically” elected representatives. (Rosenau 1992:146; citations omitted)¹¹

The second consequence is institutionalized or structural racism. The Rodney King verdict and the Los Angeles riots only exposed what has been endemic for centuries, as the critical race scholars have reminded us. Yet, the individualistic Grand Narrative of liberal capitalism continues to mask the institutionalized basis of racism.

It seems to me that if postmodernism is to seriously challenge the ideological hegemony of liberal capitalism, it must come up with an alternative vision, a vision of the economy and of the polity that will complement its vision of community. Allan Hutchinson calls his postmodern book *Dwelling on the Threshold* (1988). That concedes the field.

James Scott (1990), in his book on protest from below, starts with an Ethiopian proverb: “When the great lord passes, the wise peasant bows deeply and silently farts.” Progressive forces need trumpets, not farts. They have to act *as if* the walls will come tumbling down. Postmoderns are willing to *believe* in the humane side of the Enlightenment. Whether they admit it or not, this is a meta-narrative—a construction of human nature that transcends context.¹² They now must believe in a

¹¹ The one major exception is Roberto Unger (1987), who sets forth a comprehensive set of policies in *Politics: A Work in Constructive Social Theory*. What is curious—but also proves my point—is that with the exception of a few Critical Legal Studies scholars, this work of Unger is virtually ignored—not even cited, let alone seriously discussed—by the major scholars of postmodern political theory.

¹² The “distinctive appeal of American pragmatism . . . is its unashamedly moral emphasis and its unequivocally ameliorative impulse; . . . [it is motivated] by a moral faith in the possibility that goodness and greatness will emerge in the future owing to human creative powers” through the application of a critical intelligence” (West 1989:4, 5). West quotes (p. 227) Raymond Williams (1966):

The real key, to the modern separation of tragedy from “mere suffering,” is the separation of ethical control and, more critically, human agency, from our understanding of social and political life. . . . To see no ethical content or human agency in such events, or to say that we cannot connect them with general meanings, and especially with permanent and universal meanings, is

political economy. The enemies of the poor and those who suffer discrimination do not rely on localized knowledge in mini-rationalities.

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to admit a strange and particular bankruptcy, which no rhetoric of tragedy can finally hide.

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