Communications and Culture

Communications has been defined as the conveying or exchanging of information and ideas. This wide definition is taken as the starting-point for this series of books, which are not bound by conventional academic divisions. The series aims to document or analyse a broad range of cultural forms and ideas.

It encompasses works from areas as esoteric as linguistics and as exoteric as television. The language of communication may be the written word or the moving picture, the static icon or the living gesture. These means of communicating can at their best blossom into and form an essential part of the other mysterious concept, *culture*.

There is no sharp or intended split in the series between communication and culture. On one definition, culture refers to the organisation of experience shared by members of a community, a process which includes the standards and values for judging or perceiving, for predicting and acting. In this sense, creative communication can make for a better and livelier culture.

The series reaches towards the widest possible audience. Some of the works concern themselves with activities as general as play and games; others offer a narrower focus, such as the ways of understanding the visual image. It is hoped that some moves in the transformation of the artful and the scientific can be achieved, and that both can begin to be understood by a wider and more comprehending community. Some of these books are written by practitioners – broadcasters, journalists and artists; others come from critics, scholars, scientists and historians.

The series has an ancient and laudable, though perhaps untenable, aim – an aim as old as the Greeks and as new as holography: it aspires to help heal the split between cultures, between the practitioners and the thinkers, between science and art, between the academy and life.

PAUL WALTON

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Contents

<i>Preface and Acknowledgements</i>	viii
1 In Search of the Postmodern	1
1.1 Archaeology of the Postmodern	5
1.2 The French Scene: From Structuralist to Postmodern Theory	16
1.2.1 The Poststructuralist Critique	20
1.2.2 The Postmodern Turn	25
1.3 Critical Theory and the Postmodern Challenge	29
2 Foucault and the Critique of Modernity	34
2.1 Postmodern Perspectives and the Critique of Modernity	36
2.1.1 Archaeology and Discontinuity	40
2.1.2 Nietzsche and Genealogy	45
2.2 Power/Knowledge/Subjectivity: Foucault's Postmodern Analytics	48
2.3 Domination and Resistance: Foucault's Political Fragments	54
2.3.1 Post-Marxist/Postmodern Strategies: Politics of Genealogy	56
2.3.2 Ethics and Technologies of the Self	59
2.4 Foucauldian Perspectives: Some Critical Comments	68
3 Deleuze and Guattari: Schizos, Nomads, Rhizomes	76
3.1 Deleuze's Nietzsche	79
3.2 <i>Anti-Oedipus</i> : Psychoanalysis, Capitalism, and Normalization	85
3.2.1 Desire, Modernity, and Schizoanalysis	86
3.2.2 The Micropolitics of Desire	93
3.3 <i>A Thousand Plateaus</i> for the Postmodern!	97
3.4 Critical Reservations: Bodies Without Politics?	104

4	Baudrillard en route to Postmodernity	111
4.1	Exploring Modernity	112
4.1.1	From Symbolic to Productivist Societies	114
4.1.2	Symbolic Exchange, Micropolitics, and Cultural Revolution	115
4.2	From Modernity to Postmodernity	118
4.2.1	The Holy Trinity: Simulations, Implosion and Hyperreality	118
4.2.2	Baudrillard vs. Foucault	122
4.3	Postmodernity, Metaphysics, and Postpolitics	126
4.3.1	Metaphysical Turn: Baudrillard in the 1980s	128
4.3.2	The End of History	133
4.3.3	Aporia and Blindspots	137
5	Lyotard and Postmodern Gaming	146
5.1	Drifting with Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche: Early Writings	147
5.1.1	<i>Discours, Figure</i>	148
5.1.2	Lyotard's Nietzschean Drift: <i>Libidinal Economy</i> and the Politics of Desire	152
5.1.3	Paganism, Just Gaming, and the Postmodern Turn	160
5.2	<i>The Postmodern Condition</i>	163
5.3	Between Kant and the Postmodern: <i>The Differend</i>	167
5.4	Postmodern Aporia	171
5.4.1	Language Games, Consensus, and the Fetishism of Difference	175
5.4.2	Sociological and Political Deficits	177
6	Marxism, Feminism, and Political Postmodernism	181
6.1	Jameson's Postmodern Marxism	182
6.1.1	Postmodernism as the Cultural Logic of Capital	184
6.1.2	Cognitive Mapping and Cultural Politics	188
6.2	Laclau and Mouffe: Between the Modern and Postmodern	192
6.2.1	Hegemony and the Marxist Tradition	194
6.2.2	Socialism, Radical Democracy, and Discourse Struggle	196
6.2.3	Beyond Marxism?: The Limits of Discourse Theory	200
6.3	Postmodern Feminism and the Politics of Identity and Difference	205

<i>Contents</i>	vii
7 Critical Theory and Postmodern Theory	215
7.1 Critical Theory and Modernity	217
7.2 Adorno's Proto-Postmodern Theory	225
7.3 Habermas and Modernity	233
7.3.1 Modernity as Unfinished Project	234
7.3.2 Habermas vs. Postmodern Theory	240
7.4 Sibling Rivalries: The Habermas–Lyotard Debate	246
8 Towards the Reconstruction of Critical Social Theory	256
8.1 For a Multidimensional and Multiperspectival Critical Theory	263
8.2 Postmodernity, Postindustrial Society, and the Dialectics of Continuity and Discontinuity	274
8.3 Postmodern Politics: Subjectivity, Discourse, and Aestheticism	283
8.4 Theory, Culture, and Politics: Conflicting Models	294
<i>Bibliography</i>	305
<i>Index</i>	320

Preface and Acknowledgements

'Tis all in peeces, all cohaerence gone (John Donne).

There is nowhere anything lasting, neither outside me, nor within me, but only incessant change. I nowhere know of any being, not even my own. There is no being. I *myself* know nothing and am nothing. There are only *images*: they are the only thing which exists, and they know of themselves in the manner of images . . . I myself am only one of these images (J. G. Fichte).

It is not difficult to see that ours is a birth-time and a period of transition to a new era . . . The frivolity and boredom which unsettle the established order, the vague foreboding of something unknown, these are the heralds of approaching change (G. W. F. Hegel).

State and Church, law and customs, were now torn asunder; enjoyment was separated from labour, means from ends, effort from reward. Eternally chained to only one single little fragment of the whole, Man himself grew to be only a fragment; with the monotonous noise of the wheel he drives everlastingly in his ears (Friedrich Schiller).

There is no firm ground under the feet of society. Nothing any longer is steadfast . . . Hence the chaos seen in certain democracies, their constant flux and instability. There we get an existence subject to sudden squalls, disjointed, halting, and exhausting (Emile Durkheim).

Dramatic changes in society and culture are often experienced as an intense crisis for those attached to established ways of life and modes of thought. The breaking up of once stable social orders and patterns of thought frequently evoke a widespread sense of social incoherence, fragmentation, chaos and disorder. The response is often despair and pessimism, panic and hyperbolic discourse, and desperate searches for solutions to the apparent crisis.

The quotes from Donne, Fichte, Hegel, Schiller and Durkheim cited above signify that the transition from traditional to modern

society was experienced as a crisis which required new perspectives and solutions to the perceived social and political problems. From this vantage point, theoretical discourses can be read as responses to historical crises, to unsettling economic and technological developments, and to social and intellectual turbulence produced by the disintegration of previously stable or familiar modes of thinking and living. New theories and ideas articulate novel social experiences and a proliferation of emergent discourses therefore suggests that important transformations are taking place in society and culture.

During the 1960s, sociopolitical movements, new intellectual currents, and the cultural revolts throughout the West against the stifling conformity of the postwar celebration of the 'affluent society' produced a sense that a widespread rebellion was occurring against a rigid and oppressive modern society. Sixties radicalism put in question modern social structures and practices, culture, and modes of thought. While the radical political movements of the era eventually dispersed and failed to carry through the revolution that many thought would follow the tumultuous events of 1968, a series of socioeconomic and cultural transformations in the 1970s and 1980s suggested that a break with the previous society had indeed taken place. An explosion of media, computers and new technologies, a restructuring of capitalism, political shifts and upheavals, novel cultural forms, and new experiences of space and time produced a sense that dramatic developments have occurred throughout culture and society. The contemporary postmodern controversies can therefore be explained in part by an ongoing and intense series of crises concerned with the breaking up of the 'modern' modes of social organization and the advent of a new, as yet barely charted, 'postmodern' terrain. From this vantage point, the writings of Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard, Fredric Jameson, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, and others articulate new perspectives that map the allegedly novel postmodern socio-cultural conditions and develop new modes of theorizing, writing, subjectivity, and politics. In this book we shall sort out and appraise the contributions and limitations of these perspectives which present themselves as the newest avant-garde in theory and politics, more radical than radical, and newer than new: the hyperradical and hypernew.

While the writers we consider develop quite diverse projects, they can be seen as representatives of 'postmodern theory' to the extent that they criticize and break with the dominant goals and assumptions informing modern theories of society, history, politics, and the individual, while embracing a variety of new principles and emphases. While the term 'postmodern theory' may seem problematical, since postmodern critiques are directed against the notion of 'theory' itself – which implies a systematically developed conceptual structure anchored in the real – the writers we classify under the postmodern rubric nonetheless develop theoretical positions on diverse topics. We approach these positions through 'critical interrogations' that assess their usefulness for developing critical theories of society and radical politics for the present age, as well as pointing to their deficiencies. The specific projects of critical theory and radical politics that we have in mind will build on our earlier works (see our Bibliography) and will be developed in the course of our inquiries.

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We would like to dedicate this book to the next generation of radical intellectuals and activists who we hope will use the insights of postmodern theory and other critical discourses to develop new

theories and politics to meet the challenges of the current decade and next century.

STEVEN BEST
DOUGLAS KELLNER