

**POSTMODERNISM AND SOCIAL WORK:
IS SOCIAL WORK OPPRESSIVE?**

BY

JOHN ALEXANDER (SANDY) ISFELD

**A THESIS
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of**

MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK

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ABSTRACT

Postmodernism and postmodern social science theory represent a significant challenge to the foundational beliefs of professions such as social work. This thesis examines the origins of the specific issues involved through a broad historical review of relevant Western philosophy, sociological theory, and criminological theory. An attempt is made to demonstrate the progression of developments in Western philosophy and social science theory which have led to postmodernism by identifying the crucial metaphysical elements of this critical school of thought. The profession of social work is then examined in relation to these elements. The thesis concludes with an evaluation of the validity of postmodernism and the utility of employing this theoretical movement within the field of social work.

For my wife, Claudia.

*Thank you for your unwavering support and encouragement,
and for helping me keep things in perspective.*

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POSTMODERNISM AND SOCIAL WORK:

IS SOCIAL WORK OPPRESSIVE?

Awareness is an openness to bad news.

- Alvin W. Gouldner

INTRODUCTION

The above quote from Gouldner is included because it is especially relevant to a discussion about postmodern theory, and the emotional reactions such a discussion invariably produces. In fact, this emotional reaction, referred to repeatedly in the literature as provoking "heated" debates, seems at times to almost *preclude* those debates, resulting in little more than the hurling of epithets and accusations of conservatism to and fro.¹ To the casual observer, this debate seems somewhat less than professional at times, and is certainly puzzling. However, immediately upon making the first tentative enquiries into the issues involved, it becomes apparent why it is impossible to remain neutral, and why people seem to care

¹ There are endless examples, but see Alex Callinicos' *Against Postmodernism*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), and Peter Leonard's "Knowledge/Power and Postmodernism", in *Canadian Social Work Review*, vol. 11, no. 1 (Winter 1994).

so much about the outcome of this theoretical movement.

As its name implies, *postmodernism* takes as its starting point the criticism of certain *modern* and/or traditional views. This of course makes sense, and accounts for some of the emotionality of the debate, because to describe a movement as *post*-something implies the transcendence (and perhaps even the destruction) of that prior condition. This condition, modernity, is of course a condition upon which many people depend not just for their careers and livelihoods, but also for their world view, and even their sanity. Pauline Rosenau, in her well known summary, writes that

Post-modernism questions *causality, determinism, egalitarianism, humanism, liberal democracy, necessity, objectivity, rationality, responsibility, and truth*....Post-modernism haunts social science today....The challenges post-modernism poses seem endless. It rejects epistemological assumptions, refutes methodological conventions, resists knowledge claims, obscures all versions of truth, and dismisses policy recommendations.²

There is certainly no doubt that these concepts form the foundation of modern science, and much of modern life. The successful refutation of all or even some of these ideas by the postmodernists would therefore have very serious consequences for any thoughtful person. The debate is a very

² Pauline M. Rosenau, *Postmodernism and the Social Sciences*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 1-3, emphasis added.

complicated one, however, because although the nature of this fundamental postmodern "questioning" is rather consistent (and consistently upsetting!) across the entire postmodern movement, extending from the literary and artistic fields to the "hard" sciences such as physics and astronomy, it is nonetheless difficult to precisely define.^{3,4} Some form of definition or at least categorization will be necessary however, if we are to eventually make some sense of the issues which have been raised in this consequential debate.

DEFINING PESSIMISM

One of the first difficulties one encounters in attempting to define *postmodernists* and the *postmodern* is of course identifying precisely what they are referring to in their extensive use of the term *modern*.⁵ This is a

³ In fact, Schwartz & Friedrichs, in "Postmodern thought and criminological discontent", *Criminology*, (Volume 32, number 2, 1994), make the point that attempting to *define* postmodernism may be perceived by postmodernists as an indication that an essential point of their criticism has been misunderstood or ignored. Because the field of discussion has to be limited in some fashion, and because I feel that definitions are as impossible to avoid as values, I am choosing to ignore this aspect of postmodern thought. See also Einstadter & Henry, *Criminological Theory: An analysis of its underlying assumptions*, (Toronto: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1995) on this point.

⁴ For a more detailed discussion of postmodern criticism and the "hard" sciences, see Werner Heisenberg's *Physics and Philosophy*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

⁵ Einstadter & Henry (1995:278) point out in this regard that it is also necessary to distinguish between postmodern philosophical criticism and the postmodern historical period, which is usually characterized as a period of materialistic culture where the shift from a producer/manufacturer society to a consumer/service/information society is underway. While

problem because postmodernism seems actually to be both a positive and a negative philosophy, in that while it does contain a more or less coherent set of substantive theories and assertions, it also relies extensively on the criticism of the theories which it intends to replace. In other words, if we are to accept the substantive propositions of postmodernism, we must first accept its criticisms of *modernism* as valid. There is certainly no doubt that Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Lacan and others who are widely described to be among the earliest truly postmodern theorists are each referring to something quite specific and distasteful in their use of the term modern, but the question remains whether or not it is precisely the *same* ideas or types of ideas that they are referring to.⁶ While part of the problem is also that postmodernism by its very nature and emphasis on linguistic concerns actively resists attempts at definition, one may also see that some of the confusion is simply the result of the breadth of the subject being criticized; i.e. *all* of modern, or current, scientific and philosophical knowledge.

In reference to the problems of definition and breadth of subject matter, Stanley Cohen observes that postmodernism might better be described as simple "...scepticism about the faith that with good will, scientific knowledge,

there are some significant connections between these usages of the term "postmodern", for the purposes of this paper the philosophical use of the term may be treated as separate and distinct for the most part.

⁶ Einstadter & Henry (1995).

and rationality human problems (can) be solved.”⁷ If we accept that the prevailing view in Western societies *is* that scientific knowledge, rationality and good will should in fact enable us to solve human problems, we must acknowledge that postmodern criticism represents a fundamentally contradictory view of what we take to be a common sense notion, and therefore merits further examination if only out of regard for the seriousness of its **pessimistic** allegations.

For the purposes of this paper, it has been useful to conceive of postmodern pessimistic criticism as constituted of two general types. These are;

1. Metaphysical/philosophical criticism; and
2. Methodological criticism.

The first type (metaphysical criticism) refers to concerns postmodernists have expressed about the nature of reality, and more precisely about the way in which it has been examined and explained historically by Western philosophers⁸ (and consequently laymen as well).

⁷ Cited in Einstadter & Henry, (1995), p. 279.

⁸ In the interest of parsimony, the term *philosophers* will be used for the most part in this paper as inclusive of social and criminological theorists, as there is very little basis upon which to distinguish these fields of enquiry at this level of theory. Similarly, the term *metaphysics* should be interpreted as inclusive of social and criminological theories which concern themselves primarily with questions about the nature of reality. Where there is reason

The second type (methodological criticism) refers to concerns expressed by postmodernists about the practice of the social sciences⁹ in the Western world, in the areas of information gathering/research, policy formulation, and direct intervention.

While these two areas are undoubtedly interconnected, it is worthwhile to distinguish between criticism directed at one or the other, as this distinction is usually possible and is useful in clarifying both the *origins* and eventual *significance* of various theoretical ideas. This theme of dichotomy or duality is in fact one which needs to be expanded upon briefly at this point, as the distinction is vital to formulating an informed understanding of the issues confronting social theory and philosophy as a result of the postmodern challenge.

DEFINING DUALISM

Postmodernists assert that humans and human experiences have been

to distinguish between the fields, attention will be called to this fact and theoretical specialties identified.

⁹ The term *methodology* refers from this point forward specifically to the methods and techniques of the social sciences. These primarily include sociology, anthropology, psychology and social work, and to some extent, certain humanities, i.e. philosophy and history. Where the methodology of the "hard" sciences is referred to, it will be specifically noted.

conceived of by traditional and modern philosophy as *dual* in nature.¹⁰ Briefly stated, this dualistic conception of man arises out of the philosophic and scientific search for *truth*, combined with the awareness of the human capacity for rational thought. Dualism is the distinction between human perception/interpretation and absolute or “true” reality.

Throughout the history of Western scientific thought, there has been the faith that *one true reality* exists, and that it may be discovered. It has also been maintained that what prevents humanity from directly perceiving this reality is precisely what makes us unique; our capacity to reason, to interpret and to create symbols. This reasoning power acts as a filter for our perceptions and memories and distorts them, resulting in the introduction of *opinion*. This explains why people seem to experience the same events but may interpret them differently. In essence, the apprehension of truth is polluted by opinion, and perception of reality is contaminated by thought. Postmodernists assert that it is recognition and acceptance of this duality which pervades, and in fact *defines*, modernity, and Murphy therefore asserts that it is “*anti-dualism* (which) is the centrepiece of (postmodernism).”¹¹

¹⁰ I am in debt to John Murphy, *Postmodern Social Analysis and Criticism*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989) for providing a particularly lucid exposition of dualism in modern social theory and philosophy; i.e. the traditional distinction between human cognition and reality, and the belief that reality may be “discovered” by minimizing cognition through methodological techniques.

¹¹ Murphy, (1989), p. 3, emphasis added.

SOME THOUGHTS ON PHILOSOPHY

Having now arrived at the brief identification of the two foundational philosophical criticisms of postmodernism; the spirit of **pessimism** to which we have previously referred, and the sentiment of **anti-dualism**, it occurs to me that philosophical concerns of this magnitude may seem at first glance to be rather esoteric and disconnected from everyday life, or as concerning only academics. But many theorists of many different disciplines, (Alvin Gouldner perhaps foremost among them¹²) have asserted that this dualistic conception of types of thought (professional and lay, for example) is fundamentally untenable. To assert that the quality of academic or professional thought is in some way superior to that of the general population, and therefore that philosophy does not or should not concern the masses, is an elitist viewpoint without much foundation. While this assertion itself is also the subject of the debate in which we are engaged with the postmodernists, the issue cannot be ignored at this early stage, as the consequences of all of these philosophical debates are in fact experienced as quite real by both the clients of human service professionals and by the population at large. There are direct connections between philosophical

¹² See Alvin W. Gouldner, *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*, (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1970).

debates of this sort and “regular” people, which go beyond potential chance encounters with philosophy in magazines and newspapers. It is precisely because universities educate people and then unleash them on the world, and because policy makers occasionally listen to academics, that the consequences of this debate are potentially quite far reaching.¹³ It should also be emphasized that it is precisely the social relations and thought processes of the “population at large” which are the purported subject of most social science theory and research, and not necessarily those of the social scientists.¹⁴

In view of the issues raised above, the importance of fundamental philosophical beliefs to the social sciences and to the practice of certain professions, such as social work for example, cannot be overstated. Neither can these issues be ignored or “bracketed” away, as to do so may merely constitute the acceptance of an unstated and unexamined set of beliefs.¹⁵

¹³ For a discussion of this issue, see for example Michael Rothery’s *The Contribution of Science to Social Work Practice Theory and Education*, (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1980).

¹⁴ This of course reflects a kind of “them” and “us” mentality. The distinction between the “layperson” and the “expert” scientist based upon a supposed difference in the quality of their knowledge is also, according to postmodernists, a hallmark of modernism. Whether referred to as elitism, scientism, marginalization, or another type of *dualism*, common sense or traditional ways of knowing are purported to be almost universally disparaged by modern social scientists. See also, for example, Gouldner (1970) specifically on methodological dualism.

¹⁵ This is in fact one of Gouldner’s most basic points. He states, “(K)nowledge of the world cannot be advanced apart from the sociologist’s knowledge of himself and his position in the social world, or apart from his efforts to change these...The question he must confront, therefore, is not merely how to *work* but how to *live*.”(1970: 489, emphasis in original). Gouldner feels that knowledge of one’s own philosophical beliefs is essential to the practice of any philosophic or scientific endeavour; “(We) must - at the very least - acquire the ingrained *habit* of viewing our own beliefs as we now view those held by others.”(1970: 491, emphasis in

THE IMPORTANCE OF METAPHYSICS

With regard to the above and similar issues, Julian Marias points out in his *History of Philosophy* that the purpose of all philosophic and scientific enquiry may be conceptualized as deriving from the basic questions of metaphysics, and as proceeding from there.¹⁶ He states (from his interpretation of Immanuel Kant's writings) that there are four basic questions that humanity seeks (and has sought) to answer:

1. What can I know? (Metaphysics)
2. What ought I to do? (Ethics)
3. What may I hope for? (Religion)
4. What is man? (Anthropology)

"But basically, Kant says, all of this can be left to anthropology, because the first three questions all refer to the last".¹⁷ Marias therefore points out that the highest object of metaphysics (and subsequently any type of enquiry)

original). As will be seen later, this viewpoint, and the category of the "other" will assume a central role in postmodern social theory and criticism.

¹⁶ Julian Marias, *History of Philosophy*, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1967), p. 305.

¹⁷ Julian Marias, *History of Philosophy*, p. 305.

is directly or indirectly the human person. Along these lines, Max Weber writes:

Now, as soon as we attempt to reflect about the way in which life confronts us in immediate, concrete situations, it presents an infinite multiplicity of successively and coexistently emerging and disappearing events, both "within" and "outside" ourselves....All the analysis of infinite reality which the finite human mind can conduct rests on the tacit assumption that only a finite portion of this reality constitutes the object of scientific investigation, and that only *it* is "important" in the sense of "worthy of being known". But what are the criteria by which this segment is selected?¹⁸

The logical extension of this passage is, then, that it is man, the researcher, who decides what is important, and ultimately, therefore, the object of research is always and inevitably humanity itself, the human thought process, regardless of the supposed field of enquiry. Even the "hard" sciences in attempting to describe only the physical universe are increasingly admitting that they may do so only in relation to a human perspective. Werner Heisenberg writes in this vein that the "subject matter of research is no longer nature itself, but nature subjected to human questioning, and to this extent man, once again, meets only with himself".¹⁹

¹⁸ Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, (New York: The Free Press, 1949), pp. 72-73.

¹⁹ Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), pp. 110-127, cited in Murphy (1989), p. 26.

Postmodern criticism when viewed from this perspective is then particularly disturbing in that its pessimism may lead to the conclusion that because humanity can never know a generalizable reality, it therefore may never be able to know itself. It follows then that defining and solving common problems through scientific, philosophic or therapeutic methods is in practice impossible, and is therefore also possibly *dishonest, immoral* and *oppressive*; a crime committed against our fellow humans with malice aforethought; the imposition of opinions and biased discourse upon others which we dishonestly represent as the "truth".

In order to fully understand both the origins and significance of this highly contentious assertion, as well as the more general spirit of anti-dualism, it is necessary to briefly review the relevant aspects of traditional Western metaphysics to which the postmodernists make critical reference in order to support their conclusions. It is important to start at the beginning, in some ways, because the entire history of Western thought when viewed in the light of postmodern criticism appears remarkably consistent over time and aids in understanding precisely how "modern" science came to acquire its particular form. An examination of the history of Western thought is also particularly illustrative for postmodern criticism, because in their eyes it further exposes the inadequacy and stagnancy of modern techniques through demonstration of the enduring irresolvability of the great metaphysical problems.

PART I - ANCIENT MODERNISM?

ANCIENT GREEK PHILOSOPHY

Plato and Aristotle are widely regarded as the giants of ancient Greek philosophy. Their influence on Western thought has been immense, ranging from art and literature to sciences of all types, prompting Alfred North Whitehead's famous comment that the entire Western intellectual tradition should be viewed as mere footnotes to Plato.^{1,2} Their contributions, although similar, are contextually unique and quite different from one another in effect, however, and therefore need to be separated.

¹ For more on Plato's relevance to modern social theory, and particularly his *functionalism*, see Alvin W. Gouldner's *Enter Plato* (New York: Basic Books, 1965) and *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (1970). The latter will be reviewed in a later section.

² As an important aside, it should be noted that Plato and Aristotle have been defined as representing one particular school of thought in Ancient Greek philosophy. This is identified by Farrington (1944) as *idealism*, as opposed to *materialism*. In some ways, this distinction represents a recurring theme in Western philosophy. It must suffice to say at this point, however, that Plato, and to some extent Aristotle, *viewed themselves* as followers of the Socratic tradition, and as opposed to the scepticism and subjectivism of the Sophists (Farrington, 1944, p. 87). They were therefore believers in, and searchers for, *truth*.

PLATO'S RELEVANT METAPHYSICS

Plato's most famous and perhaps most enduring contribution to philosophy has been his theory of *Forms* or *Ideas*.³ This theory is based primarily on the belief (or one might more accurately say the *faith*) that *substance* exists. Substance is *matter* or the thing that underlies all existence, that from which all perceivable aspects of the world are constituted. Plato's problem with substance was that he felt that it could not be directly perceived through the senses, as everything that he was able to perceive was changeable, impermanent, and imperfect, and *substance*, by its very nature as the foundation of reality, could not be any of these things. What he was searching for, then, was the unchanging, underlying foundation of all perceivable reality. The reason that it was so important to Plato that he discover *substance* was that the only knowledge that could be "true" would have to be knowledge of something that was absolutely fundamental, perfect, permanent and unchangeable in order to avoid the possibility of deception and mistake; and for Plato failure to demonstrate that *substance* existed and could be apprehended would have meant that knowledge and even existence were impossible. For ancient Greek philosophers, this would have been the ultimate incarnation of "bad news", as the lack of a proof for existence and

³ Adam Fox in *Plato for Pleasure* (London: Cox and Wyman, 1945) provides a particularly lucid overview of Plato's writings. *Plato: The Last Days of Socrates* (New York: Penguin, 1954), translated by Hugh Tredennick, and containing the *Euthyphro*, *The Apology*, *Crito*, and the *Phaedro*, is also particularly clear and offers insightful notes.

knowledge would mean that their lives were meaningless. In a very real sense, the bulk of philosophical enquiry ever since (Western and otherwise) has centred on this search for meaning in life, or for the foundation of meaning, with the psychological consequences of failure being accordingly quite high.

Plato may have made the leap to his theory of *Forms* as a solution to this problem as a result of his knowledge of mathematics and geometry.

Hugh Tredennick states:

“Plato’s reasoning may have been something like this...In geometry, the properties which we know and can prove to be true of circles and triangles and so on are not strictly true of this particular figure which I draw, because it too is imperfect and impermanent. They are true of the “look” or *form* of a circle or triangle which exists somewhere in eternal perfection. Surely it must be the same with everything else. The things of this world are all imperfect copies of *Forms* which exist externally somewhere; which are the true and only objects of knowledge but can only be apprehended *by direct contemplation of the mind*, freed as far as possible from the confusing imperfections of the physical world.”⁴

While this account is drastically oversimplified, it nonetheless contains the essence of Plato’s thoughts on the nature of reality and the best way to go about trying to understand it. The three most significant aspects of Plato’s philosophy for our purposes are:

⁴ *The Last Days of Socrates*, (1954: 14, emphasis added).

1. **His assertion that man is constituted of two parts**; the physical and the psychical (the duality of the body and the soul);⁵
2. **His emphasis on introspective methods** as the proper way to engage in philosophic enquiry due to the confusing imperfections of the physical world; and
3. **His assertion that the world of the *Forms* actually exists somewhere external to man** (or has real existence outside of the mind).

The relevance of these assertions for our current examination of postmodernism should be obvious. Perhaps most significant are Plato's distinction between mind and physical reality, and between *two types* of physical reality (i.e. that which is perceived by the senses and which is false, and that of the world of the Forms, which is true, but only perceivable by the mind). We see here that the stage has been set very early in Western thought for the creation of dualistic metaphysics and methodology, with the ultimate purpose being to define the meaning of life. In postmodern language, the history of Western metaphysics starts here as an attempt to create a satisfying *discourse* of a particular kind (i.e. formal, rational, logical, etc.).⁶ Another significant aspect of these core assertions is that we will later see Plato's methodological advice discarded in favour of more direct physical

⁵ From the *Phaedo*. For example, Socrates is quoted as saying, "If we are ever to know anything absolutely, we must be free from the body and must behold the actual realities with the eye of the soul alone." (cited by Farrington, 1944, p. 115).

⁶ And this discourse is created by man for consumption by man as the *truth*. This is the pattern which is important in Western thought: That this discourse, which is nothing more than opinion itself, is given an almost magical veneer of validity as the result of the use of a particular *methodology*.

examinations of the world. The origins of this particular trend are first apparent in the writings of Plato's foremost student, Aristotle.

ARISTOTLE'S RELEVANT METAPHYSICS

Aristotle is perhaps the most influential thinker in Western history. To attempt to summarize that influence briefly is perhaps a fool's errand, but it is possible, for our purposes, to distill from his thinking the most relevant aspects of his metaphysics.⁷

Aristotle rejected Plato's theory of Forms, because he felt that *substance* existed in much the same way everywhere.⁸ He believed that substance existed because he felt that everything had something in common. That something must be substance. What makes things appear different and/or imperfect is their possession of *attributes* in varying degrees; these attributes (such as colour, size, or texture) are always attributes *of* substance. Furthermore, these attributes also perform the function of *obscuring* substance, because we may only perceive attributes with our senses and not substance directly. Aristotle believed that substance, because it is perfect, may only be known by the *Entity*, or the perfect being, if he/she/It exists. The

⁷ I have relied on Julian Marias' *History of Philosophy* for the bulk of this summary.

⁸ Murphy, *Postmodern Social Analysis and Criticism* (1989).

reason that this being is perfect, aside from Its ability to know substance, is that It is entirely self-sufficient; It does not depend on anything else for existence.⁹ In a sense also, the Entity *is* substance, and this is the key reason that It does not depend on anything for its own existence. So because Aristotle believed that knowledge of substance, or true reality, represented *wisdom*, or *sophia*, and because only the Entity may truly know substance, he concluded that an absolute metaphysics, or explanation of reality, was really impossible for mankind.¹⁰ The best man could do was live his life in the habit of the love of wisdom (*philo-sophia*), and hope for occasional glimpses of truth. Hence the ethical man practices philosophy without any real hope of success.

The pessimism we see here is certainly reminiscent of postmodern ideas, and was probably as unpalatable to many historic thinkers as postmodern ideas are to modernists, perhaps contributing toward the historic move away from introspective methodology due to its apparent fruitlessness. Aristotle's own thoughts on physics, society and nature in general also contributed towards the development of more empirically-oriented methodologies, both in ancient times, and later at the close of the medieval period.

⁹ The ancient Greek concept of self-sufficiency as the highest form of existence is also an idea that has had considerable influence on Western thought!

¹⁰ This point in particular (an emphasis on *how* and an ignorance of *why*) will come to have enormous influence upon the philosophy of the *positivists*, to be discussed later.

In the interest of brevity, it may be stated in this regard that Aristotle's ideas about society and nature were somewhat *functionalist* in their outlook.¹¹ He believed that everything and everyone has a purpose or function which is subordinate to the "grand design of the cosmos", which itself is a reflection of the substance underlying all existence.¹² As such, society and nature are transcendent, or beyond the will of common men to change. Human interpretation of reality oriented towards radical social change is therefore meaningless or irrelevant for the most part, and Aristotle therefore advocated philosophic and scientific enquiry whose purpose was the *discovery* of truth. The task of an honourable man would then be to aid in constructing or maintaining a society structured in accordance with the natural order.

In summary, Aristotle's philosophy contains several ideas which have profoundly influenced the history of Western thought and therefore the development of postmodern criticism. The most salient of these are perhaps:

1. A certain amount of **pessimism** about the ability of humans to understand the "why" of reality, or to fully achieve wisdom;
2. His **dualism**, or dualistic conception of the distinction between human thought and reality; and
3. His **transcendent** or **functionalist** views of nature and society.

¹¹ Murphy (1989).

¹² Murphy (1989), p. 6.

SUMMARY OF RELEVANT ANCIENT GREEK METAPHYSICS

Although this review has been extremely brief, it serves the necessary purpose of establishing the *general spirit* of the dominant figures in ancient Greek philosophy, and it is precisely this “spirit” which has exerted the most profound influence upon Western thought. Perhaps the most significant aspect of this influence has been the perpetuation of the idea that *wisdom, or true knowledge, exists, and is beyond the reach of normal individuals*. The ancient Greeks, most notably Plato and Aristotle, truly believed that some sort of *systematic mental discipline* (or methodology) was necessary in the practice of metaphysics in order to even catch a glimpse of truth/reality. While the purpose of this methodology was to allow philosophers to systematically organize their thoughts, it was also in large measure to limit the influence of *emotion* on thought; in another dualistic metaphor, to separate fact from fancy. In criticizing this tradition, postmodernists assert that the distinction between rational and emotional thought is completely impossible and absurd, and that the net effect of this conviction has really been the denial and oppression/repression of *differing* world views and non-expert discourse, with the power to define expertise maintained by select groups. This oppression has resulted in the marginalization and dehumanization of

dissenters throughout Western history.^{13,14}

While it would be premature at this stage to pronounce upon the validity of this postmodern criticism, it *is* apparent that ancient Greek philosophy was rather **elitist**, **pessimistic**, and **dualistic** in its outlook, and did undeniably set the stage for later developments in Western thought.

MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY

For much of the Dark and Middle ages, Western philosophy is synonymous with Christian theology.¹⁵ In a certain sense, **optimism** has been returned to philosophy with the development of Christianity and the loss of much of ancient Greek pessimism. This optimism is somewhat shaken in the thirteenth century by the re-introduction of Aristotle to Europe by the Arabs, however.

Aristotle presented several serious challenges to the thinkers of this

¹³ Murphy (1989).

¹⁴ On a somewhat tangential note, one might argue from a feminist perspective that throughout Western history, it has been archetypically feminine forms of knowing and knowledge *in particular* which have been marginalized by the oppressive hegemony of so-called expert discourse. The current debate in Canada over midwifery comes to mind as one example. Dualism and dualistic or binary conceptions of the nature of gender may in fact constitute an archetypal source of dualism in philosophy worth exploring. Perhaps this has been alluded to by feminists in their identification and criticism of the *public/private* distinction, another type of dualism.

¹⁵ Marias, *History of Philosophy*, (1967).

age, and while interesting, an enumeration of the exact nature of these is not necessary for our discussion at this point. A brief review of the metaphysical accommodations that resulted from this re-introduction is illustrative, and may be accomplished by reviewing the metaphysics of two outstanding Christian thinkers of the time, St. Thomas Aquinas and Roger Bacon.

RELEVANT THOMIST METAPHYSICS

There is relatively little distinction between theology and philosophy for St. Thomas. Both philosophy and the natural sciences share the fundamental purpose of theology, which is the discovery of the nature of God. This view is not concerned with "*whether* God is, but *what* God is", and as such is very compatible with the Aristotelian search for the foundation of reality and for the *oneness* in the universe.¹⁶

In spite of the possibility of the oneness of substance, St. Thomas also maintains the distinction or duality between body and soul, and to this extent, between reason and reality. He asserts that the human soul is a *subsistent form*, or is capable of existing apart from the body or substance; that furthermore it is the human soul which is the source of reason, and that it is this capacity which distinguishes humans from animals. In some ways, the

¹⁶ St. Thomas rejects, however, the idea that there may be one collective soul for all of mankind, which was the Latin Averroist view deriving from Arab philosophies. See Marias (1967), p. 170.

human soul is similar to and/or derives from, Aristotle's *Entity*, and St. Thomas's *God*.

The most significant aspect of Thomism for our purposes, however, is his assertion that although God is infinite and invisible, it is possible to learn something about Him/Her by observing His/Her imperfect and visible creations; i.e. by observing *nature*. Because St. Thomas' proposed methodology for conducting these observations is primarily revelatory or meditative and contemplative, (and always related to a theological purpose) his particular reconciliation of Aristotelianism and Scholasticism may be viewed as rather different (and less complete) than that of the more empirically oriented philosophy of his British contemporary, Roger Bacon.¹⁷

BACON'S RELEVANT METAPHYSICS

Roger Bacon, along with other English thinkers of his day, made an arguably more successful attempt at reconciliation of Aristotle's philosophy with Christian doctrine than his continental contemporaries. While St. Thomas was able to reconcile most aspects of Aristotle's metaphysics, he left relatively untouched his views on physics and nature, or, as previously

¹⁷ I do mean *Roger*, and not Francis, Bacon.

referred to, Aristotle's *functionalist*, or more empirically oriented, theories.¹⁸ Bacon, and others at Oxford, primarily, accepted this challenge and consequently exerted what was to become the most decisive influence on English philosophy, eventually leading to the transformation of European society through the development of the ideas of sensationalism, the critique of the cognitive faculty, skepticism, tolerance, liberalism, the spirit of the Enlightenment, deism, utilitarian ethics, and pragmatism, to name a few.¹⁹

Bacon believed that the true purpose of both the sciences and philosophy was to "explain the truth revealed in the scriptures".²⁰ He believed that man had been given the ability to reason by God, but that human evil prevented man from perceiving the truth which God causes to be manifest in nature. This possibility of deception necessitates the use of history, languages and mathematics to accurately interpret nature. The practice of the sciences and early scientific methodology, therefore, is in the interest not only of preventing simple error in the search for Divine truth, but of preventing deception from another source; "evil".

Bacon also believed that there were three sources of knowledge;

¹⁸ The interested reader may note that Aristotle was himself faced with the task of re-establishing the *possibility of physics* in opposition to the Eleatic philosophers, who denied the existence of nature and therefore motion (Marias, 1967). It would seem that the *forms* of many debates recur throughout history.

¹⁹ Marias (1967), p. 248.

²⁰ Marias (1967), p. 175.

authority, reason, and experience. The first two are inadequate in and of themselves; he felt that all knowledge must be *confirmed* by experience. He further believed that there are two types of experience; internal and external, with internal being of a revelatory or divine origin, and external being of the five senses. We therefore see in Bacon's philosophy both dualism (the belief that perception of truth may be impeded *and confirmed* by profane thought) and the germs of *positivism*.

The overall spirit of these assertions is quite curious, however, in that while he asserts that man's ability to reason may be polluted by evil and this supports the ideology of dualism, his ideas about the *truth* contained in nature also lead to the growth in optimism about the capability of humans to solve human problems which becomes so characteristic of Enlightenment science and social theory. In a sense, optimism is regained through the devaluation of thought and emotion, however. There is also a change in the specific character of this optimism which is significant, in that it becomes less and less dependent on theological bases throughout the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods, and more dependent upon unemotional, expert scientific knowledge.²¹

²¹ The transition is more specifically from the belief that the truth in nature depends on God and reaffirms his/her existence, to the idea that nature contains truth whether or not God exists.

SUMMARY OF ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL METAPHYSICS

As this review is intended to be representative and not exhaustive, it must suffice to say at this point that from Roger Bacon to Occam, and from thence finally to Francis Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, and Newton, et al., a gradual shift in emphasis occurs in Britain towards the acquisition of knowledge through sensory experience or experiment and away from the more introspective or philosophical means favoured on the Continent.²²

The Continental ideas formed after the medieval period and Aquinas are more in the rationalist/idealist tradition, and achieve full exposition in the writings of the Continental Renaissance philosophers. The most important of these is Rene Descartes - described by Marias as "the first *modern* man".²³

Through the eventual development and interplay of these somewhat different currents in Western thought, it must suffice for the purposes of this paper to say that they eventually give rise to German Idealism (and other idealist philosophy), and most significantly for postmodernists, to the fully developed expression of empiricist metaphysics; *positivism*.

We have now arrived at the essential or fundamental metaphysical

²² Methodologically speaking, *induction* as opposed to *deduction*, and the philosophical schools of Rationalism and Empiricism.

²³ Marias (1967), p. 211.

position of modernity against which postmodernists most enthusiastically align themselves. In the social sciences, Auguste Comte (1798-1857) is widely regarded as the father of positivism, so it is to his writings that this paper must now turn in order to fully establish the roots of the current debate.

COMTE'S POSITIVIST METAPHYSICS

Comte believed that he was observing in his era the death of one type of society and the birth of another. He termed these respectively the *theological/military*, and the *scientific/industrial*.²⁴ This observation seems related to the historical developments in metaphysics and philosophy referred to above.²⁵ What Comte believed as a result of this observation was that Western society was embarking upon an age where humanity could finally live in peace and harmony, and achieve real progress, due to the

²⁴ For a particularly good summary and analysis of Montesquieu, Comte, Marx and de Toqueville, see Raymond Aron's *Main Currents in Sociological Thought: The sociologists and the revolution of 1848*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1968).

²⁵ It should be noted however, that the Marxist view of the historical development of metaphysics would differ somewhat from the one presented here. Marx is sometimes interpreted as having viewed all philosophical, artistic, literary or *ideological* development of societies as a mere *superstructure* which is automatically altered as the forces and relations of production are developed. In this case for example, the decline of theological ideologies would be more attributed to technological and not philosophical advancement. As theories along these lines relate to the *causes* of historical change/development, and we are more concerned with postmodern criticism of destructive ways of thinking, we can avoid entering the materialist/idealist debate for the meantime.

universal adoption of the same way of thinking. What he wrote is summarized well by Raymond Aron:

From the moment men begin to think scientifically, the chief activity of collectivities ceases to be the war of man against man, and becomes the struggle of man against nature, the systematic exploitation of natural resources.²⁶

The metaphysical views which are implied by this passage suggest, upon further examination, both a pessimism which is reminiscent of Aristotle, and an optimism of a practical sort. The reason that Comte may be described as pessimistic is that he emphasizes scientific thought as the essential precursor to human unity, and in his conception of positivism, scientific thought does not include speculation about *ultimate* truth or the meaning of life. Comte viewed such speculation as based entirely upon unprovable opinions, as fundamentally divisive, and inevitably leading to disagreements over "superstitious beliefs". Aron notes:

Positivism consists for man in recognizing the order which is outside himself, in admitting his inability to give a final explanation of it, and in confining himself to deciphering that order.²⁷

Comte may also be viewed as an optimist, therefore, in the sense that

²⁶ Aron (1968), p. 74.

²⁷ Aron (1968), p. 97.

he believed that the “deciphering” of order was possible. This implies a faith in the first place that *order* exists, and secondly that it exists in a knowable form.

Here we find the central and *contradictory* spirit of positivism; *pessimism* about humanity’s ability to ever fully understand reality, yet *optimism* that when we give up trying to achieve our goal of ultimate understanding, some real progress will be made! The pessimism is really fundamentally based on the same disparagement of human thought which has been previously described; thought which has as its goal the discovery of the ultimate meaning of life. Or, from a more specifically postmodern perspective, the disparagement of thought which allows for active interpretation and assignation of personal meaning to experience through the use of language. The fact that positivism is optimistic about the possibility of making “positive” contributions towards solving human problems only when we stop trying to find absolute truth, leads one to ask: How will we know, then, if what we are doing is *right*? Of course the answer to this question is that we must rely on positivistic methodology to reveal the “truth”. We may see now that an incredibly ragged circle of logic has been completed, and this brings us to a very odd juncture in our discussion.

The state of science (and philosophy to some extent) at the close of this transitional period in Western history is perhaps best summarized by a quote

from the German physicist and physiologist Ernst Mach:²⁸

I should like the scientists to realize that my view eliminates all metaphysical questions indifferently, whether they be regarded only as insoluble at the present moment, or whether they be regarded as meaningless for all time. I should like then, further, to reflect that everything that we can know about the world is necessarily expressed in the sensations, which can be set free from the individual influence of the observer in a precisely definable manner...Everything that we can want to know is given by the solution of a problem in mathematical form, by the ascertainment of the functional dependency of the sensational elements on one another. This knowledge exhausts the knowledge of 'reality'.²⁹

SUMMARY OF ANCIENT MODERNISM

We began the review of Western metaphysics with the intention of demonstrating the roots of "modernity", and the basis of postmodern criticism. The two guiding principles of postmodernism were identified as **pessimism** and **anti-dualism**. The review so far has attempted to

²⁸ Mach is a particularly interesting theorist as he represents the first significant adaptation or extension of Comte's ideas to the physical sciences. This is interesting not only because Comte idealized the physical sciences of his day, but because his work was to later result in their complete destruction/transformation (i.e. Mach extended Comte's ideas about the relativity of social phenomena to the physical world, subsequently influencing Albert Einstein). So in a sense, Comte himself was responsible for the destruction of the Newtonian world which he held in such high esteem. (I am indebted to James Burke and his television series *Connections III* for this insight, which was broadcast on The Learning Channel May 4, 1997.)

²⁹ Ernst Mach, *The Analysis of Sensations*, (Chicago: ? publisher, 1914), p. 37, cited by Anthony Giddens in *Politics, Sociology, and Social Theory*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 149.

demonstrate the roots of both the optimism and the dualism which are purported to be characteristic of modernism.³⁰ What we have found, however, is that positivism itself (and by extension modernism) is based upon, at its earliest stages, its *own* version of pessimism. In any event, and at least, the central issues identified so far should have acquired a further degree of clarity. These are:

1. The role of human thought in attempts to solve human problems (help or hindrance?);
2. The relationship of human thought to reality (same or distinct, chicken or egg?); and
3. Given that there are no definitive answers to the above so far, what ought we to do ? (What is ethical behaviour?).

We already know what positivists of Comte's era thought we should do: Stop worrying and fighting among ourselves and get on with it (whatever field of endeavour *it* is). Of course the problems and absolute tragedies resulting from the acceptance of this advice litter Western history. The various applications of positivistic techniques in the twentieth century have arguably produced as much or more harm than good, at least in some

³⁰ For the moment at least, the assertion that modernism is inherently optimistic and postmodernism pessimistic must be allowed to stand. At this point, modernism does in fact seem to possess the faith that human problems may be solved, and relies upon this faith as the justification for research and intervention. Postmodernism, at least as it has been alluded to so far in this roundabout attempt at definition, does seem to be fundamentally skeptical about this possibility.

areas, and not limited to modern warfare.³¹ It is with these issues in mind that this review must now turn to more recent expositions of modernism, and from there to the essence of the postmodern discourse.

³¹ There are of course numerous historical examples of social, scientific, and criminological policies which were based upon the "scientific" research of the day that turned out to produce the opposite of the desired effects, etc. A detailed discussion of this issue will be undertaken in Part III - Post(?)Modernism.

PART II - MODERN MODERNISM?

The task of accurately summarizing positivism/empiricism/scientism¹ since Comte is probably impossible.² The sheer volume of meta-theory and methodological criticism in sociology alone since the turn of the twentieth century is overwhelming. Having made this disclaimer, however, it is the assertion of this paper that much of this literature is the recycling of the issues already described, with some notably profound advancements. For the purpose of understanding the current (shaky) status of modernism as it relates to this (long-winded) attempt to define *post-modernism*, two of the best works are Alvin W. Gouldner's *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (1970) and a collection of articles edited by David Frisby entitled *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology* (1976).

¹ The term scientism is used by Jurgen Habermas, and refers to dogmatic faith in positivistic methodology, or the view that we can no longer understand "science" as only one form of possible knowledge, but rather must identify knowledge *with* science. Also the equation of scientific rationality with rationality in general. See his *Knowledge and Human Interest*, trans. J. Shapiro (London: Heinemann, 1970).

² Or more precisely, summarizing it to *everyone's* satisfaction.

GOULDNER - THE COMING CRISIS...

Much of Alvin Gouldner's most important book is criticism of Talcott Parsons' functionalist theories, and speculation on the convergence of functionalist and Marxist sociology. For the purposes of this paper, however, a detailed review of this particular debate is not necessary.³ The aspects of Gouldner's work which are of interest to us are those more general theoretical and methodological criticisms which he targets at *all* of modernism, and which have contributed to the development of postmodernism. These are really found in two chapters; Chapter 11 - *From Plato to Parsons: The Infrastructure of Conservative Social Theory*; where he conducts a detailed criticism of value-freedom, and Chapter 13 - *Living as a Sociologist: Toward a Reflexive Sociology*, where he clearly outlines his metaphysical assumptions.

³ While Parsons' functionalism and the functionalist theories of the twentieth century in general may be viewed as the natural products of 19th century organicism and positivism, the exact nature of this evolution does not concern us. It must suffice to say at this point that functionalism shares many of its particular flaws with the rest of the theories referred to as "modernist" in this paper. In fact, since functionalism is asserted by many (e.g. Turner, 1986) to have been the dominant sociological theory of the twentieth century (and Parsons, by extension, the dominant theorist), it (and he) is in fact the direct target of much postmodern criticism of the social sciences. While this is to some extent an oversimplification, most postmodern criticism shares with some other "critical theories" an opposition to *general theories* purporting to reveal the grand design of the cosmos. These criticisms will of course be further enunciated in due course.

Chapter 11-From Plato to Parsons: The Infrastructure of Conservative Social Theory

Much has been written about Gouldner's criticism of value-freedom, or the value-free orientation of the social science of his era. It is not the purpose of this paper to entirely review this issue, as it is fairly widely known. Some aspects of his writings in this regard are of direct significance in the development of postmodern ideas, however, and therefore must be examined. Fortunately, Gouldner's basic ideas in this specific regard are contained conveniently in a few brief passages. For example:

The central consideration... is that our very commitment to a system of moral values invariably creates an interest in seeming to be, and seeming to do, what the values require. Our most idealistic commitments therefore induce us to deceive ourselves and to lie to others. It is not only egoistic self-interest but morality as well that is a root of "bad faith". It is thus not only when men conform without belief, but when their very belief leads them to continuing self-deception, that men may manifest inauthenticity.⁴

This passage is interesting on several levels, because viewed out of context, it seems to be an argument in favour of objectivity (or against

⁴ *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*, p. 425.

“commitment to a system of moral values”) while Gouldner is in fact referring to the problems that *conforming to the value of objectivity* creates. This is of course based upon his assertion that it is impossible for humans to escape from some type of value commitment, and that the *value of objectivity* is a particularly contradictory and damaging value. This contradiction is most obvious when one considers that positivistic objectivity is simply *a value that denigrates values*. Gouldner, as a result of this obvious contradiction, does not hold a very high opinion of sociologists who claim objectivity. For example, he states:

The call for “objectivity” serves as a “sacred” justification to withhold the reflexive loyalty that society demands, while at the same time providing a protective covering for the critical impulses of the timid. Under the protection of his claim to objectivity, the sociologist sometimes engages in a bitchy and carping, tacit and partial unmasking of society’s failures. Challenged, the sociologist can always scamper back behind the parapet of his “objectivity”, claiming that it is not really he who has pronounced a judgement on society, but that it is the impersonal facts that have spoken. In its present, historically developed form as a claim of the contemporary professional social sciences, “objectivity” is largely the ambivalent ideology of those whose resentment is shackled by their timidity and privilege. Behind objectivity there is a measure of alienation.⁵

We see in this passage a clear indication of Gouldner’s opinion of the value position of positivism. In the interest of grounding this opinion

⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 439-440

theoretically, Gouldner establishes some connections between the problems of objectivity and *metaphysics* in this chapter, through examination of Plato's philosophy. This is particularly significant for our purposes, in light of the previous discussion of the influence of the Ancient Greeks on certain elements of the history of Western thought.

Gouldner asserts in this chapter that Plato held a generally functionalist view of the world and of society.⁶ He states that both Plato and the modern functionalists are concerned with the search for order (or the *one true order*) and *authenticity*. Only in the discovery and achievement of the true or *natural* order can man both understand and attain authenticity, or truth. A corollary belief is that man must first *discover* his nature, nature generally, and the nature of society, before he can properly work to achieve their full realization through changing man, society and nature to *conform* to this ideal. Of course, the methodology which is purported by positivists to be best suited to the task of discovery is the objectivity which Gouldner so forcefully opposes. We see here (finally!) the actual connection between Plato, functionalists, and positivism, and it becomes this methodological orientation towards discovery, or the process of attempting to reveal or find a *pre-existing* reality (social or otherwise), which is the precise target of Gouldner's most effective and enduring criticisms.

While the apparent groundwork of a complete metaphysics has been

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 422. See also Gouldner's *Enter Plato*, (1965).

made in this chapter, it is necessary to proceed to Chapter thirteen to complete the analysis of this assertion and to establish full scope of the influence of Gouldner's work on postmodernism.

Chapter 13 - Living as a Sociologist: Toward a Reflexive Sociology

Gouldner begins Chapter 13 by stating that he will attempt to "bare (his) assumptions", as he has bared others.⁷ He acknowledges in stating this intent that although he has spent much of the book to this point engaged in the criticism of others, or in a primarily negative activity, his criticisms are in fact based upon a positive or substantial set of beliefs. It is here, almost point by point, that we encounter the essential spirit of postmodernism in its most influential early form.

He begins by saying that man's view of reality is socially shaped. As a result of this basic assumption, combined with mankind's capacity for rational thought, he has concluded previously that values are intrinsic or unavoidable. It is only here though, that he fully establishes that the existence of, and differences between, the values of individuals are the result

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 481.

of their *interpretation* of their *unique* circumstances and experiences.⁸ He concludes that because mankind's rational interpretation of unique experiences is unavoidable, and the subsequent generation of values is unavoidable, it is pointless at a philosophical level to disparage or denigrate this process, as positivists have inappropriately done. He writes:

Surely men must be led to truth no less than to falsehood by their socially shaped personal experiences of the world.⁹

This is perhaps Gouldner's most significant philosophical statement, because it is the result of the realization that as human thought is unavoidable, it is not unavoidably *bad*. This statement is the result of Gouldner's entire refutation of the positivist assertion that personal experience and values may be methodologically eliminated, and this elimination proves that they are therefore unnecessary and imperfect. Because he has demonstrated that this 'elimination' is impossible, he is able to conclude that all research begins with the researcher's own stock of 'knowledge' and then to observe that because science is so pervaded by the paradoxical idea that a researcher should completely ignore his or her

⁸ In the interest of clarity, I am expanding upon Gouldner's statements somewhat and extending them to their logical limits in order to reveal the assumptions underlying his own statements of assumptions. I believe that this is a process that Gouldner would approve of, as he states in this chapter that it impossible to successfully criticize one's own work.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 482.

personal experiences and values, that “It often seems that the making of social theory can get underway, and be sustained, only when questions of fact are deferred or ignored.”¹⁰ It is precisely because we unavoidably take our personal experiences for granted as facts that positivism forces scientists into this even further and more impossible contradiction. Gouldner’s argument so far that positivism is a harmful *disguise* for our values gains further weight from this observation, and also raises other important issues, such as the *true* intent and functions of positivist/objectivist methodology, in light of these contradictions.¹¹

Gouldner views the contradictory nature of positivism/objectivism as having two particularly harmful functions.¹² The first of these is *avoidance*, in that it allows scientists (social and otherwise) to avoid responsibility. As referred to in the previously cited quote, the guise of objectivity allows the scientist to create, identify and even be occasionally critical of immorality or harm, while avoiding a personal connection and/or compulsion to intervene or help. Various ethnomethodological studies of gangs and violence come to mind as examples where the justification of “neutral observer” status is employed to avoid ethical behaviour on the part of the researcher, and in fact

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 484.

¹¹ Positivistic scientists seem to be disguising their values as much from themselves as from others in this paradoxical endeavour.

¹² While Gouldner does not use the terms *avoidance* and *oppression* in this specific sense, I feel that they accurately convey the overall sentiment of his arguments.

to explain simple cowardice. Weapons research in certain areas of physics is also in dire need of the ethical acrobatics which positivism allows.

The other function of the obvious contradictions of positivism is *oppression*, in that it allows scientists to impose their particular values and/or view of reality on others, again in the guise of objectively absolute "truth". While Gouldner stops considerably short of saying that this is an intentional process, conducted through the use of a hegemonic discourse by a dominant elite intent on dehumanizing dissenters (as some postmodernists assert), the net effects are the same.¹³ Although Gouldner conceives of more or less innocent or merely self-interested scientists labouring somewhat unknowingly in the service of what he terms the "military/industrial/welfare state", whose consciousnesses merely need raising, the results of their activities in advancing the values of that elite and marginalizing dissenting views are no less harmful.

Gouldner does identify the issue of methodological dualism in this chapter, (the idea that scientists are somehow superior to their human subjects) however, and to this extent strikes a blow at elitism. He writes:

A systematic and dogged insistence upon seeing ourselves as we see others would, I have suggested, transform not only our view of ourselves but also our view of others. We would increasingly recognize the depth of our kinship with those whom we study. They would no longer be viewable as alien others or as mere objects for our superior techniques and insight;

¹³ Some postmodernists might also assert that the scientists themselves are victims of this process.

they could, instead, be seen as brother sociologists, each attempting with his varying degree of skill, energy, and talent to understand social reality. In this respect, all men are basically akin to those whom we usually acknowledge as professional "colleagues", who are no less diversified in their talents and competence....The development of a Reflexive Sociology, in sum, requires that sociologists cease acting as if they thought of subjects and objects...sociologists and laymen...as two distinct breeds of men. There is only one breed of man. But so long as we are without a Reflexive Sociology, we will act upon the tacit dualistic premise that there are two, regardless of how monistic our professions of methodological faith.¹⁴

SUMMARY OF GOULDNER

Gouldner's book contributed significantly to what were eventually to become known as "postmodern" ideas in the following ways:

1. He made one of the most effective logical criticisms of positivism in the social sciences undertaken to this point in history;
2. He asserted that values are unavoidable, views of reality are socially constructed, and he reaffirmed the wholeness/ oneness of humanity (anti-dualism);
3. He implied the existence of differing/ conflicting subjective world views and their role in defining the "other"; and
4. He significantly developed the criticism of elite/scientific world views.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 490. It should be noted that Gouldner's conception of dualism here is somewhat different from that explained earlier. He is not referring to the dualistic conception of reality as phenomena and noumena, but only to the distinction between researcher and subject as different types of people, different in the quality of their thoughts. All *anti-dualism*, as seen here and in all its forms, is essentially the same, however, in that it embodies a belief in the wholeness or oneness of humanity and human experience (*monism*), and opposes the devaluation of *others*. The concept of the "other" will be seen to play a central role in the development of postmodernism, perhaps largely as a result of Gouldner's extremely insightful analysis.

While some of these ideas may be found elsewhere prior to publication of this book (often in Gouldner's own writings), this work is unique in its comprehensiveness and subsequent influence. In sum, it offers a "total package" of sorts, representing a watershed moment in the evolution of Western thought and American sociology, viewed from a postmodern perspective.¹⁵

The other important work which was occurring at roughly the same time concerned sociology and the philosophy of science in a European context, and subsequently had a somewhat different, but congruent, influence.

THE POSITIVIST DISPUTE IN GERMAN SOCIOLOGY

The "dispute" described in the title of this work was initially a debate that took place in the sociological/philosophical literature between Karl Popper and Theodor Adorno. The focus of the debate was of course positivism, and in many ways continued the squabble between rationalism and empiricism, and the late 19th century controversy between the *historical*

¹⁵ It is also interesting to note that Gouldner was aware of the work of Michel Foucault when he wrote this book. He cites Foucault's *Les Mots et les Choses*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1966) on page 277 in relation to the moral crisis of industrial positivism, the death of God, and the death of man as a moral actor.

(fact based) and *theoretical* (rational) methods.¹⁶ The debate was joined also by Hans Albert and Jürgen Habermas, most significantly by the latter.

While much of the argument evolved into extremely detailed analysis and criticism of positivist methods, the origin of these methods in the natural sciences, and their appropriateness for conducting social research, these specific elements of the debate are of only secondary interest to us.¹⁷ The most significant aspects for our purposes are the broad *metaphysical assumptions* of the participants and how these contributed to the development of postmodernism, and the arguments over the *practical effects*, on individuals and society, of positivism in the social sciences (mostly as examined by Habermas).

David Frisby notes that none of the authors involved in the debate were willing to explicitly take the side of positivism or accept the label of positivist. This is perhaps more due to the negative connotation which the word had already acquired, rather than an actual issue of philosophical agreement.¹⁸ In any event, it is Karl Popper who assumes the role of

¹⁶ David Frisby, Introduction to *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, London: Heinemann Educational Books, (1976).

¹⁷ The specifics are in many ways similar to Gouldner's analysis and criticism. It is worth noting also that both Gouldner's work and the articles in this book were written at almost the same time.

¹⁸ Anthony Giddens notes in *Politics, Sociology, and Social Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995: 136) that "Positivism over recent years has become more a term of abuse than a technical term of philosophy."

apologist, or at least preservationist, in the debate, and we will therefore begin with an examination of his first contribution, *The Logic of the Social Sciences*.

Karl Popper - The Logic of the Social Sciences

Popper begins by stating that "we know a great deal, (but that) our ignorance is sobering and boundless".¹⁹ He states in fact that it is the tension between our knowledge, and the ignorance revealed by new knowledge, that drives science. This occurs because as knowledge is expanded, new problems are identified, and science is really just the attempt to solve these new problems. Scientific *theories*, therefore, are really just *proposed solutions*.²⁰

Popper states that the objectivity of science lies in the *critical method*, or the process which allows any theory or proposition to be logically criticized. In other words, no idea is above criticism if science is correctly practiced. It is this criticism which allows a theory to be *refuted* through *falsification*, or discarded, and replaced by another one. Popper describes this process, of conjecture and refutation, as inevitably leading to *progress* over the long term. He states that it is not an oppressive or damaging process in

¹⁹ Karl Popper, *The logic of the social sciences*, in *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, London: Heinemann Educational Books, (1976: 94).

²⁰ See also Popper's *Conjectures and Refutations*, (New York: Basic Books, 1962).

any way because it is *open*, and ideas may be freely exchanged.²¹

In his unique defense of objectivity, however, Popper also maintains that theories may have both *scientific* and *extra-scientific* (or *pseudo-scientific*) relevance. He believes that some ideas and their expression are confined to scientific circles, and that it is possible to distinguish between *purely scientific truth* and *extra-scientific values*, and to prevent confusion between them. So although Popper has made a significant contribution towards re-establishing or defending the processes of science, he does so in some ways through a very tenuous distinction. This becomes more apparent when the work of Jürgen Habermas is examined.

Jürgen Habermas - The Analytical Theory of Science and Dialectics²²

Habermas has had an enormous influence on social theory, and subsequently postmodernism. Perhaps his greatest contribution is in his criticism of what has been gradually described in this paper as “modernism”;

²¹ See Popper's *The Open Universe*, (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982).

²² Before I begin this analysis of Habermas' work, I feel that I must make the usual disclaimer. His writing is at best cryptically confusing, and at worst absolutely impenetrable to me. I acknowledge the possibility that this problem may have led me to misinterpret his ideas, but I have nonetheless persisted in what may be little more than a literary Rorschach test, revealing more of my own biases and predilections than his. I contend that this tendency towards overly confusing writing is another way in which Habermas may have influenced the postmodernists.

i.e. positivism, functionalism, capitalism, scientism, etc. This criticism, and its efficacy, have resulted in Habermas' work being described as "critical theory", or a somewhat unique stream in sociological and philosophical thought. His criticism of Popper, in this paper, may be viewed as representative of the general spirit of his work and demonstrates a clear evolutionary step in the development of postmodern ideas.²³

Habermas begins by asserting that science always *begins* with theories. These theories are formed by all people in order to make sense of the world. Scientists are forced to make use of their pre-existing theories and assumptions, which they have formed through their unique, everyday experiences, because in a very real sense, it is impossible to study something that you know nothing about. On the face of it, this assertion seems compatible with Popper's assertion that new knowledge results in new problems, but Habermas takes this idea to its illogical conclusion, and asserts the inseparability of theory and practice. He writes:

(S)ocial techniques themselves are based on general law-like regularities which are neutral to historical development. Yet these techniques are formed within the framework of a

²³ I feel that Habermas' contributions to social science theory and methodology are also very ironic, in a certain sense. He may be seen here, in this debate, to have provided some of the most effective criticisms of positivism (and modernism), which eventually led to the complete development of postmodern ideas. The irony arises due to the fact that Habermas was to become one of the most outspoken critics of postmodernism (see Rosenau, 1992, for example). The decision of whether this irony is the result of contradictions within Habermas' work, or is the result of misinterpretation of his writing, or is evidence of a change of heart on his part, must be left to the reader.

heuristically fruitful historical total view, which, in the last instance, is chosen arbitrarily. The social context, in which we intervene in a social-technical manner, remains strictly within the dimension of existence (sein) set apart from what ought to be (sollen). Conversely, the viewpoint of our interpretation and the projection of praxis remain within the dimension of what ought to be, which is split off from existence. The relationship of science to praxis rests, like that of theory of history, upon the strict distinction between facts and decisions: history has no more meaning than nature but we can posit a meaning by virtue of arbitrary decision (deziision) and energetically strive to enforce it gradually in history with the aid of scientific social techniques.

In contrast, a dialectical theory of society must indicate the gaping discrepancy between practical questions and the accomplishment of technical tasks...We can only make history in so much as it appears to us as capable of being made. Thus it is one of the advantages and obligations of a critical social science that it allow its problems to be posed by its object.²⁴

Although this is an extremely dense passage, it contains essentially simple ideas which stand in direct contradiction to the position held by the positivists. One may see that Habermas seems not to accept that science can be value free, and that from a metaphysical perspective, he asserts that it is impossible to be objective and separate science from "praxis". In fact he writes:

"...(E)mpirical science arbitrarily silences a more comprehensive rationalization, and converts the strength of reflection, in the name of precise distinction and sturdy empiricism, into sanctions against thought itself."²⁵

²⁴ *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, (1976), p. 142.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 143.

Habermas is aided also (at a much later date) in his criticism of Popper and positivism by Anthony Giddens.²⁶ In summarizing the criticism levelled against Popper by Habermas and others, Giddens points out that there are some logical problems with even Popper's watered down version of objectivity.

The first problem is the assumption that by progressively offering theories for examination and successively refuting them, that progress is made, or that we move closer and closer to the truth. For this to be true, there would have to be only a *finite* number of theories, which are eventually eliminated until the "true" ones or "most true" ones are all that remain. If there were an infinite number, regression is as likely as progression over the long run, as new theories may spring up indefinitely to replace the ones cast aside. Aside from the fact that it seems very unlikely that there are a finite number of theories, Popper's assertion seems also to rest on the idea that there is "truth". Postmodernists will come to point out, as a result of this early criticism perhaps, that as there are infinite theory possibilities and reality is socially constructed by the theory makers (i.e. people), that progress in any sense is a myth.

The second problem is that of *falsification*, or the process by which theories are refuted. This problem is summarized well by Giddens:

²⁶ Anthony Giddens, *Politics, Sociology, and Social Theory*, (1995).

"The universal statement 'all swans are white' is in principle contradicted by the discovery of a black swan, but in practice matters are not so simple because we have to decide, for one thing, what is to count as a black swan, that is, as a falsifying observation. It would be possible, for example, for someone accepting the universal statement 'all swans are white' to discount any case of a black swan that might be found as not being a swan at all, and hence place it outside the scope of the law."²⁷

This argument is of course even more forceful when applied to the social sciences, where there exists such fundamental disagreement over even basic categories.

SUMMARY OF THE POSITIVIST DISPUTE

There are several important points made in this *Dispute* which are relevant to our overall discussion. These are:

1. The reiteration of the inseparability of values and the practice of the *social sciences*; and
2. The affirmation of human intention as first of all, existing, and second, as playing a crucial role in social life and science.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 170.

Habermas maintains the distinction between social science and the natural sciences, and at this point at least, does not entirely equate the two in terms of the philosophical issues which concern them. In a sense, Habermas maintains optimism in that he believes that it possible to practice both natural and social science separately, through the employment of somewhat different methodology. In his summary of Habermas' relationship with modernity, Robert Hollinger writes:

For Habermas, modernity requires differentiation so that the ethical, aesthetic, and scientific remain distinct. He defends an instrumentalist approach to nature and the natural sciences, and is wary of narrowing the gap between the aesthetic and the political....the types of argumentation and discussion in the three spheres have their own logic, which embodies the progressive elements of modernity.²⁸

While this perhaps an oversimplification, Habermas' belief that it may be possible to decide first of all, what ought to be, and second, to achieve it through technical means, must be considered as optimistic.²⁹

²⁸ Robert Hollinger, *Postmodernism and the Social Sciences*, (London: Sage, 1994), p. 158.

²⁹ See also footnote 20. Habermas has in fact been accused of being a *functionalist*, due to his views on social evolution. It is claimed that he employs behaviourist-interactionist and phenomenological-interactionist ideas (from George Herbert Mead and Alfred Schutz, respectively) as the solution to the problem of restoring the meanings of society and of action in people's lives. This restoration implies both a return to a previous state (which some say never existed) as well as the achievement of an evolutionary ideal. In my opinion, the confusion resulting from attempts to interpret Habermas' ideas is due as much to his own confusion and self-contradiction as it might be to the complexity of his ideas. See Jonathan H. Turner's *The Structure of Sociological Theory*, 4th ed., (Chicago: The Dorsey Press, 1986), for a critical examination of Habermas.

SUMMARY OF PART II - MODERN MODERNISM ?

Both Gouldner and *The Positivist Dispute* leave modernism in the same precarious position. A sense of optimism has been maintained by Gouldner through his proposal of a Reflexive Sociology, and by Habermas through his proposal of critical/ dialectical theory, but one cannot help but feel that this optimism is more foolheartedly brave than reasonably considered. Modernism at this stage is certainly exposed to an attempt at almost complete destruction by the unreservedly pessimistic (some would say nihilistic) postmodernists, as science, modernity, the "Enlightenment project", seems to have lost access to any pretension to objectivity or truth.

In any event, Habermas' influence on the postmodernists is direct, not only in his criticism of positivism, but also in his ideas on the functions and role of language, to be more fully examined in the section on postmodernism.

PART III - POST(?)MODERNISM

In the previous two sections, the attempt has been made to demonstrate the roots, development, and partial transformation of modernism. The questions remain, however, of whether or not modernism is in fact entirely represented by what I have claimed, and whether or not it is truly superseded or replaced by the school of thought to which I have constantly alluded. This section will attempt to answer these questions, first by completing the postmodern criticism/definition of modernism, and then by explaining as much as is possible the substantive postmodern position¹.

POSTMODERN CRITICISM OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

I have previously asserted that the two defining characteristics of postmodernism in whatever field are **pessimism** and **anti-dualism**. It seems at this stage, however, after the review of modernism, that neither of these sentiments are unique to *postmodernism*. Rather, what I have asserted demonstrates that modern social science, in its attempts to address fundamental metaphysical questions, may have created within itself the seeds

¹ It should be noted at this stage that some authors (Rosenau, 1992, in particular) distinguish between skeptical and affirmative postmodernists. I will refer to this distinction where appropriate or where it aids in understanding, but I should note that I believe that the distinction is artificial, and that the term 'affirmative postmodernist' is an oxymoron.

of its own destruction.² In order to establish whether or not this was the case, and whether or not postmodernism does in fact supersede modernism's criticisms of itself and offer a new paradigm for viewing social life, we must now turn to a more detailed analysis of postmodernism's fundamental criticisms.

On pessimism

It should be stated that the term 'pessimism' has a negative connotation, and that it is a label most of us would like to avoid. I am certain Stanley Cohen was aware of this when he employed the term to describe postmodernists, and I am equally certain that they feel it is undeserved. I have chosen to use the term for my own reasons, which may already be apparent. It must be left to the reader to judge, after the presentation of postmodern ideas, whether or not it is appropriate. In any event, the postmodern pessimism referred to in this paper is of a rather specific type, and has not been developed either lightly or haphazardly. It represents rather more than a sentiment of petulant disenchantment, or nihilistic withdrawal from responsibility. It is a seriously considered response to the **incompetence**,

² The establishment of this parallel with Marxist evolutionary theory and with Kuhn's theory of scientific revolutions is not accidental.

harm, hypocrisy, failure, inhumanity, and amorality which has characterized the history of Western civilization, and which has found its ultimate expression in the hegemonic discourse of modernity expressed as 'science'.³ It represents a decision not to participate in the further oppression of man by man, and a commitment to destroy the *ideas* which make this oppression possible. Postmodernists cannot be accused of nihilism, then, because they are saying *something*, they believe that discourse has power, and they are taking a position which is intentionally contrary to that of the establishment 'decision makers'⁴. For them, philosophy is a potentially serious business, which engages one with others and which involves the taking of risks (not the least of which are careerwise). They believe that is not enough to stay uninvolved, a passive observer of the oppression and marginalization of others, becoming involved only when directly affected. Postmodernists in this sense are pessimistic only in that they believe that there is no hope for humanity if modern ways of thinking continue to prevail.

But are they right? Is there no hope for humanity in modernity at all? We have already seen modernity (largely defined as positivism) severely criticized, but saved in the end. Will the *postmodern* critique successfully

³ These categories of criticism are derived primarily from Rosenau (1992), as well as Hollinger (1994) and Seidman's 'The end of sociological theory', in *The Postmodern Turn*, Steven Seidman, ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

⁴ To use Lyotard's term from *The Inhuman*, (Stanford: University of Stanford Press, 1984).

destroy it? Should they even try? For the answer to these questions, we must look more carefully at the philosophically derived specifics of the postmodern critique.

The incompetence of modernism/The myth of mastery⁵

Modernism is of course not entirely and accurately represented when it is described as synonymous with, or merely as, positivism. Modernity is more complex, particularly in the social sciences. The other defining characteristic of modernity which we must review in order to complete the elaboration of postmodern allegations is the tendency to construct **general theories**.⁶ Lyotard states, "I define postmodern as an incredulity toward metanarratives."⁷ Postmodernists assert that a *defining characteristic* of the Western intellectual tradition is the tendency to universalize observations in the attempt to construct 'grand' meta-narratives. By this they mean that modernist social scientists have been inspired by their (positivistic) belief in

⁵ The irony that I am writing this paper for my *master's* degree is not lost on me.

⁶ Therefore if postmodernism is negatively characterized by *pessimism* and *anti-dualism*, in the interest of fairness I propose that modernism may be characterized as composed of *scientism* and *essentialism*. For further discussion of essentialism, see Steven Seidman's 'The end of sociological theory', in *The Postmodern Turn*, Steven Seidman, ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

⁷ Lyotard, (1984), excerpted in Seidman, ed., *The Postmodern Turn*, (1994), p. 27.

an absolute reality to generalize their spatially, culturally and temporally specific observations to universal proportions, or to create grand stories to explain all of reality. These stories purport to explain human nature and the nature of society for all people, places and times. Because it seems absurd to be doing this in the face of the staggering personal, social and cultural diversity in the world, modernists are accused of imposing their particular (privileged) view of reality upon other classes and other cultures. Postmodernists view this tendency to universalize as an *oppressive imposition* of discourse on others by the powerful. Postmodernists are not only critical of the grand metanarratives of the *privileged*, however. They are also critical of the *critics* of Western society, and accuse them of the same harmful grandiosity as their 'oppressors'. Foucault, for example thinks that the question of whether or not Marxism is a science is itself indicative of this problem:

If we have any objection against Marxism, it lies in the fact that it *could* effectively be a science. ... When I see you straining to establish the scientificity of Marxism I do not really think that you are demonstrating once and for all that Marxism has a rational structure and that therefore its propositions are the outcome of verifiable procedures; for me you are doing something altogether different, you are investing Marxist discourses and those who uphold them with the effects of a power which the West since Medieval times has attributed to science and has reserved for those engaged in scientific

discourse.⁸

The tendency to generalize one's own specific experiences in a given time and place, to extend individual experience to theories claiming to have discovered reality and the essence of human and social nature (**essentialism**), provoking absolute prescriptions for human behaviour in order to achieve 'freedom', is not merely ethnocentric, however. Nor is it merely a reflection of the logical process of induction. The making of (absurd and unfounded) truth claims is rather a fundamental characteristic of Western modernity so interwoven into the fabric of our history, our society, our discourse, that until theorists like Gouldner, Habermas and the postmodernists, the absurdity of doing so remained more or less hidden in plain sight. Postmodern philosophers are extremely critical of the obvious flaws in Western scientific process, the belief that this process is somehow endowed with truth and the ability to define freedom, and the subsequent tendency to interfere in the lives of others. Richard Rorty writes:

What method do scientists use?...*(W)e* shall say that within what Kuhn calls 'normal science' - puzzlesolving - they use the same banal and obvious methods all of us use in every human activity. They check off examples against criteria; they fudge the counter-examples enough to avoid the need for new models; they try out various guesses, formulated within the current jargon, in the hope of coming up with something which

⁸ Michel Foucault, "Genealogy and social criticism," in , *The Postmodern Turn*, S. Seidman ed., (1994) p. 43, emphasis added.

will cover the unfudgeable cases. We shall not think there is or could be an epistemologically pregnant answer to the question 'What did Galileo do right that Aristotle did wrong?,' any more than we should expect such an answer to the questions 'What did Plato do right that Xenophon did wrong?,'...We shall just say that Galileo had a good idea, and Aristotle a less good idea; Galileo was using some terminology which helped, and Aristotle wasn't. Galileo's terminology was the only secret he had - he didn't pick that terminology because it was 'clear' or 'natural' or 'simple', or in line with the categories of the pure understanding. He just lucked out.⁹

However this method, this way of thinking, and the successive agreements¹⁰ that reality has been discovered (once again!), have endured in social science and social philosophy almost throughout Western history, as demonstrated in previous sections of this paper.¹¹ The subsequent tendency to continue to generalize the successive rediscoveries (recreations) of truth, to represent and implement theories selected arbitrarily from an infinite range of possibilities as fact, in spite of the continuous and undeniable failure of the successive models of reality and society, and then to conceive of this process

⁹ Rorty, excerpted in *The Postmodern Turn*, S. Seidman ed., (1994), p. 48.

¹⁰ Postmodernists would say that the only significant aspect of this process is its discursive construction, how agreement is arrived at, why one story, one text representing reality, achieves dominance.

¹¹ This process is of course not unique to the social sciences. We are still bombarded through the media with the conflicting truth claims made by scientific discoverers of medical 'facts' for example, which in many instances differ in no measurable respect from the claims of the snake oil salesmen of yesteryear. Discoveries concerning the relative benefits/harms of coffee, alcohol, smoking, etc, are a fixture in daily news reports. Reassurances about the safety of pesticides, household chemicals and various medications have been scientifically 'established' in opposition to scientific 'evidence' to the contrary. At least in these areas, there really does seem to be an infinite number of conjectures and refutations.

as *progress(!)*, goes beyond mere incompetence. Seidman writes, about the great social theorists of the 19th and early 20th centuries:

The great modernists claimed not only that Western modernity unleashed processes which would have world impact, but also that modernization contained universally valid forms of life (e.g. science, bureaucracy, socialism, organic solidarity, secularism). Not much effort is required to see that behind the aggrandizing intellectualism of the modernists were the expansionist politics of the age of colonialism.

These grand narratives seem to bear the mark of their own national origin. They contain an element of national chauvinism. Modernists projected their own nations' unique development and conflicts onto the globe as if their particular pattern were of world historical importance. These *totalizing conceptual strategies* that attempted to sketch a world historical story seem today extremely naive and misguided. The grand narratives of industrialization, modernization, secularization, democratization, these sweeping stories that presume to uncover a uniform social process in a multitude of different societies, these stories with their simplistic binary [dualistic] schemes (e.g. Tonnies' *Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft*, Durkheim's mechanical to organic solidarity) which purport to relate a story of change over hundreds of years, should be abandoned. They repress important differences between societies; they perpetuate Western world hegemonic aspirations and national chauvinistic wishes. They are, in short, little more than myths that aim to authorize certain social patterns.¹²

This process has unarguably continued, in spite of the concerns raised by theorists such as Gouldner. It is not simple incompetence which is most

¹² Seidman, (1994), p. 129-30, emphasis added. Heidegger, who has greatly influenced the postmodernists, describes these modernist tendencies as indicative of the 'will to dominate', arising in part from post-Enlightenment humanism (see Hollinger, 1994, p. 111).

offensive to postmodernists, however, as incompetence may be forgiven. It is not simply the fact that modernity has failed to deliver on almost all of its promises of peace, freedom, prosperity and health for all. It is not the fact that most social scientists, policy makers, and front line implementers of social policies have ignored prior incompetence, and have not made any fundamental changes to their methods. It is rather the *arrogance* and *intentional harm* arising from this underhanded incompetence, the intentional imposition of cultural, temporal and spatial biases upon others defined at worst as backwards savages and at least as naive masses, justified by the myth of the superiority of modern man, modern thought, and modern techniques, which is despised. It is this *harm*, arising completely from the arrogance of scientism, which justifies the destruction of modernity.

The harm of modernity/ The myth of helping

Modernity is not just harmful due to its arrogant incompetence. While there are certainly innumerable examples of this type of harm (thalidomide, residential schools for Aboriginal Canadians, the eugenics movement, the Sixties Scoop¹³, DDT, etc. ad infinitum) it is the way of thinking which allowed these tragedies to occur, and which will continue to

¹³ This refers to the program of permanent removal of Aboriginal children from their parents in Canada in the 1960's due to inferior/unacceptable childrearing practices and subsequent international placement of the children with adoptive/ foster families.

justify future tragedies, which is most insidious. This pattern is perhaps most evident in the field of criminology, where the broad patterns of the larger society are played out in somewhat extreme fashion.

Henry & Milovanovic, two of the foremost postmodern criminologists, assert that modern society is one in which the "other" is devalued.¹⁴ This devaluation provides both the ethical justification for the commission of criminal/harmful/violent acts, and for the subsequent treatment of 'criminals' by the criminal justice system. This is significant, because it is indicative of a *cycle* of harm, perpetuated by a *culture* of harm. What Henry & Milovanovic assert specifically is that because people construct their view of reality (or *lifeworld*, to use Husserl's expression) through *discourse* (through interacting with relatively small groups of other people in their daily lives), people form identifiably different groups. These groups invariably have constructed views of reality which differ from one another proportionately to the different life experiences of their members. These groups may be assembled along socio-economic, age, or ethnic lines, for example, and while the individual subjects composing these groups obviously do not all possess identical views of reality, they are similar to an extent that allows the subjects to identify an essential sameness, or affinity

¹⁴ Henry & Milovanovic, *Constitutive Criminology*, (London: Sage, 1996). Also Einstadter & Henry, *Criminological Theory*, (Toronto: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1995). 'Other' in this sense is not limited merely to the previously referred to pattern of scientists and academics devaluing non-positivist ways of knowing, but includes this phenomena as typical of broader patterns of 'other' devaluation.

with one another, perhaps only as distinct from groups with which they possess no degree of perceived similarity.¹⁵ In short, only the subjective perception and agreement about group distinctness is significant. Henry & Milovanovic assert that the thought structure of modern society is particularly harmful in that it allows a subject (a person) to devalue, *dehumanize*, or view as less than equal, those persons who do not belong to his/her own group. This dehumanization, supported by the overall culture of elitism and essentialism (faith that there is *one* true reality, and as such, *one* correct lifeworld), serves as justification to treat 'others' as less than human, sometimes even because it is *for their own good*, i.e. in order to help them to attain the *correct* lifeworld. The tendency to view one's own lifeworld as the 'correct' form of human existence and to dehumanize 'others' is institutionalized in Western society, according to Einstadter & Henry:

Control institutions [police, courts, social service agencies, prisons, etc.] are the relations among human agents, acting to police the conceptual distinctions among discursively constructed social structures....[C]riminal justice policy is the ideology and the plan for the organized acting out of "control thoughts", whose very action reflects on the reality of that which they are organized to defend....Criminal justice agencies are engaged in administrative structures whose professionals define, hierarchize, and categorize others, concentrating that

¹⁵ It should be noted that these membership in these groups is purported to be constructed subjectively, and is more felt than reasoned. Membership criteria are not necessarily established along 'logical' lines, or by social categories imposed by modernists. Phenomena such as black-on-black crime may therefore be explained not as the result of a type of false-consciousness pattern of victimization, but as a personal evaluation of 'victim-otherness' by the subject.

which is done more diffusely in the wider society. In this way they repress and constrain those that they classify, thereby violating them in the same ways these persons had earlier violated others. As a result, say the postmodern criminologists, criminal justice policy and practice is itself a crime over others...¹⁶

As may be seen in the above quote, modern society is the embodiment of a fundamentally harmful pattern of thinking, a reflection of the positivistic faith in one true reality, an expression of elitism and essentialism resulting from the imposition of a dominant metanarrative. In other words, modern society is completely harmful:¹⁷

Law does not include most of the behaviours that fit our definition of crime. Law is a very partial list of harms. An adequate listing of laws to capture the behaviour that we define as crime would have to start from the contexts of pain resulting from such denials of others. It would thus have to include much of what currently stands for *business practices, governmental policies, hierarchical social relations, historically contingent constitutive interrelational sets, and a lot of what occurs in family life*, since these arenas of power are premised upon the inequality that liberates the expression of agency to the creation of pain.¹⁸

¹⁶ Einstadter & Henry, (1995), p. 293.

¹⁷ I wish to point out here that I agree that society is harmful, but not in the specific manner asserted by the postmodernists. I will expand upon this idea in a later section.

¹⁸ Henry & Milovanovic, *Constitutive Criminology*, (1996), p. 116, emphasis added.

The reason that modern dualistic, essentialist and elitist ways of thinking, and subsequently almost all of modern society, may be characterized as harmful results from their *reductive* and *repressive* nature;

Harms of reduction occur when an offended party experiences a loss of some quality relative to their present standing; *harms of repression* occur when an offended party experiences a limit or restriction preventing them from achieving a desired position or standing. Considered along a continuum of deprivation, harms of reduction or repression may be based on any number of criteria...(but) whatever the criteria, these are harms either because they move the offended away from a position or state which they currently occupy, or because they prevent them from occupying a position or state that they desire.¹⁹

Of course this type of thinking and subsequent behaviour (characterized here as harmful) pervades modern Western society, and has been forcefully imposed upon other cultures through the colonialism referred to earlier. Modernism, then, is not just harmful in its *effects*, but in its *essence*.

The hypocrisy of modernism/The myth of reason

It hardly needs stating at this point that modern Western science has

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 103, emphasis in original.

never lived up to its own formal methodological standards of objectivity, logic, reason, and value freedom. This is viewed as hypocritical. It is especially hypocritical because modernists are accused of first *constructing* this completely unattainable and inhuman ideal, and then *pretending* to have achieved it. It is a process that is ingenuine from start to finish. The very idea that humans may be able, in some way, to completely suspend emotional or personal involvement in their day to day lives, in their work or in their play, now seems completely absurd.²⁰ To continue to cling to whole or partial reiterations of this dualistic philosophy seems absolutely inexcusable, in consideration of the harm which this mythological objectivity has allowed or directly caused, and of the failure to achieve it at any time. Faith in *reason* as conceived of by traditional philosophy, the magical properties of which are employed to support this edifice of hypocrisy, is therefore also viewed as possibly unfounded.

Faith in reason and logic, as the terms are defined in modernity, has been a troublingly intermittent feature of Western thought since the Ancient Greeks discovered/created the concepts. Of course, faith of another type and incorporating somewhat different definitions of reality *did* achieve dominance for a considerable period of Western history, a period now described as the 'Dark Ages', and intervening between the glorious days of

²⁰ The distinction between work and play may be another example of an untenably simplistic dualism.

ancient reason and the 'Enlightenment'.²¹ But this era should not necessarily be viewed as an inconsistent or drastically different manifestation of privileged discourse, because whatever their disagreements about the *specific* objects of faith, these eras do share the more foundational Western belief that there is a correct, or proper, way to think, which is necessary to eliminate the possibility of mistake and deception, and which is necessary to achieve wisdom (i.e. to acquire an understanding of the one true reality). For the most part, in the modern era, this privileged discourse has been synonymous with the methodological processes of positivism. While there has been considerable debate over the years (among those with faith in logic) about various methodologies of reason (induction vs. deduction, for example), the dominance of the faith in the existence of a *single, correct* way to think has been maintained. In consideration of the history of thought outlined earlier, where both agreements about reality and the correct way to think about it have been changed on numerous occasions, faith in reason itself must be suspect as merely another mythological justification of privilege. It may be argued that reason has not ever prevented the formulation of lifeworlds which were later judged to be incorrect. Since it is likely that there are infinite theoretical possibilities, all established through the use of reason, evaluated through the use of reason, and eventually

²¹ See Hollinger, (1994), for example. The capacity to *have faith* in whatever concept seems to be a tendency that is more durable over time than the ideas which require it, be they scientific or supernatural. I will attempt to expand on the relevance of the inherent power of ideas somewhat in a later section.

refuted through the use of reason, it is difficult to conceive of this process as anything but pointlessly teleological.²² Reason seems to be nothing more than a discursive construction itself, the definition of which is determined through the same exertions of power/control as any other human construct. Reason is a myth which has been created and employed to justify the lifeworld of the elite, the expert, the privileged, and to devalue the lifeworlds of others.

The failure of modernity / The myth of progress

Robert Hollinger, in his summary / defense of postmodern ideas, asserts that one of the claims of modernism is that "the truth shall set us free...because ignorance is the cause of unhappiness and immorality."²³

²² The reader will recognize that many of these concerns about 'reason' certainly did not originate with postmodern criticism. In many ways, they, and many other aspects of postmodern criticism in the social sciences, are reiterations and applications of previously ignored philosophical debates, the significance of which for these fields has heretofore been unrecognized. From David Hume's skeptical assertion that an 'ought' may not be derived from an 'is', to Kant's attempts to reinstate types of reason as particular to certain ends, to Hegel's idealism, and perhaps most significantly, to Nietzsche's perspectivism, the postmodernists seem to have re-opened discussions which have intermittently lost relevance in the history of philosophy. See the previous sections of this paper as well as Hollinger's *Postmodernism and the Social Sciences*, (1994), and Marias' *History of Philosophy*, (1967), for example. Hollinger goes so far as to (almost) suggest that the modernism - postmodernism debate is the same as the Enlightenment - counter-Enlightenment debate of the 19th century. Foucault (1994) describes the resurrection of 'disqualified knowledges' as the archaeology or genealogy of theory: "In fact, as things stand in reality, these collected fragments of a genealogy remain as they have always been, surrounded by a prudent silence" (p. 45).

²³ Hollinger, (1994), p. 7.

While this is rather a dishonest oversimplification, it nonetheless accurately represents the general sentiments of science since the Enlightenment. So what are we to make of the history of scientific efforts in search of truth? How much 'truth' has been uncovered? How much freedom gained?

Postmodernists might assert that the difficulty one encounters in trying to answer these questions, and the reliance on modernist techniques which would be necessary in order to quantify the alleged 'progress', point to the absurdity of conceiving of life in such terms. Is it even possible, from a postmodern perspective, to accuse modernists of failure in achieving such goals when the only way to judge them is by their own (absurd) standards? If progress is a myth, if theories (stories) are infinitely diverse, plentiful and malleable, then to participate in the evaluation of progress is pointless. An extension of postmodernist thinking should assert that progress, the measured attainment of goals, is the most ethereal of modernist constructs. Who can say with 'certainty' after all, what our goals *are, should be, were, or should have been?* Our goals are exceedingly difficult to define, let alone justify, and it seems that a lot of after-the-fact rationalization occurs in evaluating success.²⁴ But even more important than these concerns is the seeming absurdity of asking the questions, How should I live? What *should* I be doing? Much of the theorizing in these areas (the definition of 'normality') seems to be nothing more than the devaluation of diversity and

²⁴ It may be argued that this is especially true for a profession such as social work.

the admonishment of extremes. But are extremes *bad*? (What *is* bad?) Science also purports to have increased the quantity of human life on the planet enormously; there are more of us, and we are living longer than ever before (or so they tell us). So what?

In this most skeptical version of postmodernism, any attempts to construct narratives and meta-narratives about human activity may be seen as merely the imposition of judgements derived from the lifeworld of the subject. But this absolutely relativistic view does not even sit well even with most postmodernists. Many of them accept that to judge an endeavour by its own criteria, or by the criteria of another, are both worthwhile, if not absolutely defensible, endeavours. So to judge modernism by its claims of accomplishment may not be entirely inappropriate. Of course, even in this sense, modernism is a colossal, hypocritical failure. One need only look to the current conditions endured by the Aboriginal peoples of areas colonized by the West, and judge these conditions by either Western *or* Aboriginal standards to determine that freedom, of either body or spirit, is not in evidence. Neither is it in evidence for large proportions of the wider population; disease, homelessness, drug abuse, crime, family violence, etc. *ad infinitum* continue to flourish unabated in spite of centuries of 'right-minded', pragmatic, modernism. Lyotard writes:

I use the name of Auschwitz to point out the irrelevance of empirical matter, the stuff of recent past history, in terms of the modern claims to help mankind to emancipate itself.²⁵

The deepest failure of modernism may not be in its facilitation of atrocities, or in its simple inability to solve the practical problems of everyday life, however. Its most harmful failure may be first in the destruction of *hope*, and second, in the subsequent inability to restore it. Peter L. Berger, et al., write:

The problem becomes most clearly apparent when one looks at that ancient function of religion which Weber called "theodicy". This means any explanation of human events that bestows meaning upon the experiences of suffering and evil. Through most of human history, religion provided such theodicies. In one way or another, religion made meaningful even the most painful experiences of the human condition, whether caused by natural or by social agents. Modern society has threatened the plausibility of religious theodicies, but it has not removed the experiences that call for them. Human beings continue to be stricken by sickness and death; they continue to experience social injustice and deprivation. The various secular creeds and ideologies that have arisen in the modern era have been singularly unsuccessful in providing satisfactory theodicies. It is important to understand the additional burden to modernity implicit in this. Modernity has accomplished many far-reaching transformations, but it has not fundamentally changed the finitude, fragility, and mortality of the human condition. What it has accomplished is to seriously weaken those definitions of reality that previously made that human condition easier to

²⁵ Lyotard, "Defining the postmodern," in *Postmodernism: ICA Documents*, L. Appignanesi, ed., (London: Free Association Books, 1989), p. 89; cited by Peter Leonard, "Knowledge/Power and Postmodernism," *Canadian Social Work Review*, vol. 11, no. 1, (Winter, 1994).

bear. This has produced an anguish all its own, and one that we are inclined to think adds additional urgency and weight to the other discontents we have mentioned.²⁶

So while we may admit that modernism has not fully achieved its cynical, hypocritical goals by *any* measure, and has *caused* harm in unfathomable degree (especially in the loss of theodicy) may we also conclude that *no progress* has been made? Has modernism merely increased humanity's capacity and tendency to harm? Again, it does begin to seem rather pointless to ask this question without first deconstructing the thought processes from which it has arisen. One of these ideas is perhaps best described as the conception of human existence as predicated upon a journey toward a *destination* (truth).²⁷ It may be argued that the only journey that humanity is uniformly committed to is that from birth to death.²⁸ Skeptical postmodernists might assert that what happens in between these universal events has been so quantified, categorized and distorted by the cult mentality

²⁶ Peter L. Berger et al., *The Homeless Mind*, (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 185.

²⁷ I have stolen this phrase from a poster which reads, "Success is a journey, not a destination."

²⁸ As with much of postmodern thought, their ideas concerning mortality may be based to an extent on the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. While this is largely irrelevant to the main thrust of our discussion at this point, the interested reader may refer to (extremely confusing) articles such as Leslie MacAvoy's "The Heideggerian Bias Towards Death: A critique of the role of being towards death in the disclosure of human finitude," in *Metaphilosophy*, vol. 27, 1&2, (Jan/April 1996). A more readable work on the subject from a psychoanalytic perspective is Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death*, (New York: The Free Press, 1973), and sections of Gouldner (1970).

of modernism that most people now live painfully repressed, ingenuine, or *inhuman* existences, and that the relevance of extreme and infrequent technologically facilitated atrocities, while no less important, pales by comparison.

The inhumanity of modernity / The myth of nature

Of course the accusation of inhumanity which has been levelled at modernism seems to imply that there is such a thing as a *genuine* human existence, which modernity has prevented anyone from attaining. Inhumanity seems to be a category derived through opposition, but in fact, this need not be the case. The allegation of inhumanity is primarily based upon the tendency to think of life in dualistic terms, or the tendency of modernists to speak or think in terms of a right way to live. It is the initial propositions of essentialism, or the assertion that truth is discoverable, which has led people to make right/wrong distinctions. Modernity is inhuman solely because it has created the category of inhumanity through the assertion of its discoverable opposite. So when postmodernists say that modernity is inhuman, they are rejecting modernity in the entirety of its binary classifications.

More affirmative postmodernists accept these categories to at least

some extent as necessary in order to distinguish between the inhumanly oppressive harms of modernity and their alternative lifeworld propositions. They assert primarily that modernity is inhuman because of its ignorance, disparagement, and marginalization of the spiritual, intuitive, and mystical aspects of human existence.²⁹ Postmodernists assert that these ways of thinking and living are as real as their mythological opposites: science, objectivity, and reason. Modernity is accused of ignoring at least half of human 'nature' based upon untenable, hypocritical ideas.³⁰ Not the least of these hypocrisies is of course the consequent idea that because intuition, emotion, mysticism, and spirituality are the polar opposites of the truth seeking methodologies, that ethics, politics, and poetics have no place in the practice of 'science'.³¹

The amorality(?) of modernity / The myth of virtue

Modern dualism, and the theme of distinction between facts and values culminates in this odd resolution: That in order to acquire the

²⁹ Rosenau, (1992). See also Lyotard's *The Inhuman*, (1991).

³⁰ For those readers who recognize the hypocrisy of the affirmative postmodern position, patience is requested.

³¹ Rosenau (1992).

dualistic category of *virtue*, one must discover truth; in order to discover truth, one must eliminate distortion; in order to eliminate distortion, one must eliminate emotion; in order to eliminate emotion, one must eliminate considerations of virtue.³² Science must be amoral if it is to accomplish anything good. This type of thinking is so astoundingly teleological that one wonders how it has endured at all. Obviously, nobody can really believe any of this (modernist scientists included). This leaves the question then: What has actually been going on in the minds of modernists for all of this time? It has previously been asserted that the answer to this question might be: Not much.

Of course, this is a somewhat simplistic representation of modernism's aspired-to amorality. Considerations of virtue are notoriously difficult. Postmodernists might assert that virtue is just another myth, which may serve the purpose of devaluing others, reinforcing privilege, etc. The application of the label of virtue is of course also as subject to the influence of power as any human concept. Doing the right thing, and being a person who does the right thing, are meaningless categories of oppression, artifacts of the

³² I swallowed the spider to catch the fly, etc. Murphy (1989) states, about the paradoxical goals of science and scientism, that; "[t]he discovery of truth consists of finding knowledge that is unquestionably valid but likely to be irrelevant" (p. 19). He states that scientific ways of thinking about 'society' and the assumed irrelevance of personal values for this transcendent construct have lead to the devaluation of individuals and that it is this process which has justified the Holocaust, for example. "Nonetheless, when order is substantiated by dualism, persons may easily become viewed as ancillary to the perpetuation of culture" (p. 19). The paradoxical theory of transcendence, of culture existing with or without people, the *whole* continuing to exist regardless of the actions or even presence of the *parts*, is therefore merely a reflection of the scientific paradox.

opposite categories of immorality, of difference and domination. Virtue, as other dualistic categories, exists only as a discursive construction or as an expression of power and the will to dominate through the definition of others.

On the other hand, affirmative postmodern ideas seem to hold out some hope that virtue exists. This belief is evident in the passages quoted above from Henry & Milovanovic. One cannot help but conclude, however, that these attempts to discover the right thing to do, through identifying the wrong things, are different from the modernists' attempts only in that they are *consciously* hypocritical (or at least I hope they are).

POSTMODERN METAPHYSICS

As noted by numerous authors, it is difficult to identify the fundamental beliefs which all postmodernists share.³³ There may in fact not be any universally accepted postulates, and this is at least as much an intentional characteristic of this type of philosophy as an indication of disorganization (because to construct metanarratives is to oppress). A

³³ Rosenau (1992), Murphy (1989), and Hollinger (1994) represent only a few examples of attempts to define postmodernism, and all admit to the slipperiness of the subject.

reader³⁴ does begin to perceive the gist of postmodernism, however, if they can endure their prose for long enough. And the basic metaphysics of postmodernism is very simple. It is not dishonest to state that the entirety of postmodernism, post-structuralism, and deconstructionism is based upon the belief that **reality is socially constructed, and defined through language**. This may seem disappointingly straightforward to anyone who has struggled through the labrynth of Lyotard's prose, or through the 'writerly' texts of Barthes, but it is nonetheless 'true'. In fact, the simplicity of this idea is perhaps what lends force to the postmodern challenge. Now, it should be stated that this is certainly not a new idea. Foucault apparently recognizes this, as evidenced to some extent by his historical/archeological/genealogical approach. Postmodernists may be asserted to have simply *broken* the 'prudent silence' which has surrounded this particular idea for some time. Theories concerning the social construction of reality may be asserted to mimic even *older* metaphysical problems, however, such as those of Plato and Aristotle which were previously referred to, and especially those formulated by Rene Descartes (i.e. given that deception is possible, and

³⁴ I am using the term 'reader' in spite of the postmodern contention that we are all 'writers', or active creators and interpreters, even when we are reading. According to this view it may be impossible to passively accept a text (a printed work, a piece of art, an event, a discourse, etc.), and writers should therefore write in a writerly (scriptible) way (which is vague [and] playful with words [and] punctuation [and] open to interpretation) as opposed to in a readerly (lisible) way which is intended for passive consumption and implies the superiority of the privileged knowledge of the author (see any of Roland Barthes works, particularly *The Pleasure of the Text*, [New York: Hill and Wang, 1975], or for a readerly account, Murphy, [1989], or Rosenau, [1992]). How am I doing? Too writerly?

deception by its very nature is unrecognized, how can we ever be certain of anything?). While interesting (for me at least) an examination of the history of these problems is not necessary at this point.³⁵ It must suffice to say that postmodernists have simply rejected all of the solutions to this problem put forth by proponents of dualism and modernism in order to justify their actions. In other words, they not only dispute the progress claimed in science or in scientific thinking, but in thought of any type. Everything is just a fundamentally uncertain verbal construction. Since every thought/language construction is equally baseless, indistinguishable from one another except by other equally baseless ideas, then to impose your thoughts on others by dishonestly representing them as 'discovered' truth may be seen to be oppressive.

Postmodernists of a somewhat less relativistic/skeptical bent might allow that there *is* such a thing as physical reality. But, they assert, it doesn't matter, because it is unknowable. The only thing that matters is the *meaning* that individuals construct for themselves.³⁶ This argument in some ways

³⁵ I believe that much of postmodernism has been formulated as a result of the work of the theorists which I have previously reviewed, in addition to the writings of Heidegger and Nietzsche particularly, as well as those of Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, (New York: Doubleday, 1959), Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality*, (New York: Doubleday, 1966), Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations*, (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1960), Schutz's *Collected Papers*, (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1962-66), and especially G.H. Mead's *Mind, Self and Society*, ed. C.W. Morris (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934), for example.

³⁶ This idea is also related to phenomenological philosophy and to cognitive or rational/emotional psychology (à la Albert Ellis, *Reason and Emotion in Psychotherapy*, (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1962). The essence of these ideas is expressed well by another ancient

extends the tenets of dualism to their extremes, in stating that because human thought is so active and complex, so infused with emotion and opinion, that even if reality in an absolute and unchanging form *did* exist (which they doubt), humans would be incapable of comprehending it in its entirety, of then agreeing upon this comprehension, and acting without *changing* themselves and reality. This changing process amounts to the same thing as the social construction of reality. In a sense, they turn the arguments of scientism about the irrationality of man around, and aim them back at science; they admit that scientism is correct in an essential way and establishes its own pointlessness. This is an attack on the paradox of scientific logic from both directions.

Greek cited by Ellis, Epictetus, in his famous quote: "Man is not disturbed by events, but by the view that he takes of them." This is sarcastically paraphrased as, "It's not the plane crash that's upsetting, but your *feelings* about the plane crash."

PART IV - HOW IS POSTMODERNISM RELEVANT TO SOCIAL WORK?

One must belong to a tradition to hate it properly.

- Theodor Adorno

Having established in previous sections the essential seriousness of postmodern criticism of the social sciences, it is now time to turn to an examination of the relevance of postmodern criticism for those engaged in the practical implementation of the “knowledge” derived from scientific inquiry. It follows logically that if the theoretical foundations of modernity are suspect, then so too are the actions of those whose professions are predicated upon modern beliefs. It is the contention of this paper that one of the most obviously practical and far reaching influences of the social sciences on professional practice is in the field of *social work*. Whether through individual counselling and psychotherapy, child welfare agencies, the corrections/rehabilitation field, or at the level of policy, social workers may be asserted to conduct the majority of social-science driven intervention into the lives of others in modern Western society. While the authority or prestige of other professions may be more commonly recognized, it is in fact social workers who seem to perform the bulk of day-to-day interventions into the

social existence of others. Social work is the epitome of the grass-roots practice of social science ideology, and yet most people find it difficult to precisely define social work.

WHAT IS SOCIAL WORK?

This is a question which has many layers of meaning. There are of course many superficial and mechanistic answers, which are obvious attempts to avoid the real substance of the issues I have been discussing. One might assert for example that social work can only be described as the activities of those persons who *describe themselves* as social workers, and then attempt to list these activities. This type of definition is of the sort one might find in an encyclopedia or in a thoroughly positivistic textbook, and is one which ignores the *interpretive meaning* of the activities in question for the practitioner, their clients, and for society in general. After the insights provided by Gouldner, et al., this would obviously be an unsatisfactory approach.

Another type of definition might delve somewhat into the realm of meaning, and return with platitudes along the lines of 'a helping profession', 'a holistic approach to psychotherapy, inclusive of the client's social milieu', 'an ecological approach to counselling', and so on. But for those who have been the victims of social work intervention, and for those who have

practiced these interventions (such as myself) these definitions are lacking in some fundamental respect. Social work, it occurs to me, may be characterized as much by what is left unsaid about it as by what it actually proclaims itself to be. From a rigidly postmodern perspective, such as that established in the previous section, I feel that social work in this sense might be viewed as one of the most damagingly insidious incarnations of modern positivism, industrial capitalism, and scientism ever to have been perpetrated. This may in some way be related to or indicated by the difficulties one encounters when trying to comprehensively define social work, and this is the issue which I intend to explore in this section.

None of this is necessarily meant to imply that *I* hate social work, as might be inferred from the quote from Adorno at the beginning of this section. Rather, I have found it necessary to adopt a somewhat hostile attitude towards the profession in order to conduct what I feel is a thorough examination of the subject.¹

In the remainder of this section, I intend to adopt a completely postmodern perspective and to deconstruct social work in the harshest possible manner, or in the manner which would result if one were to accept postmodern metaphysics holus-bolus. It should also be noted that the “version” of social work which I am going to deconstruct is the result of a

¹ This hostility, or antagonistic attitude, which I have found necessary to adopt in this sense, and which I have simply *found* in much postmodern writing, is indicative I believe of the general sentiments of the postmodernists. I will expand upon this idea in a later section, but wished to call attention to it at this stage to facilitate an informed reading of this section.

postmodern perspective also, and in no way represents a consensus view of the profession.² This exercise should not be construed as evidence that I am a postmodernist, however, but rather as representative of my wish to illustrate in the clearest possible fashion the implications of postmodernism for social work when the fundamentals of this philosophical movement are accepted completely.³

This deconstruction of course must begin at the beginning, as it were, with a brief examination of what it is that social workers actually do.

How can just talking to people be harmful?

This is of course essentially what social workers do. They communicate with people by talking, writing and gesturing, by listening, reading and interpreting. They seldom actually run around clubbing people

² In my attempts to define social work I have discovered that no two attempts at such a definition are exactly alike, or for that matter, entirely different. In other words, there exists a varying amount of agreement and disagreement, both within and outside the profession, over what social work *is*. Of course these disagreements represent the precise reason that I have undertaken this exercise. I feel that this section, where I outline both the postmodern view of social work and the resulting postmodern criticism of it, is illustrative of both the strengths and weaknesses of postmodernism, and is therefore a worthwhile exercise. The true significance of this exercise will become apparent in the next section. Until then, I ask the reader to suspend judgement about whether or not the social work I represent here is the "real social work", or whether or not such representations are possible.

³ I further believe that if postmodernism is to be accepted at all, it *must* be in its entirety due to the fact that it is based upon a very few, very basic, metaphysical assertions (such as anti-dualism, anti-essentialism, the social construction of reality, and the concept of power/knowledge). I feel that attempts to incorporate bits and pieces of postmodernism into social theory are really just fundamentally illogical attempts to water down its depressingly nihilistic message. I will develop this point further in the next section.

over the head, or shooting them, or actually having any physical contact with their clients and coworkers at all, in an official capacity.⁴ But in this last sentence, we may have stumbled upon exactly what it is that defines social workers, both as a distinct profession and as regards their meaningful activities. This is of course that they *have* an *official capacity*, and their communications with others are guided by this role. Social work communication is purposive, as is all communication, but is guided by the status conferred upon it, the mantle of legitimacy derived from official authority and from scientific professionalism. But what does this really mean?

It means that social workers talk to other people guided by a set of beliefs which they possess, and which they believe is constituted by professional knowledge and technical expertise which in some way qualifies them to interfere in other people's lives. This belief in *intervention* as sometimes justified is the other common element. These beliefs are legitimized to varying extents by governmental (state), professional and scientific authority. In other words, social work is a 'local site' in the sense meant by Lyotard, where the interpretation of facts is agreed upon in an

⁴ Of course social workers often have the power to affect physical change in the lives of others through actions which they merely recommend or order to be implemented, such as the withholding or denial of financial assistance, the removal of children from one or both parents, or through pre-sentence recommendations to the courts. As I do not wish to become mired in description of social work activities, it should suffice to say at this point that these actions are based upon the discursive construction/interpretation of reality by the social worker, and for our purposes, it is this language and thought process which is most salient.

unique manner.⁵ But social work is an officially powerful local site. This means that social workers share an interpretation of reality which allows them to conduct essentially similar social work activities; activities which involve at one level or another *intervention* in the lives of others, usually on behalf of official, authoritative organizations. Now, it should be noted here that it is not asserted that all social workers share completely identical beliefs and interpretations of reality, but rather that there is something common to all of their belief systems which enables them to conduct the communicative activities typical of social workers. Within this over-arching similarity, the details of precisely how one intervenes are relatively trivial adjuncts to the fact that one feels that intervention is justified, is legitimized by authority of some type, is beneficial to someone, or is even actually possible. So in "essence", the thing that social workers have in common is that they feel that purposive intervention in the lives of others is in some way "OK".

Social work may be seen to be essentially paradoxical in a certain sense also. Social work has traditionally made claims to being the most progressive and open-minded of the social science professions. It has long championed the rights of the marginalized, fought inequality, aided the helpless, demanded social justice. Yet at the same time, it has done so with power

⁵ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A report on knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

acquired through legitimization by association with the holders of power; through appeals to scientism, liberalism, socialism, and capitalism, the essentialist metanarratives of modernism. So on the one hand, social work is the handmaid of modernity, and on the other, the champion of the oppressed. This is why the quote from Adorno is particularly appropriate to social work. *Social work legitimizes and is legitimized by the forces which it often professes to despise. Social work often reifies the principles of modernity in the guise of helping the oppressed. This is why, from a postmodern perspective, social work may be viewed as one of the most dishonest, duplicitous, and immoral endeavours in history, rivalling even the Roman Catholic church in its cunning chicanery. Social workers appear from this perspective as the *sonderkommandos* of modernity.⁶*

I recognize that this is a rather controversial statement, and requires some further elaboration. The best way to examine this assertion is through the deconstruction of the process of intervention, as it is common to almost all fields of social work.

⁶ Sonderkommandos were the inmates of Nazi Germany's concentration camps which aided in the extermination of their fellow prisoners, in a terrible sense representing one of the most extreme examples of collaboration in history.

INTERVENTION AS OPPRESSION

Concerns about the true functions of social workers are not new, and are not unique to postmodern analyses. Piven and Cloward (1972), for example, have produced an extremely insightful examination of the functions of public welfare activities generally, and the analysis of psychiatry undertaken by Foucault (1967) also bears profound relevance to social work.⁷ It is not my intention to entirely recount the contentions of these authors, although their insights are implicit in my analysis. Rather, I intend to demonstrate generally that the process of social work is identical (and identically inappropriate) to the processes of scientific inquiry, in spite of its historic efforts in the direction of client-centredness. In fact, it is my contention that, when viewed from a postmodern perspective, it is the *process* of social work, common to all of its fields of practice, which both reveals it as oppressive and condemns it to perpetually sabotage its emancipatory ideals. This process may be broken down for examination into the categories of *assessment*, *treatment*, and *evaluation*.

⁷ F. Piven and R. Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: The functions of public welfare*, London: Tavistock, 1972; and M. Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, London: Tavistock, 1967.

Assessment

The fact that we have words with which to define the people we attempt to help speaks volumes about the way in which we think about them. They are not simply other people, “brother sociologists” as Gouldner might describe them. They are clients, consumers, patients, different in some essential respect from us and everyone else.⁸ But regardless of what we call them, there is the underlying belief that those who seek help are not just different, but in some way inferior. In social work, this belief is expressed to varying extents in the employment of insight-oriented therapies, for example. The profession of social work is predicated upon the idea that we will in some way be able to help people solve problems which they are unable to solve on their own. What is behind this thinking?

In fact, this belief is perhaps evidence of the most profound influence of the arrogance and elitism of scientism on the social work process. The theory is of course that clients are unable to help themselves because they are unable to identify their *real* problems. They are lost in subjectivity. The

⁸ The recent wave of political correctness is interesting in this respect. Because some of the words we have used to describe or identify the inferior or dysfunctional have (understandably) acquired a negative connotation, there has in recent years been a constant search for new terms. As these become tainted, they are cast aside and new ones applied, until one wonders if there will be any of the language left with which to label. Persons are no longer handicapped, but differently-abled, for example. Of course, postmodernists contend that it is the oppressive tendency to define “others”, a reflection of the modernist will to dominate, which is at the root of this absurd phenomena. As long as we conceive of those who are different from ourselves, those who do not conform to the Western dualistic ideals, or who conform less completely, as inferior, these word games will continue. It is the process of defining others which is distasteful, not just the words we use, say the postmodernists.

reader will recall from earlier sections that this belief is a reflection of the most basic positivist assumption: that ignorance is the cause of unhappiness, and that knowledge of the "one true reality" is what will set humanity free. So from this perspective, it is relatively easy to see how social workers have arrived at the idea that they, through their "expertise" and superior knowledge, will be able to assist clients to identify the true source(s) of their misery. This occurs in every field of practice, from feminist social workers who aid their female clients to perceive the truly oppressive nature of society and of their interpersonal relationships with men, to social workers working in the policy area who attempt to expose the "regressive" nature of certain social policies. The techniques of this reprogramming process have many different names, from "re-framing" to "consciousness raising" (and perhaps the most cynical - *empowerment*), but they are fundamentally the same and predicated upon the social worker's superior ability to grasp reality. Elitism is obviously the foundation of social work practice, the bedrock upon which the arrogance of assessment is laid. When one considers who the employers of social workers are, or who they represent, assessment may be seen to be merely the first stage in the reification of the dominant modernist metanarrative of Western society, and nothing more.

Treatment

Of course, assessment is not an end in itself. Assessments are conducted in order to precisely identify the client's most sensitive vulnerabilities as a prelude to helping them acquire the correct view of reality. The "insights" of the therapist would be damaging enough if they were merely communicated to the "client", but social workers rarely stop there.⁹ The treatment phase of the helping process is the actual intentional deception, coercion, and/or alteration of another human being's lifeworld by the social worker (or intentional alteration of a previously existing "local site" in the case of community development work or social policy formulation). Social workers use a broad variety of methodological techniques to accomplish this goal, ranging from cognitive/behavioural interventions, to insight oriented therapies, to political lobbying, all of which are the adaptation and application of positivist beliefs and techniques concerning the physical world to human social relationships.¹⁰

Now, it should be stated at this point that although postmodernists

⁹ In fact, social workers rarely even *start* there. Many social workers never completely disclose their assessments to their clients. It is a rare helping organization which even allows clients access to their written records, let alone encourages such openness. Many only allow such access because it is mandated by the laws of the relevant jurisdiction. This secrecy is profoundly revealing about the arrogance and underlying harmfulness of the social work process in many settings.

¹⁰ A detailed analysis or categorization of the particular techniques employed is not necessary here, as we are more concerned at this stage with the intentions of the process rather than with its mechanics.

would conceive of this process as harmful or at least insensitive, most social workers actually believe that they are helping their clients. But are the clients of social workers really being helped? Does it at least *seem* that they are? In view of the above criticisms (which seem obvious to postmodernists) how can social workers continue to justify what they are doing? To answer these questions, we must look now at how social workers *evaluate* what they do to their clients.

Evaluation

Again, it is not my purpose here to review the many issues and concerns surrounding evaluation of outcomes to be found in the *mainstream* (modernist) social work literature. Many of these concerns are identical to the debates which have occurred within positivism over the years about the technology of creating (or should I say *discovering*) the truth. It is interesting to note, however, that these concerns exist, and for the most part are representative of the recognition that professionals have a personal investment in seeming to be competent at achieving the results that they desire.¹¹ From a postmodern perspective, however, the evaluation process is really more complex than debates about whether or not client satisfaction

¹¹ From a postmodern perspective, the belief that it is *possible* to achieve a desired result through intervention into the lifeworld of another person is perhaps the most significant aspect of these debates.

surveys are worded correctly, or whether they are valid at all. The interesting part of the evaluation process, when viewed from a perspective that recognizes the *oppression* which a client has undergone, is that clients often do seem, or can be made to seem, temporarily at least, *happier* after intervention.¹² Since postmodernists view the whole exercise as a harmful expression and reification of power relations and privileged discourses, some explanation of this phenomenon is necessary.

One possible explanation is that people seek the help of social workers primarily because of the incompatibility of their marginalized lifeworld with that of the dominant elite. Unhappiness in this sense is the result of condemnation resulting from being different, or identified as the "other" by those with the power to define them as such. Since the process of intervention is aimed for the most part at indoctrination into the *dominant* lifeworld system of beliefs and the production of a conforming, complacent underclass of the marginalized,¹³ clients may genuinely feel a reduction in stress as their beliefs about reality are altered to conform more closely to those

¹² Again, I'm choosing to ignore studies from within the modernist literature suggesting that professional intervention has *no* discernible effect also, such as that of Hans Eysenck's famous study, reported in 'The effects of psychotherapy: An evaluation', *Journal of Consulting Psychology*, 1952, 16, 319-324, and related debates. In the final analysis, whether or not the modernist psychotherapists are producing the results they desire is secondary to the harmfulness of their *intentions*, as these intentions reflect the harmfulness of modernist beliefs in general.

¹³ See Piven & Cloward (1972), especially on this point, although the dominant discourse from a postmodern perspective is not quite the same as that identified by these authors. For postmodernists, the dominant metanarrative is essentially the idea that grand metanarratives are valid and possible.

of the privileged. Clients may find some solace in accepting a version of the truth which locates the source of their misery in their own helplessness, laying blame at the feet of an "addiction" perhaps. They may cease to struggle against their oppressors, accept their marginalization more complacently, and experience a reduction in anxiety as a result.

Alternatively, clients may be reprogrammed to accept an essentialist metanarrative which is in some ways *contrary to* that of an alleged dominant elite in Western society, but which provides a more personally satisfying explanation of reality and provides a sense of solidarity or group membership. In either case, evaluation in whatever form is merely an extension of the over-arching oppressiveness of the modern project, and the reification of the tendency to make absolutist truth claims. Evaluation serves to reinforce the privileged position of the expert helper, and as such is merely another expression of the power relations inherent in social work's role in modern society. Evaluation, as the final stage of the oppressive social work process, is ultimately a politically motivated endeavour and another reification of the de-humanizing aspects of science's intrusion into the fabric of human social relationships.

"INVOLUNTARY" CLIENTS

As may be seen above, the social work process is extremely suspect both in its motives and in its effects. I wish to point out at this stage, however, that in the previous section I have intentionally avoided examination of the issue which I feel is most damning of the social work profession. This is of course that arguably *the majority of social work clients are involuntary*. Almost all social work in the fields of income assistance, corrections, mental "health", and child welfare is mandated by the state, in more or less explicit form, and is in fact officially imposed upon people against their will. In the area of social policy also, many of those affected have little or no say in changes which are implemented.

The term "involuntary client" is perhaps a euphemism on the order of George Orwell's Ministries of "Truth" and "Peace" in 1984. Involuntariness in the social services is really just coercion. Postmodern criminologists point out that modern society is rife with "...disciplinary institutions, practices, and discourses which legitimate its modes of domination and control," and the majority of these are staffed in some measure by social workers or others operating under the mandate of social welfare.¹⁴ Much of social work practice is therefore the simple and direct subjugation of others through the use of

¹⁴ Steven Best & Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*, Basingstoke, England: Macmillan, 1991, p.3.

legitimate authority. The source of this power is the discourse which has been described throughout this paper - the same power which is accused by postmodernists of having created the social problems which it is employed to address. Postmodern criminologists (such as Henry & Milovanovic) assert that modern Western society is a cycle of harm which perpetuates its own misery through the classification, definition, and subjugation of others, and social workers are an integral part of this process. The idea that there is one true reality and that those who hold to a different version of it are classifiable or inferior and in need of "help" whether they want it or not is the real source of harm in society, they say, and from this perspective, social work as it has been practiced is inherently harmful.

Has postmodern theory influenced social work?

One might assert that the answer to this question will demonstrate whether or not social work is in fact an intransigent and oppressive force, or if it is open to criticism and possesses awareness, reflexivity, or "openness to bad news". I intend to look at the (admittedly limited) body of literature which has arisen on this subject non-critically and as an undifferentiated whole, as I feel that an examination conducted in this fashion will enable us to more fully understand some of the actual effects of postmodernism first, and then later, to distinguish these effects from what merely *ought* to have

occurred.

Peter Leonard's Representative Contribution

Peter Leonard is arguably the most prolific and influential Canadian author to have concerned himself with the relevance of postmodernism for social work.¹⁵ His work in many ways encompasses the entire field of discussion on this subject, in a fashion which I feel is very insightful, representative, and therefore also useful in the categorization and evaluation of other relevant literature, Canadian or otherwise.

Leonard, as the result of an analysis somewhat less extreme than mine above, asserts that emancipatory forms of social welfare must acknowledge that they emerge from particular *cultures*, and not from the "truth". He recognizes the potential harmfulness of social welfare activities because of this faith in modernist metanarratives, and states that social work must:

1. Stand against essentialism;
2. Realize oppression is not just from class, gender, and race;
3. Seek emancipation not through scientific truth, but from *diverse*

¹⁵ See for example Peter Leonard, "Postmodernism, Socialism and Social Welfare", *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, Vol. 6(2), (1995), pp. 3-19; "Knowledge/Power and Postmodernism", *Canadian Social Work Review*, Vol. 11, no. 1. (Winter, 1994), pp. 11-26; and "Three discourses on practice: A postmodern re-appraisal", *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, 23(2), (1996), pp. 7-27.

struggle;

4. Recognize grand metanarratives are Eurocentric; and
5. Dialogue with the oppressed, not the elite, to achieve emancipation.¹⁶

These recommendations all flow directly from the application of postmodern ideas to social work, and in this sense are fairly obvious. They are in fact repeated in various forms by other social work and social welfare authors, and are in this way, I contend, representative.¹⁷

In view of the above, then, it seems conclusive that social work theorists *have* after all taken stock of postmodern ideas and applied them in a rather consistent but disappointingly vague fashion. They seem vague, for example, because it is not immediately obvious *precisely how* a front-line social worker would go about “standing against” essentialism, or for that matter, seeking emancipation through “diverse struggle”. Once again, however, Leonard seems to have neatly encapsulated the more practical suggestions that have been proposed, and it is here that we find the truly

¹⁶ Adapted from Leonard (1995).

¹⁷ For example, Sue Penna and Martin O'Brien, “Postmodernism and social policy: A small step forwards?”, *Journal of Social Policy*, 25, (Jan. 1996), pp. 39-61; Jane Gorman, “Postmodernism and the conduct of inquiry in social work”, *Affilia*, 8(3), (Fall, 1993), pp. 247-67; Dennis Saleeby, “Technological fix: Altering the consciousness of the social work profession”, *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, 18(4), (Dec. 1991), pp. 51-67; Pardeck, Murphy & Chung, “Social work and postmodernism”, *Social Work and Social Sciences Review*, 5(2), (1994), pp. 113-23; all of which contain some or all of Leonard’s recommendations in one form or another.

significant potential of postmodern ideas for social work. I will review his four cornerstone suggestions one by one as a vehicle through which to explore the general trends of the postmodern influence.

Leonard states that:¹⁸

1. Social work needs to establish dialogical relationships.

This is a sentiment also repeated by authors such as Weick, Hartmann, Gorman, Saleebey, Pardeck, Murphy & Chung, Rossiter, Haworth, Gottschalk & Witkin, for example.¹⁹ Viewed *en masse*, as they are here, the sheer number, recency and consistency of these recommendations lends a certain force and urgency to their arguments, and also serves to convince a reader of the seriousness with which this issue has been treated. While these authors do not all employ Freire's exact and illuminating terminology, they nonetheless do all refer, more or less directly, to the same shaken confidence

¹⁸ Adapted from Leonard (1995) primarily, but also (1994) and (1996).

¹⁹ Gorman (1993); Pardeck, Murphy & Chung (1994); Amy B. Rossiter, "Teaching social work skills from a critical perspective", *Canadian Social Work Review*, 12, 1, (Winter 1995), pp. 9-27; Glenn O. Haworth, "My paradigm can beat your paradigm: Some reflections on knowledge conflicts", *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, 18(4), (Dec. 1991), pp. 35-50; Shimon S. Gottschalk & Stanley L. Witkin, "Rationality in social work: A critical examination", *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, 18(1), (1991), pp.121-35.

in social work's traditionally "banking" model of education and practice.²⁰

Leonard states that this banking model (where the teacher or professional is conceived of as the repository and dispenser of truth while students and clients are viewed as ignorant and passive recipients of this knowledge) has been exposed as elitist and oppressive in light of postmodern criticism. For, after all, if the "truth" which the privileged possess is called into question (as it has been), their authority is undermined and exposed as the calculating reification of dominative modes of expression which it is.

The solution to this problem has been hinted at in the use of the term "dialogical". Various descriptions of the development of "communicative competence", or respect for diverse narratives, for example, this phrase refers to the revolutionary practice, for teachers, of actually listening to their students, and for social work practitioners, of actually listening to their clients. But of course "listening" does not entirely capture the substance of the proposed interaction. What is proposed is the conscious respect for, and negotiation with, the different *lifeworld* of the subject. The education or helping process therefore becomes one in which the student/client is a full participant and where their world views are respected rather than dismissed or condemned as false, maladaptive, dysfunctional, or even superstitious. Social work practitioners and educators would become, in this model, the *co-*

²⁰ Leonard (1995) borrows the specific terms "dialogical" and "banking" from the work of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), as uniquely appropriate to describe the distinction between postmodern and modern models of education.

creators of the process in which they are involved, instead of the “expert” or conscious manipulator of “others”. They would have to recognize the existence of equals, “brother sociologists”, and relinquish at least some measure of their authority.

2. Social work needs to challenge dogmatic discourses.

Due to the fact that social work is rather an eclectic endeavour, it receives much of its theoretical material from other disciplines.²¹ These are psychological, sociological, anthropological, criminological, economic, and political science theories for the most part, adapted to suit the social work code of ethics in some respects, and chosen for their utility in selecting and accomplishing various practical goals. Of course this process of first creating a story about reality (a metanarrative) and then acting in a ruthless fashion to force it upon the world (or “others”) has been precisely what we have seen criticized most severely by postmodernists, as reviewed in previous sections.

²¹ One might argue that the relative lack of theoretical originality within social work as a profession is what betrays it most clearly as an oppressive endeavour, where the goal of subjugation of others takes precedence over the development of detailed justifications. Social workers might be accused of cynically adopting and discarding theories which suit their immediate purpose, or the purposes of their employers, with little serious effort made towards reconciliation of these theories. It is therefore possible to practice social work simultaneously from a variety of incompatible perspectives, which is often termed the “eclectic” approach. I do not wish to develop this idea further at this point, but will discuss the opposite view in the next section. *I will* note here, however, that the separation of theory construction into distinct academic disciplines is a practice that seems increasingly unjustifiable. While this debate bears relevance to our overall discussion, it is easily the subject of another thesis, so I’m going to avoid it.

But with further regard to these metanarratives, Leonard and the other authors cited are almost all in agreement that the discourses of the various social science disciplines are *particularly dogmatic* (or strongly stated, inflexible assertions formulated for *specific purposes* about specific aspects of “reality”, without reference to any real “evidence”). It is therefore doubly inappropriate for social workers to employ these discourses as they have been, as some sort of an objective technology, like a ruler or compass. For example, employing psychoanalytic techniques to address the problem of poverty is in this sense much like using a screwdriver to hammer a nail. The effort will produce results of some kind, but “evaluating” these results will not be a straightforward endeavour because the technology is not really being used for its original purpose.

The problems with the employment of these dogmatic discourses are not limited to producing undesired or questionable results, however. The most serious consequence of social workers employing these extra-disciplinary metanarratives is what we have been discussing all along, i.e. that this use lends *legitimacy* to their construction, perpetuates ideological conflict, and reifies the inhuman aspects of modern society as a result.²² Leonard and the other postmodernists therefore call for social workers to dispute these totalizing discourses verbally and in writing, and to stop teaching them and using them in practice. The dogmatic discourses of the

²² Rossiter (1995) is particularly clear on this point.

social sciences are seen to be both inappropriately and illogically employed and also legitimized by social workers, and therefore their use must be discontinued and their validity must be openly challenged within the profession. This anti-totalitarian stance leads directly to the next recommendation.

3. Social work needs to focus on diversity.

If social workers are to stand *against* the homogenizing and oppressive dogmatic discourses, this of course raises the question of what they are to stand *for*(?). The opposite of totalizing theories is of course the recognition of pervasive diversity. In a nutshell, social work must relinquish any commitment which it holds to *ideal types*, and accept the moral equivalence of different beliefs, lifestyles, values, etc. The dogmatic discourses which we have identified (and which social work has traditionally employed) may be asserted to be committed to the discovery of, or even based upon, the belief in the existence of ideal types, in a way which is the only possible result of faith in the existence of "the one true reality", or in "the right way to live". The idea that there is a way to achieve "self-actualization", "wedded bliss", "crime free societies", "a healthy child-rearing environment" or other mythological states through the assistance of social work must be viewed with rather more than suspicion.

Although social work *is* arguably the helping profession most tolerant of diversity, it is still, through its commitment to its current practice and teaching methods, demonstrably committed to ideas which artificially *typify* and categorize human experience and existence. Even in areas of its most emancipatory intent, social work may be seen to really exert a homogenizing and totalizing influence. For example, feminism asserts the commonality of interests shared by all women, and by this assertion, totalises inappropriately. The same for Marxist attempts to raise the consciousness of "classes". In this interpretation of postmodernism, I believe it might be asserted that because *no two people are exactly alike*, any attempts at categorization, typification, or group construction are coercive attempts to pound square pegs into round holes. Because no two people are exactly alike, no individual fits entirely into an artificially constructed category. Viewed on a societal scale, and within the context of theory construction in the social sciences, this basic observation serves to entirely disassemble any attempts at homogenization. Social workers must therefore recognize the illusory nature of group interests and respect the uniqueness of their clients and students. By focussing on diversity, social work will avoid the oppressive tendencies resulting from the quest for similarity and attempts to achieve ideal types. It seems that social work must become oriented towards assisting people to achieve *their* goals without influencing the process in the direction of their modernistically

justified categories.²³

4. Social work needs to deconstruct professionalism.

This recommendation is essentially similar to the previous three, and elements of it are inherent in each. It represents the recognition that social work is founded upon and legitimized by subscription to the elitist, totalizing and oppressive forms of discourse arising from its place and role within modern society as a profession. This should be more or less self evident at this point, if one has been able to follow the postmodern metaphysical position. At the risk of delving into criticism, which I had planned to save for the next section, it must be noted at this point that the only noteworthy aspect of this particular recommendation is that Leonard really only concerns himself with the “surveillance” and “control” functions of social work (as discussed earlier with reference to Piven & Cloward). He asserts that social workers must resist and refuse the pressure to perform these functions, and one of the first steps in doing this is to deconstruct professionalism in order to diminish the authority inherent in the title. It would be somewhat more difficult after all to oppress people when attempting to help them as a peer, or brother sociologist, rather than as someone invested with some sort of scientifically proven superiority. Of course, and this is where I risk criticizing,

²³ I am putting off discussing the difficulties involved with this until the next section.

Leonard and the other authors I have mentioned still maintain the belief that helping people without somehow *coercing* them is possible. The idea of deconstructing professionalism then stops short at an admonishment to be careful, but not at any real misgivings about the whole idea of an occupational group that systematically meddles in other people's social lives, regardless of whether the client or social worker initiates the relationship.

On this note, it is now appropriate to proceed to the final phase of this evaluation of the relevance of postmodernism for social work.

PART V - CONCLUSION/EVALUATION/RECOMMENDATIONS

Since the significance and recommendations of postmodern social theory for social work have been summarized in four basic points, perhaps the best way to evaluate their validity is by following the same pattern.

1. Does social work need to establish dialogical relationships?

Of course saying that it does implies that it doesn't *already* function based on such relationships, and this observation exposes this recommendation as the over-simplification that it is. It may be argued that every relationship is dialogical to a greater or lesser extent. It is in fact difficult to imagine a perfectly lopsided relationship (or a perfect causal relationship) of any type in light of modern social and scientific theory, not to mention common sense.¹ This recommendation, therefore, must be treated not as the absolute prescription that it seems, but as an admonishment in a particular direction along a continuum, with an absolute banking model on one end and an absolutely dialogical model on the other. Because neither of these absolutes is attainable, of what real use is this recommendation then?

¹ While it is unnecessary at this point to become involved in a detailed discussion about the issue of causality, it should suffice to say that quantum physics, chaos theory, etc. are particularly relevant to this point.

Who decides where to stop along this continuum? Based upon what criteria? How much co-determination of the educational and/or therapeutic process is *enough*? These questions in fact expose this recommendation as essentially empty, due entirely to the fact that *these issues are dealt with by social work practitioners and educators on a daily basis already, and are in fact unavoidable*. In fact the only way to avoid issues of influence, coercion, and what might be called "directional structure" in relationships is to not enter into them at all. Of course this leaves us in an impossible position - since there is no such thing as a completely dialogical relationship (a point I will develop further), are we simply to solve all of humanity's problems by ceasing to associate with one another?

Of course the criticism I have presented above is very abstract, as it must necessarily be in order to counter such an ethereal and impractical proposition. But even if some practicality of the recommendation to become *more* dialogical is conceded, what would such relationships actually look like? In the worst case scenario, one might envision teachers and practitioners struggling mightily *not* to influence their students and clients, hoping that they will stumble upon their own solutions to their problems, assuming such solutions exist. Setting aside the nihilistic view that positive change is completely impossible for a moment however, it should be obvious that the structureless relationships which result from extreme dialogism would not be successful at producing change of *any* type (at least I can't

imagine how they could), and would in effect be no different than doing nothing. In relation to this conundrum, it is also necessary to point out that the assumption that *relationships which are less effective at producing change are somehow less harmful* is not necessarily warranted. Change, whether educational or therapeutic, does not necessarily equal harm, and is not necessarily an act of oppression. The reasoning which has inspired the call to become more dialogical is therefore as suspect as the possible results of actually attempting to implement this recommendation. Inspired by the belief that intervention is inherently harmful, the situation we would arrive at by becoming more dialogical (again, assuming this is possible) would therefore be the same as doing less, or doing nothing.²

2. Can social work challenge dogmatic discourses?

Of course not. Every discourse is dogmatic, even the ones that might be employed to combat dogmatism. The statement "Dogmatism is bad" is of course dogmatic. If one is willing to accept that every human communication is purposive, i.e. to satisfy a need or accomplish a goal, then dogmatism becomes a term which is applied to texts that we do not *agree* with, or which are contrary to our own perceived interests, rather than a term that refers to any substantial characteristic of an utterance. Following the

² I will explain in due course why I feel that doing nothing is not good.

postmodernists' own logic concerning the linguistic/social construction of reality, dogmatism becomes a completely meaningless label, because *every* text, including their own, is an unsubstantiated but purposive discourse.³

With regard to the issue of typification, classification or categorization of "others", this recommendation is also deficient, and for the same reasons: i.e. classification is as unavoidable an act as dogmatism, because, as we shall see in the next section, *similarity* is as valid a concept as *difference*.

3. Should social work focus on diversity?

This recommendation is equivalent to the advice to become more dialogical. Just as there are no relationships which are *entirely* or infinitely dialogical, there are also no two people who are *entirely* different. No two people have everything in common, and no two people have nothing in common. One may see from this basic observation that this recommendation is very similar to the previous one, in that it somehow purports to deal in absolute terms where in fact none exist. The recommendation must therefore be (charitably) viewed as advice to alter our focus in a particular direction along a continuum, and the same sorts of problems are encountered. Foremost among these is the idea that *diversity* is somehow

³ Rosenau (1992) is particularly clear on this point. She states that the postmodern discourse is itself a quite consistent "...logical, reasoned and analytical process..." and represents an attempt to construct a metanarrative itself (p. 176).

morally superior to *similarity*, in the same way that non-intervention was alleged to be superior to attempts to effect positive change. This type of thinking is really quite dogmatic, and quite strange, when deconstructed, and one wonders how it was constructed in the first place.

4. How can social work deconstruct professionalism?

This recommendation includes elements of, and therefore depends upon, the success of the first three, so at this stage, it may be more appropriate to ask: *Why* would social work deconstruct professionalism? It is not clear what would be gained by the diminishment of the authority derived from this status, because we have already discussed the rather dubious outcomes that might result: i.e. more dialogical relationships (or less ability to effect change), more focus on diversity (or the ignorance of similarity), less dogmatism (or different versions of dogmatism).

Conclusion

The essential point that postmodernists seem to have missed is that (also following their own logic about the social construction of reality) *both similarity and difference are intrinsic to the human condition*. It may also be

that modernism is ultimately both more tolerant of, and better equipped to deal with, those differences and similarities.

Once again, modernism may be described as:

...the historical period which followed the middle ages of feudalism and that continued until the mid-twentieth century. Modernism is characterised by an *opposition* both to traditional society and to its faith in divine constitution, cosmic centredness, the supernatural, subjectivity, and local boundedness...In modernism this faith was replaced by a belief in the values of innovation, rationality and objective analysis, directed toward progress and the discovery of truth.⁴

Modernism, then, was actually a response to a brutal, some may say inhuman, form of hegemonic discourse. It might even be convincingly argued that the Dark Ages represent an example of an era dominated by a much *more* hegemonic (if something may be said with correct grammar to be *more* hegemonic) discourse than that of the modern period, even in view of postmodern scepticism concerning the generation and interpretation of historical texts. The enlightenment advocacy of the use of reason and the scientific method as the primary means by which to formulate the discourse used to constitute reality also seem to be a significant advance over the stagnation and oppression resulting from the primarily superstitious world views of the feudal regimes. There is no question that different views of reality existed even in feudal times, but they were brutally suppressed (the

⁴ Einstadter & Henry, (1995: 278), emphasis in original.

Spanish Inquisition comes to mind as an obvious example of the processes employed) in a manner which was arguably more harmful than the methods purported to be employed by “modernists”.

Viewed from this perspective, modernism may be seen to actually represent merely the *recognition* of the *ubiquity* of *both* differing and concurring world views, and an attempt at instituting a discourse which allows for acknowledgement of their existence and for their open discussion. The “Enlightenment” may actually be the most valid way to describe the beginnings of the modern period.

Modernism, therefore, represents the recognition that humans will always create categories of “other” which are both similar and different, due to the social construction of reality, and is fundamentally just an attempt to cope with this process in a more open fashion. The entire history of science and the application of the scientific (positivistic) process since the enlightenment may be seen as reflecting this intent; theory generation is followed by logical analysis, then testing (if possible), further analysis, then acceptance, rejection or modification of the truth claim. This process is inherently *non-violent* (hence the emphasis on the use of reason, argument and discourse) and may also be seen as an attempt to *moderate* the use of power, not necessarily to capture it. Certainly concerns about the effects of power *on* this process are valid, but the *intent* of the process is no less worthwhile as a result. Modern history is in fact replete with examples of

truth claims which gained acceptance in spite of the efforts of the powerful to suppress them, offering some hope that the system can function productively to advance even the truth claims of the marginalized. To reject this process out of hand (as many postmodernists seem to do) is naive and shortsighted.

It is also possible to more completely integrate the above view of the role of reason in western society with ideas about the subjective nature of reality, but that is not the purpose of this paper. Suffice it to say that if one accepts that human reality is more or less socially constructed by humans that are rational interpreters of phenomena (in the Kantian sense), this should reinforce the view that both difference and similarity, among individual humans and groups, is inevitable because of differences and similarities in experience. The "other" will therefore always exist, and by existing, both challenge and support our worldviews. This observation serves to illustrate further the naiveté of the postmodern position.

An example from criminology

Turning exclusively to criminology for a moment is perhaps the best way to illustrate the folly of the four postmodern recommendations for social work because of the extensive similarity of theoretical subject matter, but more advanced debate. Criminology has in fact produced at least one complete theoretical system constructed upon postmodern recommendations

which are very similar to those intended to improve social work. This system is that of Henry & Milovanovic, and has been described previously as *constitutive criminology*.⁵ Through a brief re-examination of this system, some of the criticisms of the naiveté of postmodernism may be illustrated.

Henry & Milovanovic argue;

...that while crime is unquestionably a socially constructed category, the outcome of humans acting toward its culturally mediated product as though it were a reality renders their action, in the words of W. I. Thomas (1923), 'real in its consequences'. Thus we argue for affirmatively reframing the definition of crime toward one that is sufficiently reflexive to allow humans to produce different realities, ones freeing them from the logic of their own constructions by allowing them to induce different behaviour as real, behaviour that is less harmful to themselves and others. (1996:111).

Henry & Milovanovic apparently recognize that even though reality is discursively constructed, the harms committed in the commission of crime are experienced no less painfully by victims. They also recognize that as discourse is used in defining reality, *it may also be used as a tool in defining harm*. This is a significant advance in that it represents a change from simply observing the effects of discursive practices to actually using them to aid in addressing crime. Henry & Milovanovic's novel approach begins with the attempt to *reconstitute* the definition of *harm*, as they recognize that its re-conceptualization is necessary for their theory to progress in an acceptably

⁵ Described in more detail on pages 60-62.

postmodern fashion.

The reader will recall that Henry & Milovanovic propose that harm be conceived of in terms of *reduction* and *repression*:

Harms of reduction occur when an offended party experiences a loss of some quality relative to their present standing; *harms of repression* occur when an offended party experiences a limit or restriction preventing them from achieving a desired position or standing. Considered along a continuum of deprivation, harms of reduction or repression may be based on any number of criteria...(but) (w)hatever the criteria, these are harms either because they move the offended away from a position or state which they currently occupy, or because they prevent them from occupying a position or state that they desire.⁶

As a result of this conceptualization of harm, Henry & Milovanovic have constructed a theoretical criminal justice system where intervention is relatively absent (or impossible), processes are completely dialogical, and scientific and professional authority are discredited because these are themselves harmful. Constitutive criminology is therefore the result of thinking which is very similar to that which has produced the four recommendations for social work. The question becomes then, in view of the ubiquity of difference and inevitability of conflict between disagreeing worldviews previously referred to, *by what mechanism to resolve potential disputes without perpetuating or amplifying the transmission of harm, thus*

⁶ *Ibid*, (1996, p. 103).

conceptualized? Regardless of the degree of tolerance of difference imposed upon people by a “replacement discourse”, it is the contention of this paper that conflict is an inevitable consequence of differing world views. *In fact, conflict which harms as a result of inter-group and inter-individual difference is an inherent fact of human existence.* Perhaps an example is the best way to illustrate the difficulties which would be encountered by a postmodern criminal justice system which defines harm and operates in a non-interventive, or dialogical fashion.

Consider in a future society constructed upon the principles advocated by constitutive criminologists the existence of a group of nudists living in a house on a street where all of the other residences are occupied by Roman Catholic nuns. It may be safely asserted that these two groups have different subjective views of reality, and that neither group recognizes anything within their own views that is intentionally harmful. Furthermore, let us consider that the nuns are deeply offended by nudity and that the nudists find the wearing of clothing offensive and an insult to the human form. The inevitability of conflict should be obvious. How would the conflict be described and addressed in this reconstituted society? To ask one group to adopt the other’s mode of (un)dress would be harmful in the reductive sense, because the changed group would be moved from a position (nudity or its avoidance) which it had previously attained. To ask one group to move to a different neighbourhood is also harmful according to these definitions. To

ask them to try and ignore each other (the metaphorical absence of a criminal justice system, or a more dialogical approach) will only perpetuate a harmful situation, promote homogenization of values, or cause the eventual reduction of one or both groups' position(s).

While this example may be somewhat whimsical, it is also extremely illustrative. If practicing pedophiles (such as members of the Man-Boy Love Society) are substituted for nudists, and nursery schools are substituted for nunneries, does the essential character of the example change? The answer is that it does, very much so. The basic point is still the same, however; and that is that constitutive criminologists have proposed an entirely inadequate definition of harm, where difference is valued over similarity, where intervention to prevent or reduce harm is characterized as oppressive, and resulting in an absurdly unworkable (or even absent) criminal justice system all based upon a misguided criticism of modernism.

Again, it may be argued that it is not modernism that is oppressive at all. Modernism has allowed for disputes like the ones described above to be resolved through the exercise of reason and discourse aimed at establishing fairness, such as the principle of attempting to achieve the greatest good for the greatest number. In the case of addressing the "different world view" of pedophiles, the imposition upon them through various social control agencies of the more widely accepted discourse which argues that children lack the capacity to consent to sexual relations before a certain age (the exact

age being the subject of other competing discourses, with the competition mediated and facilitated by modernist, i.e. positivist and rational, techniques) and therefore may be harmed by them represents a significant and irreplaceable example of the modernist contribution to dispute resolution which balances both difference *and* similarity in order to reduce harm for the greatest number of people possible.

The reason that modernist techniques (such as achieving the greatest good for the greatest number) for coping with difference are justified also points to a fundamental "truth" that postmodernists seem to have overlooked. This point is of course that *communal living is inherently repressive and reductive*. Humans living in association with one another simply cannot always do what they want when they want, or always have what they want when they want it. *In this sense, power is exerted over individuals by virtue of their simple association with others*. Power and its use to reduce, repress and even oppress in social settings is therefore unavoidable. By virtue of membership in a human community of any size, an individual enters into an implicit contract to both submit to and exercise power over others.⁷ By simply occupying space on the planet, you are limiting the space available to others. Membership in a group of humans is an implicit consent to harm and be harmed. Henry & Milovanovic's idea that power hierarchies can somehow be eliminated through celebrating

⁷ See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985:1658) for example.

difference, or inaction, seems therefore absurd. Much of what has been discussed to this point may now be seen as merely complex reiterations, denials, and discussions of this basic point. Modernism, in this view, has simply been an attempt to formalize and mediate the *inevitable* exercise of power. Modernism and modern techniques may be our best (or only) hope of celebrating difference, reasonably defining unacceptable harm, identifying legitimate victims, and alleviating human suffering. While harm in some form may always be inevitable, striving towards the minimum possible is a worthwhile *modernist* goal. The essentialist view that harm may be minimized, but not eliminated, through both respect for difference *and* similarity is therefore a defensible position.

We may see then, finally, that although postmodern criticism is based upon what seem to be indisputable metaphysical points, such as the social construction of reality, the existence of power, and the recognition of oppression, their contribution to solving these problems is almost utterly useless. They have demonstrated that it is possible to be simultaneously correct and irrelevant. This is due to the fact that the source of the problems which they have identified is the result of human association: They are facts of life, to an extent. The only solution which flows from the nihilism of the postmodernists is to do nothing. Since by living with one another it is impossible to do nothing, the only logical solution to the problems of humanity that logically results from postmodern metaphysics is global mass

suicide. This would in fact end oppression, poverty, marginalization, crime, disease, and harm of all types, and would solve *all* of our metaphysical dilemmas, but somehow doesn't seem necessary. We have no reason in fact to believe the pessimism of the postmodernists that a solution will not be discovered. Perhaps one will from the application of the modernist ideas of conjecture and refutation, but perhaps not. In any event, since in fact by living we are choosing to do *something*, we might as well continue to do our *best*; to search for similarity and affinity with one another and to explain our differences in a way that respects our essential humanity.

The solution to the problems of metaphysics, and subsequently ethics, which are raised by the postmodernists were in fact answered long ago by Immanuel Kant, in response to similar issues. His categorical imperative is, "*Act in such a way that you can will what you are doing to be a universal law of nature*".⁸ In other words, practice the golden rule: Do unto others as you would have others do unto you. If postmodern criticism somehow leads to social work incorporating this dictum more completely into its teaching and practice, it will not have been a complete failure. But it *is*, at its root, a very unoriginal contribution, and certainly did not need to be expressed in as complicated a fashion.

⁸ Marias (1967), p.295.

Summary

What has been accomplished in the preceding pages? I have attempted to demonstrate the historic origins of modernism, and by extension *postmodernism*, through examination of the development of the main metaphysical issues involved. This began with a review of the quite ancient origins of these problems, and continued through to the rise of postmodern criticism of this intellectual history and almost all activities resulting from it. It is my hope that I have succeeded in demonstrating that there is really nothing new in postmodern theory, and that its application to the field of social work, for example, is really quite unproductive. Although it has raised some issues which have always been, and should always be, of concern to us, we are better served by maintaining our commitment to helping others, and our belief that this is possible.

So, in answer to the most important question of all from this perspective: *Is social work oppressive?*, the answer is: yes and no. Social work does in fact involve coercion of others. But this coercion is *oppressive* only if one accepts the completely indefensible view that all coercion is *harmful*, or the similarly illogical view that coercion is *avoidable*. Social work, like most aspects of modernism, is the attempt to minimize harm, or maximize the self-actualization of the human species. While there are certainly innumerable examples of these aims having been pursued

incompetently, the intention is no less valid as a result. Even if there are an infinite number of possible theories, and by eliminating a few we are no closer to absolute truth, we can still attempt not to make the *same* mistakes twice. This in itself is a worthwhile endeavour, and justifies modernity, the modern project, and the profession of social work.

Therefore, in conclusion, postmodernism really does seem to represent nothing more than the rehashing of ancient philosophical debates, and the complete ignorance of their historic resolutions. The most famous quote from Santayana's *Life of Reason* (1905) is almost *too* appropriate in describing both the postmodernists themselves, and the issues that they have raised; **"Progress, far from consisting in change, depends on retentiveness...Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."**

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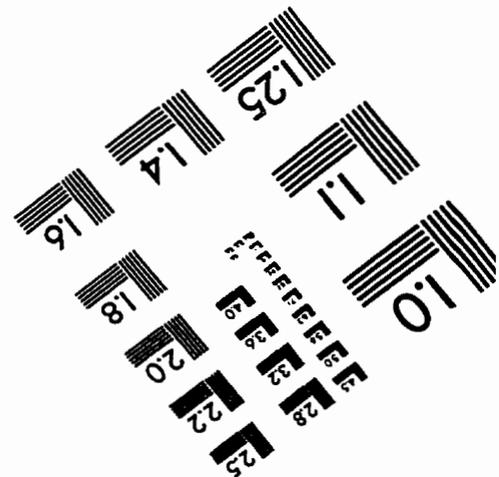
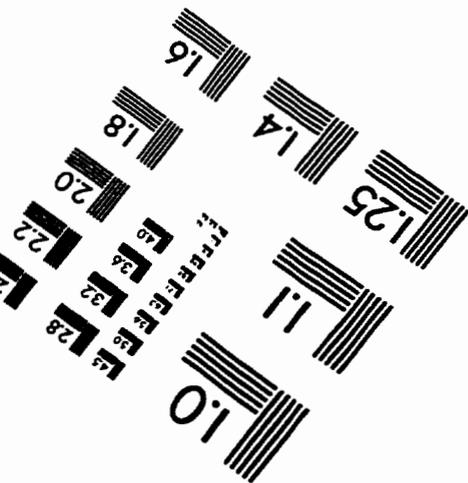
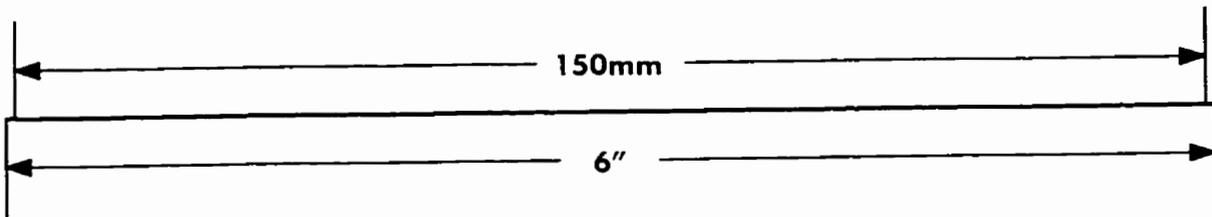
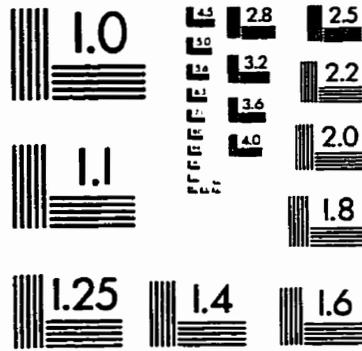
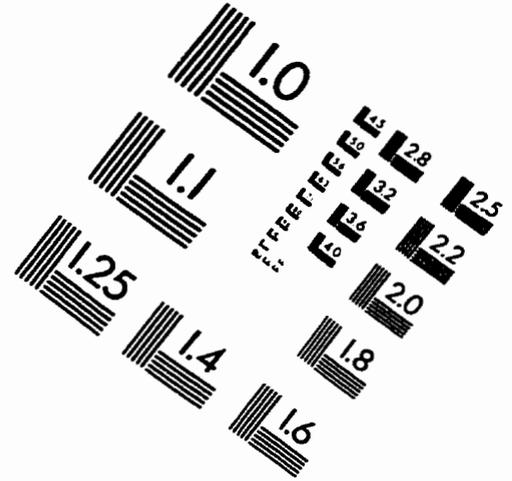
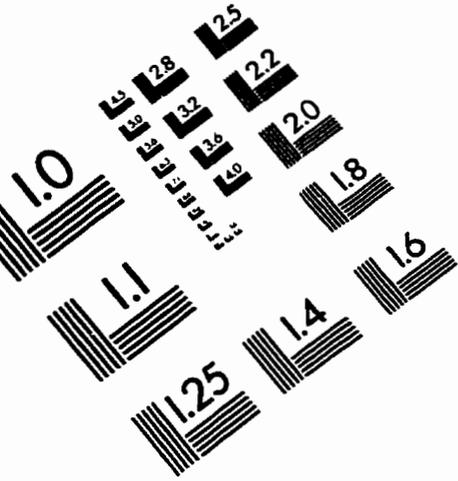
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