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**Frédéric Vandenberghe\* : Post-ism or Positivism? A Comparison between Theories of Reification and Theories of Post-modernity (with apologies to Cultural Studies).**

" Modernity is not a cab one can get out of on the next corner just when one no longer likes it, as Weber said."<sup>1</sup>

Having worked for a couple of years on the theories of reification in classical and critical German sociology, from the young Hegel to Habermas, via Marx, Simmel, Weber, Lukács and the Frankfurt School, I've come to the conclusion that reification theory, especially as it is formulated by the Frankfurt School, is a dead end.<sup>2</sup> And, having just spent a couple of weeks visiting the variegated funhouses of post-modernism, post-structuralism, post-industrialism, post-marxism, etc., in brief what I propose to call "post-ism", I've come to the conclusion that this fad of the eighties is a swamp. In this paper, I want to confront head on the free floating signifiers of post-ism and reification. Trying hard not to get trapped in a swampy dead end, I'll present a quick, but critical comparative analysis of the ontological, epistemological and ideological presuppositions of the theories of the post-modern and the theories of reification. Finally, I will present the rudiments of an alternative to post-ism and reification theory.

1. Post-ism as artifact

But first, let me start with some general observations on this conceptual construct that is called "post-modernism" and which I write with a hyphen to stress its highly artificial character. Nobody knows exactly what post-modernism means. Is it an epochal concept? Is it a counterconcept? Is it a concept at all? Does it refer to a stage of societal development beyond the modern era? To objects and discursive practices of contemporary culture? Does it refer to the latest wave of reactionary anti-modernism? Does it refer at all? Or is it just a performative illusion of a cluster of self-validating discourses? Indeed, it looks as if, until now, the main stake of the whole Anglo-American debate about post-ism has been to define it and thus to create it. So, post-ism exists, and in so far as "critical debates about postmodernism constitute postmodernism itself", as O'Connor has rightly observed<sup>3</sup>, those debates prove its existence - if proofs are still necessary or even possible when paralogy is seemingly all that matters.

Notwithstanding the appearances, post-modernism is not a French thing. In France, there are post-modernist writers, writers who consider themselves as such or who are

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<sup>1</sup> Beck, U.: Politik in der Risikogesellschaft (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main, 1991), p. 193. In fact, Weber borrowed the image of the (marxist) cab from Schopenhauer.

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. Vandenberghe, F.: Métacritique de la Réification (Ph. D., E.H.E.S.S., Paris, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Connor, S.: Postmodernist Culture. An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary (Blackwell, Oxford, 1989), p. 20.

considered so - Baudrillard, Virilio, Jeudy, Lipovetsky, Maffesoli, Livet, Latour, Lyotard and Derrida are just some instances - but there's no first or second order debate about post-modernism as such. In Paris, I could hardly find a book on the subject.<sup>4</sup> The books on post-modernism are mainly written in English, and in Paris, even after the rejection of *la loi Toubon* which aimed to counter the hegemony of the English language in academic life, it is sometimes easier to find a book in Polish than one written in English. So, if post-modernism is not a French thing, where does it then come from? I surmise it is an Anglo-American invention, a creation of a couple of American intellectual yuppies and radicalized hash-smokers who are connected to E-mail and who, bored with the local scene and fascinated by the essayistic productions of the French philosophical avant-garde of the seventies, decided to import French thought to the States in the eighties. Through the accumulation of misunderstandings (e.g. Lyotard's misreading of Wittgenstein's limits of the (life-)world being misread as a license to develop a politically correct "standpoint theory"), it is the transatlantic circulation of French texts itself on the academic marketplace that has produced the whole reality of this cultural phenomenon, without an object, and one could even say, without a subject. Thus, to compensate the absence of a home grown avant-garde in the United States, a huge collective artifact has arisen. By the time it was already largely *dépassé* in France, it was received and perceived across the Atlantic as the newest thing of the old continent.<sup>5</sup> An analysis à la Bourdieu of the emergence of the post-modernist discourses in North America would be interesting; pushed far enough, it could maybe even explain why the whole debate on the various post-isms is so mediocre, so middle-brow and so predictable. I'm not going to pursue such an analysis here. Let me just mention that, thanks to the export of French theory, France itself is finally delivered from its perpetual temptation of nihilistic aestheticism.<sup>6</sup> The renewed interest in theories of Emmanuel Levinas and Paul Ricoeur is a clear sign that the (anti-)intellectual climate has changed.<sup>7</sup> The defense of human rights is on the agenda. It's time again to think of the subject. It's time again to think.

## 2. Post-modern social theory

We've seen that the main stake of the debate about post-ism is to define it. And yet, as Bryan Turner has correctly observed, the very playfulness of post-modernism precludes any premature foreclosure of its own meaning.<sup>8</sup> One thing is clear however: post-ism is a state of mind. Using Schelskyian terms, this particular structure of sensibility can best be

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<sup>4</sup> Just one critical article by Herpin, N.: "Au-delà de la société de consommation de masse? Une discussion critique des sociologues de la post-modernité", *L'année sociologique*, 1993, 43, pp. 294-315.

<sup>5</sup> Edgar Morin, the French systems theorist, smugly suggests that post-modernism sells as well on the American market as *Beaujolais Nouveau*. What the French consider to be "junk" wine is flown overnight in specially chartered plane to Beverly Hills and elsewhere where it is purchased as a very distinguished *délicatessen*. Morin, E.: "Ce qui a changé dans la vie intellectuelle française", *Le Débat*, 1986, 40, p. 82.

<sup>6</sup> I owe this remark to Alain Touraine (personal discussion, Paris, May 1994).

<sup>7</sup> The Foucault-revival doesn't contradict this observation. Being coincidental with the tenth birthday of his death, it was a media-event, and as such it was largely on a par with the recent rediscovery of Rimbaud, Voltaire and Montaigne. The publication in September 1994 of Foucault's scattered interviews and writings, collected by F. Ewald and D. Defert and published by Gallimard in 4 massive volumes under the title *Dits et Ecrits* is of a different order, but by then the French market was already saturated with 2 biographies and at least 5 monographs on Foucault.

<sup>8</sup> Turner, B.: "Periodization and Politics in the Postmodern", in Turner, B. (ed.): *Theories of Modernity and Postmodernity* (Sage, London, 1991), p. 5.

characterized, I think, as joyous self-destructive cynical *Dauerreflexion*.<sup>9</sup> As such, this state of mind - or should I say of mindlessness?- expresses a late-modern reaction against modernity, against its promises and its betrayals, a reaction which, when articulated in theoretical terms, expresses itself as a rejection of modernism in philosophy, social theory, politics, art, etc.

Assuming for the sake of the argument that there's some scholarly position with sufficient coherence to warrant the label "post-modernism" (in fact, it is not evident at all that this is so. In France, Foucault, Lacan and Derrida, for instance, appear much more as rivals than as fellow-travellers), I want to limit the discussion in the following pages to the discourse of post-modern social theory, and more particularly to its critique of modern social theory. It is not always clear, however, who is targeted. In the same way as almost any author can be post-modernized (Simmel is just the most recent example of such an endeavour of post-ist recuperation<sup>10</sup>), any author can be modernized. Now it's Descartes, Hegel or Marx, then it's Comte, Durkheim, Weber, Parsons or Habermas who are reconstructed as arch-modernists whose oeuvre just deserves to be deconstructed. In any case, it seems that if one wants to deconstruct, one has to homogenize one's subject first so that it becomes deconstructible. Take Lyotard, for instance. In order to be able to attack Habermas for an alleged "violation of the heterogeneity of the language games"<sup>11</sup>, he has to reconstruct Habermas' theory of universal pragmatics as though the latter were "a communist jukebox with only one record to play".<sup>12</sup> Alexander's analysis of the post-modernist (meta-)narrative as a semiotic system is highly revealing in this regard. The underlying code of the post-ist narrative is simply binary; it just inverts the modernist code: "In terms of code, modernity moved from the sacred to the profane side of historical time, with modernity assuming many of the crucial characteristics that had earlier been associated with traditionalism and backwardness".<sup>13</sup> This fusion of the judgemental axis "good versus bad" with the epochal one "before versus after" results in a simple pseudo-historical plot which is iterably standardized.<sup>14</sup> Just like in any James Bond film we know from the very beginning who are the goodies and who are the baddies (and who will win), so in post-ist discourse we always already know what is modern, that it connotes evil, that it has to be fought and we expect that at the end a plea will be held for radical deconstruction of and rupture with modernity (or pre-post-modernity, if you prefer). Instead of allowing for continuity and internal correction, instead of seeing post-modernism as an intellectual project generated from within modernity, instead of recognizing it as a recurrent form of modernist challenge to Enlightenment universalism and foundationalism, self-styled post-ists always seem to opt in a quasi-foucauldian vein for radical rupture and discontinuity. Thus pseudo-historical deconstruction comes to replace immanent critique and critical reconstruction of the modernist tradition.

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<sup>9</sup> Cfr. Schelsky, H.: "Ist die Dauerreflexion institutionalisierbar?", in Schelsky, H.: Auf der Suche nach der Wirklichkeit (E. Diederichs Verlag, Düsseldorf, 1965), pp. 250-275.

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. Weinstein, D. and Weinstein, M.: Postmodern(ized) Simmel (Routledge, London, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. Lyotard, J.-F.: La Condition Post-moderne. Rapport sur le savoir (Minuit, Paris, 1979), p. 8; Le différend (Minuit, Paris, 1983), pp. 187 sq. and Le Postmodernisme expliqué aux Enfants. Correspondence 1982-1985 (Galilée, Paris, 1988), pp. 10-12.

<sup>12</sup> O'Neill, J.: The Poverty of Postmodernism (Routledge, London, 1995), p. 194.

<sup>13</sup> Alexander, J.C.: "Modern, Anti, Post, and Neo: How social theories have tried to understand the 'New World' of 'our Time'", Zeitschrift für Soziologie, 1994, 23, 3, p. 176.

<sup>14</sup> For a critique of the pseudo-historical character of the post-modernist meta-narrative, cfr. Calhoun, C.: Critical Social Theory. Culture, History, and the Challenge of Difference, ch. 4 (Blackwell, Oxford, 1995).

Reconstructed modern social theory is criticised by post-modern edifying sociologists for, among other things, its foundationalism and logo-phallocentrism, its universalizing and totalizing onto-theological claims, its stress on subjectivity and allegedly fallacious rationalism, its supercilious neglect of difference, pluralism and localism, its emphasis on representation, homogeneity, identity, consensus and meaning, its assumptions of social coherence and systematicity, its notion of linear causality and determination, its legitimizing masternarratives on emancipation, its macropolitics and, last but not least, its continuing belief in the value of the project of modernity.

Countering the modernist faith in the power of *Aufklärung*, post-modernist anti-sociologists claim that modernity is a kind of Heideggerian one-way street. Although they pretend to be sure about nothing, they seem to be well convinced that reason is dead and that the historical project of modernity, the project of European Enlightenment and, ultimately, the project of western civilisation as such has come to its term - and that that is a good thing. End of reason, end of history, end of man - those are the watchwords of "post-ist" thought. Although theories of reification, from the young Hegel via Simmel, Weber, Lukács and the Frankfurt School to the late Habermas, are concerned with the same issues, they don't treat them in the same way. Their *Stimmung* is completely different.<sup>15</sup> They share neither the ideological pathos of the postmodernists nor their presuppositions about reason and totality. From a modernist viewpoint which remains faithful to the Enlightenment, post-ism can be decoded as the cynical play-form of positivism. That is what I would like to show in this article by means of a comparative analysis of reification theory and the theories of post-modernity. But first I turn to reification theory.

### 3. Reification theory.

Georg Lukács' chapter on reification in History and class consciousness represents the exemplar of reification theory as it is classically conceived in Western Marxism.<sup>16</sup> The paradigmatic core of this theory is composed of a grandiose, but brittle and problematic synthesis of two somewhat contradictory strands of thought.<sup>17</sup> The first strand is Webero-marxist: fusing Marx' theory of commodity fetishism with Max Weber's theory of formal rationalisation, it conceives of society as a closed, self-referential, alienating and autonomous pseudo-natural structure which imposes its normalising and disciplinary constraints from outside on the alienated subjects. The second strand is hegel-marxist: fusing the hegelian ascending and totalising dialectical movement of consciousness with the Marxist theory of the class struggle, it projects proletarian class consciousness as the identical subject-object of world history. Minerva's owl no longer flies at dusk, but at dawn. From the webero-marxist point of view, reification appears as the reverse side of formal rationalisation which characterises modern capitalism; from the hegel-marxist point of view, reification appears as a kind of cunning of reason which announces and assures redemption.

Almost half a century before Derrida's call for an *émajusculation* of all onto-theological teleologies of the Hegelian style and Lyotard's critique of the Marxist master

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<sup>15</sup> On the role of moods in the diagnosis of the present, cfr. Lohmann, G.: "Zur Rolle von Stimmungen in Zeitdiagnosen", in Fink-Eitel, H. and Lohmann, G.: Zur Philosophie der Gefühle (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main, 1993), pp. 266-292.

<sup>16</sup> Cfr. Lukács, G.: History and Class Consciousness. Studies in Marxist Dialectics, ( M.I.T., Cambridge, Mass., 1971), pp. 83-222.

<sup>17</sup> Cfr. the excellent article of Brunkhorst, H.: "Paradigmenkern und Theoriendynamik der kritischen Theorie der Gesellschaft", Soziale Welt, 1983, 34, 1, pp. 22-56.

narratives of emancipation, the members of the Frankfurt School rejected Lukács' neo-idealistic version of automatic Marxism as an anachronistic and misplaced endeavour to actualise Hegel. Instead of actualising Hegel in an effort to decipher society as an "expressive totality" (Althusser), instead of assuming that dereification is the only possible telos of reification, critical theorists think that, to explain the post-revolutionary times of universal commodification and generalized reification, the Hegelian dialectics of liberation should be replaced by a Freudian account of sublimation and repression and conjoined to a radicalisation of Weber's critique of western rationalism. Once the Hegelian strand is eliminated, only the Weberian one remains. And in the same way as Lukács tried to "outhege Hegel"<sup>18</sup>, the theorists of the Frankfurt School tried so to speak to outweber Weber. Radicalizing his tragic view of bureaucratic domination and formal-instrumental rationalisation, and linking it to Lukács' analysis of generalized commodity fetishism, they paint black on black and push Weber's sense of despair to the extremes. Consequently, they arrive at the Dantesque diagnosis of total reification (sic), a conclusion which is as bleak and one-dimensional as it is self-refuting. The iron cage of modernity might be a bit more luxurious and comfortable than Weber thought, but this doesn't alter anything to the fact that it remains a cage. If people revel in the marvels of consumption, it only shows that they are so alienated that they are not even aware of it anymore. And as reification becomes total, social dynamics come to an absolute standstill. "Plus ça change", says Adorno with a wink to Nietzsche's philosophy of the eternal return, "plus c'est la même chose".<sup>19</sup> The real is indeed rational, reason is effectively realised, but certainly not as Hegel and Lukács expected it. According to Adorno and the late Marcuse, the subject and the object, the individual and society are indeed identical, but in so far as the object absorbs the subject and in so far as the subject is thereby suppressed, or "decentred" as we say nowadays if we want to be *à la page*, this identity is infernal. The overpowering might of the system and the absolute powerlessness of the individual corroborate in a dramatic way Hegel's systematic thought. And in this perverted sense, one can indeed say that the truth is the whole. Adorno's famous anti-hegelian one-liner according to which the whole is not the truth ("Das Ganze ist das Unwahre") doesn't contradict it, for this cryptic aphorism is not directed against the methodological maxim that the truth is the whole, but against Hegel's ideological affirmation that the whole is the truth ("Das Ganze ist das Wahre")<sup>20</sup>. Indeed, (pace Jay) Adorno's turn to negative dialectics does not imply the surrender of the dialectical categories of totality and reification as such, but only of their expressivist and humanistic overtones.<sup>21</sup> The turn to negative dialectics means rather that society is interpreted in proto-structuralist terms, which are closer to Althusser than to the young Marx, as the transphenomenal totality of structural relations which characterizes the social formation of late capitalism and which mutilates every particular phenomenon it determines. As a result of this passage from a humanist to a proto-structuralist concept of totality, the *Aufhebung* of the social contradictions is no longer

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<sup>18</sup> Lukács, G.: "Foreword (1968)", in *History and Class Consciousness*, p. xxiii.

<sup>19</sup> Adorno, T.W.: *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* (Continuum, New York, 1976), p. xi.

<sup>20</sup> Adorno, T.W.: *Minima Moralia. Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben* (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main, 1951), p. 80.

<sup>21</sup> In an early article ("The Concept of Totality in Lukács and Adorno", *Telos*, 1977, 32, pp. 132 and 136), Martin Jay assumed that Adorno's critique of the idealist "lament on reification" did imply his abandonment of the category of reification. Later, probably under the influence of Gilian Rose's *The Melancholy Science. An Introduction to the Thought of T.W. Adorno* (Macmillan, London, 1978), he changed his mind and stated correctly that Adorno didn't reject the category of reification as such, but only its lukácsian version. Cfr. Jay, M.: *Marxism and Totality. Adventures of a concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Polity, Cambridge, 1984), p. 269.

assured; to the contrary, in so far as the totality no longer points to any beyond, the social contradictions only express and expose the violence of rampant reification. In other words, when the negation of the negation no longer results in any positivity, the brute facticity of total reification is all that remains.

Against the omnipresence of reification, Adorno wants to save the non-identical, let's say those particulars that still escape reification by violent incorporation in the system and which are deemed worth saving. Here, where Adorno declares his solidarity with all possible creatures who are suffering and with all particulars which are threatened by annihilation by the system; here, where he tries to express the pain of the imposed systemic violence and to commemorate the accumulated suffering, he pays honour to the victims in the name of what could be and what should be totally different. In my opinion, this nostalgic yearning for the absolute other, for "*das ganz Andere*" as the late Horkheimer said<sup>22</sup>, constitutes the sympathetic side of Adorno's obscure and dark thought. Alas, to the extent that Adorno has forgotten his own admonition that reification should not be reified in its turn<sup>23</sup>, his endeavour to cherish the non-identical could only fail. Starting from the a priori of the existence of a closed functionalised system, of a totalitarian social totality which doesn't tolerate anything which is external to it and which thus greedily devours what still escapes it, Adorno could only register the permanent failure of the individual to resist reification. At the end of the day, it appears that by autonomizing the logic of identity and by hypostatizing reification, Adorno has himself conceptually liquidated the non-identical which he wanted to preserve at any cost from reification, precisely by reifying it. In this sense, his "functionalism of the worst", as Bourdieu calls this kind of Durkheimian-marxist conception of an overintegrated society, is the symptom of his own diagnosis.<sup>24</sup>

If I've quickly recapitulated Adorno's diagnosis of modernity in terms of total reification, it is not, as happens all too often with his enthusiastic acolytes who desperately try to emulate this inimitable *Adorno-Deutsch*, to celebrate the radicalism of his analysis. To the contrary, I think that critical theory, as we find not only in Adorno but also in Horkheimer and Marcuse, is a dead end. Accordingly, I want to plead here for the abandonment of the basic premiss from which all the rest can be inferred, namely the metaphysical a priori of reification. In my opinion, the category of reification is a transcendently necessary category of any critical theory. In other words, any critical social theory must be able to think reification. However, a social theory which is based on the metaphysical a priori of reification, and which thus transforms a methodological assumption into a metaphysical one, is not a critical theory. Indeed, I think that a theory can only be critical if it controls consciously and reflexively its basic assumptions in such a way that is able to conceptualise the transformation of the social system. A social theory which can only think the alienation of the subject and not its emancipation is not a critical theory, but a one-dimensional one. I cannot develop those thoughts here, but I've done so elsewhere.<sup>25</sup> Here, I would like to argue that a post-modernist social theory offers no alternative to the critical theory of the Frankfurt School.

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<sup>22</sup> Cfr. Horkheimer, M.: *Die Sehnsucht nach dem ganz Anderen. Ein Interview mit Kommentar von H. Gumnior* (Furche Verlag, Hamburg, 1970).

<sup>23</sup> "The knowledge of the reification of society should not be reified." Adorno, T.W.: *Vorlesung zur Einleitung in die Soziologie* (Junius Drucke [=pirate edition], Frankfurt/Main, 1973), p. 157.

<sup>24</sup> Bourdieu, P. and Wacquant, L.: *Réponses. Pour une anthropologie réflexive* (Seuil, Paris, 1992), p. 58.

<sup>25</sup> Cfr. Vandenberghe, F.: *Métacritique de la Réification* (Ph. D., E.H.E.S.S., Paris, 1994).

#### 4. Post-ism or positivism?

At first sight, a post-modern approach which stresses, among other things, contingency and openness, indeterminacy and randomness, difference and plurality, reenchantment and local resistance to domination might seem to propose a handy way out of the metatheoretical *cul-de-sac* of critical theory. I don't think, however, that this is the case. For a closer look reveals that, in so far as it uncomfortably combines these themes with an anti-humanistic methodology and a theory of disciplinary normalisation (Foucault), fetishistic hypersimulation (Baudrillard) or libidinal territorialisation (Deleuze and Guattari), it doesn't offer a solution, but it prolongs rather the flaws of critical theory of reification. Of course, I could follow a *bricoleur* like Zygmunt Bauman and present an alternative which looks very much like a collage of Giddens' structuration theory, Maffesoli's eroticizing interpretation of Simmel and Luhmann's glosses on autopoiesis and second order cybernetics.<sup>26</sup> I could even add a zestful bit of Habermasian intersubjectivity to it and call the ensuing result post-modern social theory. This will not do, however. Post-modernist social anti-theory is fundamentally flawed. Whether this latest variant of intellectual populism adopts the apocalyptic tone or the Rabelaisian carnival attitude, it cannot ground or found its normative judgments. Its crypto-normative position can neither be reconciled with its rejection of modern values, nor with its declared relativism. As a result, it gets almost invariably stuck in what Habermas calls, following Hintikka and Apel, "performative contradictions".<sup>27</sup> In general, one could say that the anti-modernist commitments of the post-modernists blind them to the fact that the values that tacitly underlie their criticism typically include a host of distinctively modern orientations toward pluralism, diversity, tolerance, equal respect, and the like. Take Lyotard, for instance. His principled refusal to consider any universal norm leads necessarily into an aporia, because, as Honneth has correctly observed, without recourse to any universal norm, the right of coexistence of different forms of life and language games cannot be guaranteed.<sup>28</sup> Deconstruction thus deconstructs itself. If a post-modernist sociology can help to deconstruct the critical theory of reification, it has not really much to offer for its reconstruction. Indeed, given its ontological and epistemological commitments, it cannot think reification and, even if it could, its ideological or moral commitments would still hamper the elaboration of a satisfactory account of it and adequate response to it.

Before tackling the epistemological and the ideological issues, let me start with the ontological problem. Semantically, the concept of reification refers to the illegitimate transformation into a thing of something which is not a thing. Whether this pseudo-thing is a concept, a person, an animal, a social relation, a commodity or the social world itself, the critical category of reification always and necessarily presupposes a definite ontology.<sup>29</sup> It is well known by now that a neo-pragmatist anti-philosophy "without mirrors" refuses all talk about essences as metaphysical and thus as idle talk. Against the traditional philosophy of

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<sup>26</sup> Bauman, Z.: Intimations of postmodernity (Routledge, London, 1992)

<sup>27</sup> Cfr. Habermas, J.: Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne: Zwölf Vorlesungen (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main, 1985), especially chapters V, IX and X on Horkheimer, Adorno and Foucault.

<sup>28</sup> Honneth, A.: "An aversion against the universal: A commentary on Lyotard's Postmodern condition", Theory, Culture and Society, 1985, 2, 3, pp. 154-155.

<sup>29</sup> The phenomenological bracketing of ontological issues which Thomason proposes necessarily implies the abandonment of reification as a critical category. Cfr. Thomason, B.: Making Sense of Reification. Alfred Schutz and constructionist Theory (Macmillan, London, 1980), p. 163 and passim.

presence, "from Iona to Iena", as Rosenzweig would say<sup>30</sup>, which is marked by the obsession of a signified behind the words and the appearances, a deconstructive philosophy will proceed to a "dissemination" of meanings and referents and show that behind the signifiers there are only other signifiers and that every endeavour to step outside language to find a transcendental signified is illusory. Post-ist philosophy is characterized by an extreme and debilitating nominalism which dogmatically assumes that there are only words and that truth is nothing but "a moving army of metaphors, metonymies and antropomorphisms"<sup>31</sup>, as Nietzsche once said with provocative eloquence. In any case, given this extreme nominalism, a post-modernist social theory cannot think reification, because reification always presupposes a definite ontology.

If we pass now from ontology to epistemology, we will find a similar incapacity to think social reification. Indeed, given its emphasis on difference, particularity, fragmentation, plurality, marginality, local embeddedness and heterogeneity; given its concomitant rejection of macro-narratives and of macro-sociological concepts like totality and social system, a post-modern social theory cannot adequately conceptualize the alienating autonomy of global social structures and their inbuilt tendency to colonise the communicative, motivational and emotional infrastructures of the life world. And if it cannot think macro-social reification, then, as a result, it cannot fight it either. Its radicalism is thus largely phoney. Take once more Lyotard for example. Having grimly outlined the most oppressive aspects of the capitalist principle of performativity, as he has found it illustrated in Luhmann's demoralizing systems theory, the rapporteur of the post-modern has really nothing else to offer in its place but "an anarchist version of that very same epistemology, namely the guerrilla skirmishes of a 'paralogism' which might from time to time induce ruptures, instabilities, paradoxes and micro-catastrophic discontinuities into this terroristic techno-scientific system".<sup>32</sup>

But the worst is still to come. In so far as post-ism abandons the moral sensibility and sense of responsibility which characterises the modernist protest against alienation and reification; in so far as it explicitly says farewell not only to the proletariat (which is fine), but also to reason and to the project of modernity, it succumbs either to an irrational "kunism" or to an "enlightened cynicism", to use the terms of Sloterdijk's Critique of cynical reason to name the two main ways to abdicate all moral responsibility.<sup>33</sup>

"Kunism" represents this Nietzschean or Dionysian strand in post-modernism which, confronted with the dialectical reversal of rationalisation in reification, seeks solace in what Habermas calls and denounces as the "other of reason", that is in the animal and infra-rational impulses, in anarchy, ecstasy and narcissistic play, in the sublime and the subliminal. Instead of trying to redeem reason by way of a self-reflexion of reason, as Adorno and Horkheimer tried to do; instead of trying to remain faithful to the promises of the Enlightenment, as I think we should try to do, this strand of post-ism simply denounces reason as the *pharmakon* that kills and joyously renounces the project of Enlightenment. Rien ne va plus - anything goes. Apparently without any regret and without any hope, the new Nietzscheans systematically privilege aestheticism and vitalism over the serene moralism and commitment for the concrete other which characterizes, for instance, the writings of the late Horkheimer.

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<sup>30</sup> Rosenzweig, F.: Gesammelte Schriften 2. Der Stern der Erlösung ( Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1979), p. 13.

<sup>31</sup> Nietzsche, F.: "Ueber Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne", in Werke III, 2 (Nachgelassene Schriften 1870-1873) (de Gruyter, Berlin, 1973), p. 180

<sup>32</sup> Eagleton, T.: "Capitalism, modernism and postmodernism", New Left Review, 152, p. 63.

<sup>33</sup> Cfr. Sloterdijk, P.: Kritik der Zynischen Vernunft. 2 Bände (Frankfurt/ Main, Suhrkamp, 1983).



In contradistinction to Adorno's melancholy science, which is still in all its negativity and sadness silently yearning for justice, this "gay science" -or "happy positivism" as Foucault called it<sup>34</sup>- is not tragic, but ironical. It is, as Derrida says in L'écriture et la différence, "the Nietzschean affirmation, the joyous affirmation of the game of the world and the innocence of the future, the affirmation of a world of signs without faults, without truth and without origin".<sup>35</sup>

Cynicism represents the second reaction of the disenchanting post-War generation of baby boomers confronting disillusioned middle age. When Sloterdijk defines cynicism as "enlightened false consciousness"<sup>36</sup>, he perfectly characterizes the nihilistic state of mind of those intellectuals à la Baudrillard and Vattimo who play once more the tragedy of the Frankfurt School, but this time as farce so to speak, if you allow me this oblique reference to the opening lines of Marx' Eighteenth Brumaire. Although Scott Lash clearly confounds post-modernism and modernism - to the point of considering dadaism and the surrealisms of the 20's as so many instances of a premature postmodernism<sup>37</sup>-, I think nevertheless that he has correctly noted the cynicism of a McDonaldized thought which is no longer critical of commodity fetishism and reification. Indeed, having dropped all moral and utopian impulses, ridiculing the project of modernity, raising alienation to the second power, alienating us even from our own alienation, people like Baudrillard, Kroker and Cook, and maybe even the young Lyotard, try in vain to persuade us that utopia is not some remote telos, but that it is the present itself. Reification, once it has extended its empire across the whole of social reality, effaces the very criteria by which it can be recognized for what it is and so triumphantly abolishes itself, returning everything to normality. In the Dialectic of Enlightenment, Adorno and Horkheimer severely criticized the reduplication of the extant world by the culture industry as the modern version of applied positivism.<sup>38</sup> Fifty years after the landing of the allied troops in Normandy and the liberation of the death camps, the cynics are still playing the same game, and they even seem to enjoy their relapse into irresponsibility. Take Baudrillard, for instance. Having poked fun at the carbonised victims of the "collateral damages" of the Gulf War<sup>39</sup>, he cynically relapses again. Without any apparent scruples, he describes the hell of Sarajevo in terms of simulation and hyperreality.<sup>40</sup> I don't know whether he's actually working on a book on the orchestrated genocide of the Tutsis, but I can now confirm the insinuation contained in the title of this article: post-ism is indeed the cynical playform of positivism. So, to finish with post-modernism, let me just quote Jameson: "In fact, what Adorno called positivism is very precisely what we now call postmodernism, only at a more primitive stage. [...] The question about poetry after Auschwitz has been replaced with that of whether you could bear to read Adorno and Horkheimer next to the swimming-pool".<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Foucault, M.: L'archéologie du savoir (Gallimard, Paris, 1969), p. 164.

<sup>35</sup> Derrida, J.: "La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines", dans L'écriture et la différence (Paris, Seuil, 1967), p. 427.

<sup>36</sup> Sloterdijk, P. : op.cit., Band 1, p. 37.

<sup>37</sup> Lash, S.: Sociology of Postmodernism (Routledge, London, 1990).

<sup>38</sup> Cfr. Horkheimer, M. and Adorno, T.W.: Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente (Fischer, Frankfurt/Main, 1969), chapter on the culture industry, pp. 128-176.

<sup>39</sup> Baudrillard, J.: La guerre du Golfe n'a pas eu lieu (Galilée, Paris, 1991).

<sup>40</sup> Baudrillard, J.: "Pas de pitié pour Sarajevo", in Le crime parfait (Galilée, Paris, 1995), pp. 181-189.

<sup>41</sup> Jameson, F.: Late Marxism. Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic (Verso, London, 1990), p. 248.

