

# Encountering the postmodern: new directions in cultural anthropology

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Faisant appel à la littérature d'études culturelles, cet article suggère que la condition de post-modernité crée de nouveaux challenges pour le domaine d'anthropologie culturelle qui vont au delà du problème pourtant significatif de la représentation ethnographique. Explorant le projet post-moderniste comme l'un de ceux qui impliquent une approche particulière des phénomènes culturels dans une économie globale, l'article pousse les anthropologues à reconcevoir le concept de culture et à explorer les politiques culturelles de la vie quotidienne dans le contexte d'une représentation globale du capitalisme.

Drawing upon cultural studies literature, this article suggests that the condition of postmodernity poses new challenges to the field of cultural anthropology that go beyond the (still significant) problem of ethnographic representation. Exploring the postmodernist project as one that involves a particular approach to cultural phenomena in a multinational global economy, the article urges anthropologists to reconceive the concept of culture and explore the cultural politics of everyday life in the context of the global restructuring of capitalism.

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The use of the term postmodern immediately begs clarification given the ubiquity of the term and the heterogeneity of its referents. I draw upon a growing body of literature in cultural studies (Bauman, 1988; Connor, 1989; Featherstone, 1988; Kellner, 1988; Ross, 1988; Turner, 1990) that synthesizes the debates about postmodernism (which continue to proliferate),<sup>1</sup> and gives the term a wider and more relevant range of meanings for anthropology than the current disciplinary preoccupation with postmodernism as a problem of ethnographic representation.<sup>2</sup> My major argument is that cultural anthropology – in its dominant guises known as 'symbolic,' 'interpretive,' or 'hermeneutic' anthropology – is a modernist intellectual project, and that the discourse about postmodernism helps us to understand that project's shortcomings and suggests new avenues of departure for critical cultural inquiry.

We need to understand the postmodernist project both as a particular type of approach to cultural phenomena and as an inquiry that brings this approach to bear upon a contemporary complex of cultural production practices – postmodernism proper. To summarize the argument of this paper, postmodernism provokes us to reconceive the concept of culture in terms that integrate it into a study of power; it asks us to consider meaning in terms of relations of struggle embodied in everyday practice, and it demands that we view these cultural practices in local contexts, related in specific ways to historical conjunctures in a multinational global economy. New fields of study are thereby opened up for anthropologists by virtue of this reconsideration of our central concepts.

Clearly, it is impossible to discuss the postmodern without discussing the modern, against which it is counterpoised. It seems fitting then, to briefly describe modernity and the manner in which cultural anthropology can be said to be modernist, in order to show how the postmodern can be distinguished. In the sociological imagination modernity is an epoch characterized by the breakdown of feudal and religious orders in European societies, and by processes of rationalization, socio-economic differentiation, urbanization, and industrialization. In this context, the dominant intellectual project is that which we associate with the Enlightenment: the elaboration of the principles of an allegedly universal rationality. In the form of positivist social science, modern rationalism presented individual and social life as governed by objective laws analogous to those imagined for the natural world.

Like all dominant discourses, modern philosophy was not fully unified but inspired its own counter-discourses. The Kantian tradition of metaphysics and epistemology was countered by a submerged but influential counter-tradition – one that rejected objectivism as the sole arbiter of truth and insisted upon the hermeneutic and intersubjective nature of social life and human understanding. Knowledge, according to these critics, could claim no universal guarantees but only local and contingent grounding in social, cultural, and historical experience. Although we might also point to Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Merleau Ponty, the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer is most influential in cultural anthropology. Asserting the concept of understanding as socially and historically situated, linguistically mediated interpretation against the claims of a transcendental ego, he saw cultural tradition as the very condition for the possibility of human knowledge.

Although hermeneutics emerged as a counter tradition to the dominant discourses of modernity, it was and still is very much part of the Enlightenment effort to develop the spheres of science, morality, and art according to their own internal logics. This was a project that separated art and culture from the everyday life of political struggle – constituting culture as an autonomous realm of meaning and reifying it as a unified whole (Brenkman, 1987; Caputo, 1987; Collins, 1989; Foster, 1983). In the dominant discourses of modernity, culture (whether referring broadly to a form of life or narrowly to Western canonical traditions) was represented as a repository of meanings and values, divorced from, but giving significance to economic and

political life. It has been suggested, following Marcuse, that this need to posit its 'culture' as a realm of transcendent, universal, and timeless values was part of the hegemonic struggle by the bourgeoisie to consolidate and legitimate its social power (Brenkman, 1987: 42).

It is possible to regard Gadamer's hermeneutics as a belated theoretical elaboration of this class project (and, I will argue, to regard hermeneutic anthropology as an extension by the Western bourgeoisie of the privilege to define legitimate cultural meanings to male elites in colonial and post-colonial societies). This becomes clearer when we examine the hermeneutical understanding of cultural tradition. 'Cultures' or 'traditions' are characterized as unified systems of meaning. This characterization is made possible because the social and political processes through which cultural meanings and texts are constructed, their social relations of production, and reception, are ignored or drained of all specificity. The people who produce and interpret meanings are not considered in terms of class, race, age, or gender – nor are they seen as having concrete interests or agendas. Interpretive processes are represented without reference to cultural differences or social conflicts within communities (Brenkman, 1987: 30–38). The dialogic, conflictual nature of social experience is obscured by a concentration on *dominant* interpretations as a univocal source of *legitimate* meanings and values. 'Traditional hermeneutics actively constructs cultural tradition in the guise of a unified realm of meanings and values separated from social relations of domination and power' (Brenkman, 1987: viii).

This bourgeois concept of culture also animated interpretive anthropology until very recently. As anthropologists know it, hermeneutics involves an explication of the forms of life in which phenomena have meaning – in Clifford Geertz's phrase 'placing things in local frames of awareness' (1983: 6). Others can only be understood in terms of a context, usually defined as a cultural system of shared meanings, and our own cultural horizons will inevitably shape these understandings.

Now, it is true that cultural anthropology rejected the universalist claims of modernity, proclaiming and celebrating instead the plurality and incommensurability of the diverse forms of human cultural life. It has, however, maintained the residues of a modernist elite esthetic. Renato Rosaldo cites Cora DuBois's observation on the current 'crisis' in anthropology: 'It has been like moving from a distinguished art museum into a garage sale' (1989: 44). The art museum is an apropos image for a discipline that rests upon 'classic ethnographies' – texts that holistically represent cultures as self-contained, integrated, and aesthetically patterned totalities:

Cultures stand as sacred images; they have an integrity and coherence that enables them to be studied as they say, on their own terms, from within, from the 'native' point of view ... [Like the work in an art museum] each culture stands alone as an aesthetic object ... Once canonized, all cultures appear to be equally great ... Just as [one] does not argue ... whether Shakespeare is greater than

Dante, [one] does not debate the relative merits of the Kwakiutl ... versus the Trobriand Islanders ... (Rosaldo, 1989: 43).

Despite an egalitarian and democratic ethos that characterizes cultures as separate and equal, traditional anthropological norms share with traditional hermeneutics an idealist comprehension of cultural tradition. To put this simply, in its classical forms cultural anthropology could recognize, respect, and celebrate differences *between* cultures, only, it appears, by effacing differences *within* cultures. Shared patterns are emphasized at the expense of internal inconsistencies, conflicts, and contradictions.<sup>3</sup> By defining culture as shared meanings, zones of difference and the intersections of age, status, class, race, and gender, where different cultural interpretations and oppositional meanings are articulated appear as annoying exceptions rather than central areas of inquiry (Rosaldo, 1989: 27–30; Roseberry, 1989: 24–25). By defining it as a system or a text, we remove it from the process of its creation and the agencies of its construction (and deconstruction). Cultures become defined by their internal homogeneity and their differences from other cultures (Rosaldo, 1989: 202; Roseberry, 1989: 11).

Anthropologists, like those engaged in cultural studies generally, are being compelled to come to terms with the differential processes at work *within* the construction of cultural traditions and the dissolution of boundaries *between* what we thought we could identify as discrete cultures. As James Clifford puts it, 'Culture is contested, temporal, and emergent ... [one cannot] occupy, unambiguously, a bounded cultural world from which to journey out and analyse other cultures. Human ways of life increasingly influence, dominate, parody, translate, and subvert one another' (Clifford, 1986: 19, 22).

Culture does not stand apart from the socially organized forms of inequality, domination, exploitation, and power that exist in society but is implicated in and inscribed by these practices, which are maintained and contested symbolically as well as instrumentally, discursively as well as forcefully. Hermeneutics and cultural interpretation can maintain their splendid isolation only insofar as they separate the symbolic from the political and construct cultural tradition as a monological realm of unified meanings and values. To do so is to evade the historically specific processes by which certain meanings become privileged, while others are delegitimated – the practices through which unity is forged from difference by the marginalization and silencing of oppositional voices and alternative understandings (which must be contained as a potential challenge to the dominant). Culture needs to be addressed in terms of the conflictual relations of its production, as intersections of struggle as well as harmonious fields of integrated meaning. In short, hermeneutics must become attuned to the various means by which hegemony is constructed, maintained, and challenged.<sup>4</sup> Feminist anthropologists have been instrumental in demonstrating that the projection of cultures as unified systems of meaning has been accomplished primarily through the exclusion of the cultural meanings that women and other subordinate groups in a society give to their own

experiences. Cultural truths are always partial and historical, often based on systematic and contestable exclusions. For too long, ethnographers let native male statements and actions stand for the whole of social reality; to counter this, feminist anthropologists have asserted an analytical attitude that 'treats culture as contested rather than shared, and therefore represents social practice more as an argument than as a conversation' (Lederman, 1989: 230).

Rena Lederman (1989) shows how the anthropological literature concerning the New Guinea Highlands has represented these societies in terms of the clan relationships in which men are dominant, relegating the exchange relationships and networks in which women are more engaged to a secondary or negligible status. This predilection arguably does not reflect these societies so much as it articulates and gives legitimacy to a *singular* and *interested* indigenous perspective – that of an ideology of male dominance over women – which is contested by women and is at issue even amongst men.

I have argued elsewhere that Mediterranean cultures can be represented as unified by the honour/shame complex only because the differential meanings that these values are given by those in different social strata are rarely addressed in the ethnographies that purport to represent these societies (Coombe, 1990). Similarly, Nicole Polier and William Roseberry (1989) argue that among the Kwaio of the Solomon Islands the definition of Kwaio ancestral custom (*Kastom*) is a site of social negotiation, in which women contest the authoritative meanings of Kwaio culture that were traditionally the preserve of male elders.

If differences *within* cultures are becoming apparent or finally being given voice, differences *between* cultures seem to be simultaneously proliferating and more difficult to locate. Political economists doing historical anthropology in the 1980s drew our attention to the historical inadequacy of cultural anthropology's attempts to draw rigid cultural boundaries around particular populations without taking into account their connections with other populations and with larger currents of world history (Wolf, 1982; Roseberry, 1989: 49–54). As Rosaldo (1989) elaborates, the borderlands which both separate and bring together 'discrete' cultures are proliferating literally as well as figuratively; cities throughout the world include (and sometimes contain) 'minorities' differentiated by race, ethnicity, class, religion, and sexual orientation. The encounter with difference is now a pervasive phenomenon as the Third World implodes into the metropolis (Koptiuch, 1991). Cultures do not remain hermetically sealed, if indeed they ever were. Cultural heritages in the contemporary world must increasingly be *actively constructed* from competing and conflicting constructions of tradition.

The last residues of cultural anthropology's modernist heritage – the commitment to seeing cultures as discrete and unified systems of shared meaning that can be explored in their own terms – are dissolving in the complex cultural context of a late capitalist, post-colonial era dominated by a multinational global economy. It is at this juncture that anthropology might

fruitfully turn to the growing body of literature which is attempting to come to terms with 'the postmodern condition'.

The academic discussions of postmodernism set themselves a dual agenda. First, they attempt to constitute an approach to cultural phenomena which challenges and avoids the limitations of modernist discourse. Secondly, they have attempted to demarcate an object of study or field of research – 'postmodernism' proper – the cultural forms, activities, and practices of late, advanced, or 'post-industrial' capitalism. Let us deal with each of these agendas in turn.

Generally, the postmodernist position is one which contests or debates the continuing worth of the universal propositions of modernity's dominant discourses (Ross, 1988: vii). I hesitate to use the term 'modernism' here because it is generally taken to refer to an aesthetic movement (Cubists, Surrealists, Futurists etc.) which constituted itself oppositionally with respect to modernity. Indeed, it could be argued that postmodern social theory is the belated incorporation of some of aesthetic modernism's essential premises into social analysis. These would include self consciousness and reflexivity, an exploration of the paradoxical, ambiguous, and open-ended nature of reality, and a rejection of the idea of integrated personality in favour of an emphasis upon the multiple cultural intersections that constitute a conflicted subjectivity.

Most of the discussion that has taken place under the postmodernist rubric has involved a dialogue about the philosophical traditions of the Enlightenment. Lyotard, Derrida, and Rorty are the philosophers best known for their critiques of the Cartesian-Lockean-Kantian tradition, pointing out the impossibility of its dreams of a foundational truth to guarantee political and philosophical systems. Engaging in debate with Jürgen Habermas, who seeks to preserve the project of modernity, they first diffused the term 'postmodern' as a critique of universal knowledge and a challenge to the legitimating myths of modernity. Instead, they posited a radical anti-foundationalism which insisted upon the co-existence of incommensurable teleologies and the inescapable heterogeneity of contemporary cultural life (Featherstone, 1988; Harvey, 1989; Kellner, 1988).

None of this looks particularly novel to cultural anthropologists, for whom the diversity of language-games, plurality of worldviews, and incommensurability of forms of life have long been stock in trade. Indeed, the hermeneutic tradition itself took this as its point of departure. What distinguishes postmodernism is its illumination of the incommensurable *within* cultures, forms of life, and language games. In Lyotard's work, for example, participation in language games involves struggle and conflict, or 'agonistic' play (1984: 10).

Lyotard rejects all theories which purport to offer totalizing accounts of [a] history, [a] society, or [a] culture (which would include structuralist and hermeneutic accounts of culture as singular systems of meaning) because such unifying schemes are both reductionist and exclusionary, suppressing existing and emergent differences in the name of order. Postmodernism insists that culture can no longer 'be conceived as a Grand Hotel, as a total-

izable system that somehow orchestrates all cultural production and reception according to one master system; how we conceptualize ... culture depends upon the discourses that construct it in conflicting, often contradictory ways, according to the interests and values of those discourses as they struggle to legitimize themselves as privileged forms of representation' (Collins, 1989: xiii).

One postmodernist strategy (which feminist and postmodern ethnographers are attempting to realize) is 'to deconstruct modernism ... in order to rewrite it, to open its closed systems ... to the "heterogeneity" of texts, to rewrite its universal techniques ... – in short to challenge its masternarratives with the "discourses of others"' (Foster, 1983: xi). As Steven Connor puts it, 'to articulate questions of power and value in postmodernity is often to identify centralizing principles – of self, gender, race, nation, aesthetic form – in order to determine what those centres push to their silent or invisible peripheries. The project can be seen as one of bringing the consciousness of those peripheries back into the centre' (1989: 228). Historically, interpretive anthropology engaged in just such a project. The anthropological endeavour *does* enable a cultural critique of Western claims to universality. It exposes the contingency of those claims through the alternative cultural worldviews of others. The cultural anthropological endeavour has always, in a sense, been engaged in a project of 'articulating the margins' (Connor, 1989: 232). But interpretive anthropology must now go further. It must enable the invisible, silenced 'others' *within* the 'cultures' it studies to express their *own* challenges to and critical commentaries on the singular cultural systems that constitute anthropology's own 'masternarratives'.

A postmodernist anthropology, then, *does need to be sensitive to the workings of power-in-representation, not merely in the service of constructing more literary or entertaining ethnographic texts, but in a manner that interrogates 'the languages, systems of metaphors, and regimes of images that seem designed to silence those whom they embody in representation'* (Connor, 1989: 232) and embraces the ethical principle of 'the right of formerly un- or misrepresented human groups to speak for and represent themselves in domains defined, politically and intellectually, as normally excluding them' (Said, 1986: 215). These include children, the physically and developmentally handicapped, the incarcerated, and those who occupy alternative gender positions, as well as 'minorities' more traditionally defined by gender, sexual orientation, class, caste, race, and ethnicity in the social groups that anthropologists encounter. The ethical difficulties, political dilemmas, and theoretical quandaries provoked by this emphasis on marginality are indeed significant, as the growing literature on post-colonialism and cultural resistance attests (Connor, 1989: 231–44). They must be engaged, however, if cultural anthropology is to transcend its historical associations with Western colonialism and imperialism.

Like hermeneutics, postmodernism sees knowledge and culture as socially and historically constructed, but unlike hermeneutics, postmodernism is committed to understanding the complex interrelationships between culture and power; seeing the genealogy of the cultural in terms of histori-

cally specific practices. Much postmodern aesthetic theory, for example, is engaged in the attempt 'to restore the repressed political dimensions of aesthetic and cultural activity of all kinds' (Connor, 1989: 224). Postmodernism insists that cultural realities be seen as fractured and multiple, and social life understood in terms of the *local* and *conflictual* relations of its production.

Postmodernist approaches also depart from hermeneutic approaches in their rejection of modernity's surface/depth metaphors that 'interpreted' cultural life as epiphenomena of some underlying structure of desire, the unconscious, social structure, or the economy. (From this perspective, Marx, Freud, and Levi-Strauss look equally modern.) There are various critiques of the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' ranging from the nihilist celebratory despair of Jean Baudrillard to the humanism of Renato Rosaldo.<sup>5</sup> What they seem to *share* is a belief that accounts of cultural phenomena that privilege deep structures do a serious injustice to lived experience and often fail to grasp the significance of cultural activity to the people who are engaged in it (Marcus, 1986: 179; Rosaldo, 1989: 2). Drawn to activities (like ritual and ceremony) most likely to yield recurrences of structure, ethnographers may miss the more significant improvisational cultural practices of everyday life.

Anthropologists might attend to developments in literary theory where we see a similar rejection of the modernist idea of literary 'texts' as self-sufficient forms as well as challenges to the modernist insistence upon the integrity and self-sufficiency of the literary artefact. Theories of postmodernist writing suggest a return to a writing lodged in experience rather than form. The role of the postmodern literary critic, it is suggested, must be one that engages:

with the open temporality of a text in the interests of breaking the interpretive will-to-power of criticism, which always construes a text from the standpoint of its ultimate or single timeless meaning. For a postmodern criticism, what was ... conceived as an artefact to be read ... an image to be looked at ... an It to be mastered, becomes 'oral speech' to be heard immediately in time (Connor, 1989: 119-20).

The postmodern critic (like the postmodern anthropologist) shifts focus from texts and cultural phenomena conceived as timeless statements of value to explore them as 'the real, the occasional speech of temporally and historically situated human beings' (Connor, 1989: 120). Particularities and contingencies are stressed rather than the abstract and the eternal as 'postmodernist poetry returns to a narrative of a less exalted, less egocentric kind, a narrative which is hospitable to the loose, the contingent, the unformed and the incomplete in language and experience' (Connor, 1989: 121).

This suggests a concern with the cultural politics of quotidian practice which, I would suggest, is a key feature of postmodern cultural studies. Rejecting modernity's boundaries between culture and everyday life, and the

distinction between high culture and popular culture (Featherstone, 1988; Foster, 1983; Grossberg, 1988; Hutcheon, 1989; Jameson, 1984; Kellner, 1988), postmodernism shifts our attention to everyday cultural practices as the locus both of domination and of transformation (Ross, 1988). With the 'theory of practice' orientation of anthropology in the late 1980s (Bourdieu, 1977; Coombe, 1989; de Certeau, 1984; Ortner, 1984; Sahlin, 1985; Stephens, 1989; Thompson, 1984) cultural anthropology has already moved some distance in this direction.

Postmodernism, then, is an approach to cultural phenomena that suggests we look at things in new ways. It also suggests that we look at new things, given the changing nature of the world in which we live. The sociocultural complex known as 'the postmodern condition' refers to a diversity of processes. I have referred to the breakdown of boundaries between cultures and to the implosion of difference within cultures. These developments are part of a global restructuring of capitalism, and involve new media, information, and communications technologies (Appadurai, 1990; Harvey, 1989; Hinkson, 1990; Jameson, 1983; 1984; 1991; Ross, 1988).

One of the important implications of the 'postmodern condition' for anthropologists is its challenge to traditional occupational divisions of labour between interpretive anthropologists and those concerned with political economies.<sup>6</sup> Earlier it was suggested that the cultural must be understood politically in a late capitalist context where capitalist exchange relations and commodification are increasingly constitutive of knowledge, information, cultural exchange, and perhaps consciousness itself (Baudrillard, 1975; 1981; 1983a; 1988a; 1988b; Jameson, 1984; 1991; Kellner, 1989). As political and economic realities are increasingly perceived through media images that we relate to in terms of consumer choice models, politics becomes a cultural matter. The formation of political communities – be these national, regional, or class-based – must increasingly be a cultural or hegemonic process given the mobility of populations and the heterogeneity of peoples to whom state officials, political parties, union organizers, and local activists must appeal. Benedict Anderson's definition of nationalism as 'imagined community' suggests that communities must be constructed through images of communion (1983: 15) and, therefore, that polities of any scale must increasingly be created and maintained through representational means. Mass media communications technologies also enable people to participate in communities of others with whom they share neither geographical proximity nor a common history but an access to signs, symbols, images, narratives and other signifying resources with which they can convey mutual solidarity, challenges to others, and aspirational ideals of social transformation.<sup>7</sup> As cultural interpreters we cannot avoid considering the political/economic structures which shape popular culture and everyday life, and as political economists we cannot afford to evade the cultural constitution of salient political and economic communities in the late 20th century.

Social theorists of the postmodern – particularly Fredric Jameson (1983; 1984; 1991) and Jean Baudrillard (1983a; 1983b; 1988a; 1988b; Kellner, 1988; 1989; Poster, 1988) have attempted to theorize the cultural logic of late capi-

talism in 'postindustrial' societies characterized by mass media technologies and an orientation towards consumption. These theorists, however, require the ethnographic efforts of anthropologists to clarify their elisions and supplement their visions. In the commodified worlds they describe – saturated with signifiers, but bereft of meaning – people appear no longer to be subjects or agents of history but passive, withdrawn creatures playing games of pastiche with history's decorative surfaces.

As cultural studies scholarship is beginning to recognize, postmodern social theory depicts the social world in a manner remarkably insensitive to actual people's experiences of the postmodern condition (Featherstone, 1988; 1989; Grossberg, 1988; Kellner, 1988; 1989). As anthropologists we are ideally situated to venture beyond the terrain of the dominant cultural logics of postmodernism, and explore the ways in which those in specific subject positions 'live and negotiate the everyday life of consumer capitalism' (Ross, 1988: xv). How do people use commodified texts, commercial signs, celebrity images, advertising, and 'mass' culture in their quotidian practices?<sup>8</sup> To what extent and to what degree may consumption practices be sites of empowerment, resistance, contestation, and critique (Ross, 1988: xv) and what are the experiential, institutional, or structural limitations on this? How are corporate capital's regimes of signification detoured or re-deployed, or the spaces it produces occupied and transversed? These are questions ethnographers in capitalist societies must begin to ask. Anthropologists concerned with people's active engagement with commodified cultural forms will find suggestive (if still insufficient) theoretical resources offered by de Certeau (1984), John Fiske (1989a; 1989b), Hal Foster (1983; 1985), Lawrence Grossberg (1988) and Andrew Ross (1989) – cultural consumption understood as active use rather than passive dependence upon dominant systems of signification.

If commodified cultural forms have become ubiquitous in the cultures of contemporary Western societies, this phenomenon is not unrelated to massive changes in the Third World. Western societies become 'reproductive' and 'postindustrial' only because capital moves production and industry elsewhere, into free production and export processing zones in the Third World. Here inequalities in the distribution of wealth are exacerbated, low wages and abysmal working conditions become the norm, poverty becomes feminized, local agricultural production declines, and traditional social collectivities disintegrate or undergo massive transformations (Frobel, 1980; Nash and Kelly, 1983; Nelson, 1989a; 1989b; Smith, 1988). The social transformations effected by multinational capital formation and the decentralization of capital accumulation have traditionally been regarded in anthropology as properly the terrain of the political economist and only minimally addressed by interpretive anthropologists as having any cultural dimension. Indeed, the introduction of Western technologies and commodities is often seen as a sign that the cultural anthropologist's days are numbered – 'culture' disappears with the entry of Coca-Cola – what Solway and Lee (1990) call the Coke bottle in the Kalahari syndrome.

We have, fortunately, begun to see some resistance to the idea of capitalism as world steam-roller, flattening out cultural difference as it makes the world uniform (Appadurai, 1990; Polier and Roseberry, 1989). After years spent implicitly bemoaning the loss of a noble 'primitive' and the death of pristine and timeless cultures, anthropologists are coming to recognize their own attitudes as a form of 'imperialist nostalgia' – a pose of innocent yearning for a way of life anthropologists themselves were involved in transforming (Rosaldo, 1989: 69–86).

No one disputes the transformations effected by the historical forces of industrial capitalism and incorporation into a global economy. However, we now know that incorporation (and even this term is misleading) 'within the world market or the introduction of capitalist social relations does not set a local population en route to an unalterable or predictable series of social or cultural changes' (Roseberry, 1989: 51–52). In any given society, the consequences of such developments will be shaped by local conditions with which they must engage. These conditions are *cultural* as well as political and economic. In coming to terms with world capital's impact in Third World societies, anthropologists are becoming aware of the crucial role played by local systems of meaning. Indigenous cultural values shape the transformations that external forces engender and the ironies and resistances they generate. As Jean Comaroff (1985) demonstrates, advancing capitalist systems interact with indigenous cultural forms to dialectically produce reciprocal transformations. Indigenous trajectories of desire and fear interact with the global flows of people and things (Appadurai, 1990: 3), in subtle ways that traditional development theories are too clumsy to address. Some anthropologists, for example, have shown how wage labour relationships become invested with new meanings as they are engaged in terms of traditional cultural values (Nash, 1979; Taussig, 1980; Ong, 1987; Crain, 1991). Lifeworlds *do* colonize systems although the teleologies of German social theory would have it otherwise (Habermas, 1984, 1988).

Little ethnographic work has been done on peoples' cultural concepts, experiences, and practices of commodity consumption in industrializing societies, however (but see Comaroff and Comaroff, 1990; Gottlieb, 1991; Philibert, 1989; Shipton, 1989).<sup>9</sup> From a superficial perspective the existence of Coca-Cola, Exxon, Barbie dolls, and Big Macs all over the world looks like a globalization and homogenization of culture. However, it doesn't follow that these things have the same meaning in other cultures that they have in our own (Appadurai, 1990; Friedman, 1988). It is surely a form of imperialist hubris to believe that they do. The social dynamics of the cultural indigenization of various metropolitan forces or 'the internalization of the external' (Roseberry, 1989: 88–89 citing Cardoso and Falleto, 1979) are only beginning to be explored, most notably in the journal *Public Culture* which has recognized this as a fruitful new avenue for inquiry.

To come to terms with the postmodern condition we need to stop treating commodities as transparent symbols of Western hegemony, guaranteed to create dependency (Solway and Lee, 1990), and see them, like all other cultural signifiers, as multivalent – capable of taking on new meanings in

new contexts. It is a true conceit to believe that because others are now engaged in cash economies, subject to multinational advertising strategies, and involved in consumer choices – that our own common sense categories therefore suffice for making sense of their lives (Rosaldo, 1989: 199). Cultural anthropologists have for too long entertained what Andrew Ross calls ‘an imaginary of Capital that consigns it to the demonology of the Other’ (1988: xiv). Fetishizing it as a monolithic, logical, cunning system, we reify its cultural power and discount the complex ideological work that people engage in while promoting, subverting, and transforming its operations. One of the biggest dangers multinational capitalism poses to the discipline of cultural anthropology may be our own fatalistic complacency in the face of it.

In conclusion, postmodernism provokes us as anthropologists to examine the *politics* of cultural production and the important *cultural* dimensions of late 20th century political economies. Cultural anthropology must engage the postmodern through an exploration of the cultural politics of everyday life.

#### NOTES

- 1 I recommend Volume 5 (2 & 3) of *Theory, Culture and Society* (1988) and the edited collection *Universal Abandon: The Politics of Postmodernism* (Ross, 1988) to anthropologists who want an introductory sense of the interdisciplinary terrain of the discussions about postmodernity. Steven Conner’s book, *Postmodernist Culture* (1989) also contains an excellent bibliography of further sources.
- 2 The literature exploring the political problematic of representation in ethnographic writing is now quite extensive. See Clifford, 1988; Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Marcus and Fischer, 1986; Sangren, 1988; Sanjek, 1990; and Tyler, 1984; 1986 for influential discussions of this topic.
- 3 This tendency has its roots in the European Enlightenment where culture was constructed as a category to serve bourgeois needs for a ‘public sphere’ according to Terry Eagleton (1984). The idea of culture as relatively stable, commonly held beliefs was one that owed its origins to the cohesiveness and homogeneity of the educated class in 18th century European Enlightened societies. The idea of a cohesive public sphere is increasingly challenged in 19th century European societies as literacy spreads across gender and class lines (Collins, 1989: 3–5) and in the 20th century across national and racial boundaries, creating a proliferation of reading and writing publics that contest and interrogate each other’s assumptions about cultural legitimacy and value. As categories of texts and readers multiply and diversify ‘culture’ becomes a fundamentally conflicted terrain (Collins, 1989: 5). For an historical discussion of the term ‘culture’ see Williams, (1983: 87–93).
- 4 Literary theorist Brian McHale (1987) suggests that the modernist novel (like the modernist ethnography) was concerned with epistemological questions of knowledge and interpretation – what can truthfully be known, understood, and communicated about the world. In the postmodern epoch there is a shift to ontological concerns about being and existence. Instead of asking questions about how a world may be known, postmodernist fiction asks the questions ‘What is a world?; What kinds of worlds are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?’ (McHale, 1987: 10). These ontological questions are also those that postmodern ethnographies engage.

- 5 Poststructuralism has also played a major role in undermining the hermeneutics of suspicion (see, for example, Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983) but its motivations are more clearly anti-humanist.
- 6 This is recognized by many anthropologists who would nonetheless reject the notion of a 'postmodern' anthropology because of the 'idealist' excesses of those they see preoccupied with questions of textuality. For example, Roseberry (1989: 32) argues for a rejection of the opposition between political economy and symbolic anthropology and suggests an historical approach that: 'tries to place itself between the extreme versions of explanatory scientism and interpretive self-absorption. That is, it rejects the goal of an explanatory science that postulates a set of transhistorical laws of history or evolution. Yet it is also resolutely materialist: it sees ideas as social products and understands social life as itself objective and material. Its approach to public symbols and cultural meanings would therefore place those symbols and meanings in social fields characterized by differential access to political and economic power' (Roseberry, 1989: 36–37). Very little, if any, of this statement would be objectionable to theorists of the post-modern despite Roseberry's evident distaste for the term.
- 7 Even mass media images conveyed by the motion picture and television industries contain this potential. The fan club, or fandom, for example, may become a social community for dispossessed peoples within which mass media images are deployed to create social solidarity and negotiate agendas for political change. See Jenkins, 1988 and Coombe, 1991b; n.d.b for further discussion.
- 8 I have been exploring a number of these issues with regards to the texts, symbols, and images commodified by intellectual property laws (Coombe, 1991a; 1991b; n.d.a; n.d.b.).
- 9 Roseberry (1989: 114) also suggests that we stop seeing the introduction of metropolitan goods and commodities as a form of loss or debasement and recognize that they may be felt or experienced as forms of social and economic advancement, and increased comfort and leisure. He also suggests we differentiate between new consumer goods (in the Latin American context) in terms of those that are 'necessities' and those that express U.S. power and influence (Roseberry, 1989: 115). Although I welcome the direction of these suggestions, I would suggest that understanding the meaning and value of mass market commodities in specific contexts requires an interpretive perspective sensitive to local cultural nuances in the creation of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) in the service of constructing social identities in fields of ever emergent social differentiations.

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