

# IDENTITY CRISES

A Social Critique of Postmodernity

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# Introduction

The postwar era in the West, especially the United States, has been witness to a complex series of intellectual, social, cultural, and political changes suggestive of major transformations, of epochal endings and beginnings, and of new perceptions and sensibilities widely characterized by the overworked term “postmodern.” Despite the troublesome ambiguities of the word, the daunting task of identifying and possibly reconciling inconsistent and contradictory usages of “postmodern” is less urgent than discerning the concept’s underlying thematics. While the term, its uses, and much of what it has come to represent have provoked a variety of responses, it is rare to find systematic and impartial accountings of the broad historical and institutional circumstances of its ascendance. Toward this goal, I propose in this book to situate the intellectual currency of “the postmodern” within the larger landscape of social and cultural change shaping this movement over the past several decades.

While planning originally to settle my own accounts with postmodernism through a systematic mapping and critique of its various discourses, I soon came to realize that we learn less from maps than material landmarks. Over time, my own readings made it increasingly clear that at the center of this intellectual movement was a vital but rather circumscribed preoccupation with the problem of identity. If nothing else, the mere recurrence of the term “identity” in recent academic and political discourses seemed to be a sign of something deeper at work that these discourses had insufficiently articulated. It became further apparent that questions of identity had import beyond the particular movements

of the Left with which they had become associated in recent decades but had also increasingly come to define the politics of the Right. Besides being a major theme in left academic theory, questions of identity in the past twenty-five years have assumed central importance in a range of struggles and debates across the political spectrum in the United States and elsewhere. In reflecting on the postmodern controversy, it became further evident that *the concept of the postmodern itself was an attempt to articulate a growing sense of the problematization of identity as a generalized condition of life in postwar Western society.*

### **“Postmodernism” and “Postmodernity”**

In linking the postmodern to questions of identity, historical and social context seemed to me to assume crucial importance. This, in turn, seemed to lead to a basic distinction between two interrelated aspects of the postmodern. Whereas the term “postmodernism” has occupied an influential place in academic discourse as a designation of a series of theoretical and epistemological claims or positions, some writers have employed the term “postmodernity” to refer to a series of sociohistorical developments. Accordingly, I have taken the term “postmodernism” to refer to a set of epistemological, theoretical, and political *responses to postmodernity*, which I define as a historically and structurally specific set of cultural conditions. I regard postmodernism as a loose array of philosophical and theoretical attitudes, a mode of inquiry and representation, and a movement, style, and mood that *reflect and parallel* fundamental changes in the cultural condition of Western societies, most notably the United States. However, without completely dismissing the claims of postmodernists who advocate new epistemologies and political positions, I argue that, to the extent that questions of identity are at the core of postmodern concerns, the problem of identity and identity formation needs to be addressed in a much broader, deeper, and more direct manner. Namely, I propose looking at problems of identity from within the context of *a theory of postmodernity as an objective sociohistorical condition rooted in material and technological change and corresponding transformations in the production and consumption of culture.* Additionally, while some see postmodernism as just a fashionable academic movement based in the life experiences of left university faculty, or a manifestation of postsixties political exhaustion and pessimism, I believe postmodernism needs to be understood as a theoretically suggestive yet ultimately inadequate response to the failures of the European Enlightenment. However, unlike many postmodernists, who with some justification regard the demise of the modern philosophical subject as an inevitable consequence of the rise of new collective identities, transformations in culture, and new ways of *thinking* about identity, I see a more generalized and structurally based *destabilization* of identity. I regard this destabilization as tied to economic

and technological transformation in the realms of cultural production and, especially, consumption, a condition to which we have yet to formulate adequate theoretical and political responses.

### Identity, Identification, and Difference

In *The Making of Political Identities*, Ernesto Laclau (1994) makes an important distinction between *identity* and *identification*. Whereas the former term designates an object of discovery or recognition, implying an originary *essence* defining the person, the latter term refers to a process of identity *construction* based on a Freudian-derived notion of “radical lack.” Social and cultural change has engendered identity crises in both senses. Belief in a substantial identity determined by birth or inner life experience has been seriously eroded in twentieth-century philosophical and social thought. At the same time, sources and means of *identification* in the form of agencies external to the individual have proliferated beyond our wildest imaginations. How are we to become persons, to construct our own identities among the seemingly limitless possibilities and intrusions of contemporary life (Melucci 1996)? In a chaotic and unsettled world, how are we to fill the “lack”? Behind these questions remain unresolved issues associated with the very distinction Laclau draws. On the one hand, despite persistent attacks on “essentialisms,” given the legacies of biology, birth, culture, and history, there are reasons to pause at arguments against substantialist notions of identity. On the other hand, the concept of identification raises critical questions about identity-forming processes, such as whether identities are self-constructed or externally imposed, an issue that in turn poses fundamental questions about the social and cultural relations of power.

Intersecting the tension between essentialist and constructivist conceptions of identity formation are questions of difference. How are we to define “difference,” and what is the relationship between identity and difference? More centrally, why have identity and difference become such major concerns in contemporary theoretical discourse? While *identity* means sameness, with implications of continuity and repetition, *difference* means the opposite of sameness, or otherness and discontinuity. Exploring the relationship between “identity” and “difference” in her book *Identification Papers*, Diana Fuss (1995) elaborates the distinction between identity and identification, arguing that processes of identification set in motion a complicated dynamic that brings a sense of identity into being while simultaneously calling that identity into question. Identification always keeps identity at a distance, making it problematic. Importantly, Fuss points out that identification always does its work *relationally*. As “the detour through the other that defines a self,” identification operates in a field of social relations, “as the play of *difference* and *similitude* in self-other relations” (Fuss 1995: 2; em-

phasis added). Thus, while a case might be made for preserving (strategically or otherwise) substantialist notions of identity, what we call “identity” is perhaps better thought of as the more persistently recurring elements of multiple and situationally contingent *processes of identification*. The concept of identification, then, shows how identity is constituted in and through yet problematized by difference—thus the impossibility of theorizing one without the other.

In this book, I attempt to address these questions against the grain of what I take to be the prevailing modes of thought in cultural studies and related academic fields. While acknowledging their contributions, I propose an alternative to an epistemology and politics of group-based identity and difference, arguing for a shift of focus toward the historically situated structural conditions in which identities form. Accordingly, I believe issues of identity ought to be approached not just in terms of group histories and oppressions but in relation to broad changes in the sociohistorical circumstances of social individuals.

### **Identity Crises, Politics, and Academic Theory**

Viewed historically, the crisis of Western subjectivity at the center of postmodern thought consists of numerous interrelated identity crises. Politically speaking, the Eurocentric subject has been eclipsed by historical trends disrupting colonial and imperial relationships between Europe, the United States, and the “Third World,” evident especially in the new social and cultural movements, changing patterns of immigration, and newly emerging patterns of global trade and telecommunications. Reflective of this crisis is a widespread reckoning with the historically subjugated identities of race, class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and other subordinated social categories and groupings. The invocation of otherness in postmodern discourse reflects, and serves to intensify, an upheaval in historically defined relations between dominants and subordinates in Western society, and their corresponding modes of representation. The modernist encodings of patriarchy, white supremacy, class privilege, heterosexuality, the domination of nature, and cultural elitism have been major targets of the new social movements, an expression of the politicization of identity and culture in many Western countries. However, alongside and interacting with these collective identity crises, *changes in the structural and institutional conditions of advanced capitalist society have generated strains on personal and social identity*. The much-commented-on fragmentation of society and culture caused by commodification and technological change casts a shadow over beliefs in a unified and coherent ego or self. The triumph of commodity society threatens inherited modern conceptions of the individual, casting doubt on previously accepted notions of personal and social identity. I argue, then, that despite recent attention to Eurocentrism and its patterns of racial, gender, and other forms of domina-

tion, broader, more diffuse but fundamental crises of personal and social identity and meaning have been occurring in the commodified structures of highly developed capitalist societies.

Certainly, our conversations about identity have had other origins. There are many possible ways to tell the story of the complex relationship between the emergence of postmodernism and the construction of identity as a problem for a Left increasingly preoccupied with group-based politics. The new social movements of the sixties and seventies provided the impetus for a politicization of identity by challenging the white, male, heterosexual, and middle-class-dominated hierarchies of modern Western society. The discourses of difference that eventually grew from these movements came to inform a version of postmodernism that emphasized the particularity and contingency of the social, cultural, and historical locations of knowing and speaking subjects. Feminism led the way by deconstructing modern patriarchy, an order that subordinated women in fixed gender roles. The movements of people of color and gays and lesbians further contributed to a politicization of identity focused on the oppression of groups whose particular histories, cultural heritages, and rights had been silenced in the universalizing social practices and official history of the West. An activist and progressive version of postmodernism can thus be seen as emerging in the wake of the particularistic and inclusionary impulses of what came to be known as “identity politics.” But this postmodernism, focusing on the epistemological play of particularity in the construction of gender, race, and sexuality, developed mainly from a critique of the essentialism that came to be seen as inherent in identity politics, and emerged more fully in theoretical arguments about the constructed relations of difference. While finally seen by many theoreticians as incompatible with identity politics, postmodernism nonetheless appropriated for its own purposes the deconstructive thrust of the identity movements, creating a broad sense of crisis in Western thought and culture through its articulation of the themes of difference and otherness. As such, postmodern theory in the United States has become a signifier of the identity crises inherent in the critical challenges to European, hierarchically based modes of authority, inquiry, and knowledge precipitated by identity politics.

While the identity movements provided the impetus for a critique of the political and moral subject of modernity, academic postmodernism, largely through the influence of French poststructuralism, eventually came to define itself through claims of the demise of the subject of modern Enlightenment philosophy. In this context the crisis of modern subjectivity was articulated more explicitly as an epistemological crisis. This crisis was increasingly traced to the writings of the anti-Enlightenment philosophers Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger and endorsed in the works of such prominent postmodern

theorists as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, and Richard Rorty. Despite their many differences, as postmodern philosophers these authors attempted to “decenter” the subject in the contingencies, particularities, and relativizations of discursive constructions, thereby attacking modern notions of a rationally centered ego. Especially in its poststructuralist versions, this type of postmodernism has attempted to replace the epistemologically sovereign subject of the Enlightenment with a subject constituted in the “always already present” effects of discourse and power.

In hindsight, however, the celebrated Nietzschean crisis of truth could be seen as anticipating, and recent poststructuralist formulations about the instability of culture as reflecting, a materially based sociohistorical crisis of the subject. By privileging discursive relations, poststructuralism posits as a world of textual instability what could be read as a decline of reason and a withering of unitary identity in a *society* fragmented by technologically based processes of signification, consumption, and power. The instabilities and incommensurabilities of language in poststructuralist theory can be seen as a theoretically mediated reflection of a real fragmentation and destabilization of social and cultural relations, and therefore modern forms of identity, resulting from economic and technological change in advanced capitalist societies. In its emphases on instability and heterogeneity, postmodernism more generally resonates a series of transformations in identity and identity-forming processes in society itself that have worked to throw the nature and boundaries of the subject into question.

The intellectual displacement of themes of disunity and instability from sociohistorical context to textuality and culture (from “context” to “text”) is partly attributable to the circumstances of postmodernism’s beginnings. Originating in the humanities, postmodernism reflects many of its traditions, perspectives, and methods. Despite occasional overtures to interdisciplinary approaches, postmodernists have with few exceptions advocated literary and ethnographic methods as the appropriate and strategically most effective means of practicing theory and research in all fields of knowledge. Curiously, the interdisciplinary implications of many postmodern formulations seem inconsistent with postmodern biases against Enlightenment philosophy, much of which is foundational to the natural and social sciences. Furthermore, many postmodern thinkers—and this is evident especially in the field of cultural studies—have failed to acknowledge similarities or connections between the new approaches and knowledges they espouse and ideas and methods long advocated or debated in the social sciences (consider, for example, parallels between standpoint epistemology and the sociology of knowledge).

Aside from the disciplinary reasons behind the textual and cultural turns in academic theory and the corresponding limitations of postmodern thought, it is



worth mentioning yet another set of factors. The social relations of the postmodern movement perhaps shed additional light on the often disembodied ways the issues of subjectivity and identity have been valorized. While in no way reducible to social position or status, the theoretical and political agendas of postmodernists need to be read against their own relationship to the changing roles and identities surrounding consumption, class, gender, race, and sexuality as these are experienced in their particular social contexts. Specifically, how problems of identity and difference get constructed can be partly accounted for by the conditions of intellectual production in the social and political environments of professional academics themselves.

In summary, on the premise that most varieties of postmodernism can be read as a reified reflection of and rejoinder to an underlying state of cultural dismemberment in society itself, I propose shifting the grounds of discourse about identity to an analysis of postmodernity as a cultural condition. A socio-historical account would resituate postmodern discourses and politics in fundamental structural changes in society and culture. Such a move, I argue, casts a different light on the postmodern problem of identity and difference by relocating it within a more encompassing perspective, one that grounds theory in material social and cultural transformations. While I begin and end with select features of postmodern thought, returning later in the book to the theoretical problem of the subject, my major concern is to formulate a diagnostic definition of the postmodern condition that enables us to think about the problematization of identity in historically and socially grounded ways.

## **Social Relations, Cultural Transformation, and Theory: An Overview**

The crisis of subjectivity defining the postmodern condition calls for a mode of analysis that situates the problem of identity and difference in the realities of social and cultural disintegration and change. While postmodernists and post-structuralists have captured a strong sense of cultural fragmentation and the ascendant powers of discourse, they have typically fallen short of understanding these phenomena as manifestations of lived cultural conditions or connecting them in any meaningful way, as Fuss would suggest, to the dynamics of social relations and interacting selves. The discursively reductionist tendencies in post-structuralism specifically are both cause and consequence of a relative (although not complete) neglect of the wider social and institutional fields in which discursive or cultural instability operates.

In contrast, I attempt to treat the destabilization of identity and culture as a product of changes in the conditions of material and social existence and within a framework of individual experience and need. I start from the premise that

identity and difference are better understood through an analysis of the postmodern condition rather than through the epistemological and political discourses and arguments of postmodernists and poststructuralists. In framing my position, I begin with a critique of identity politics and a discussion of the problems associated with this perspective and subsequent postmodernist and poststructuralist emphases on difference. I propose what I call a “social relational” approach that grounds the concepts of identity and difference in a social field. Having framed identity socially, I proceed to explore the transition from modernity to postmodernity, the accompanying transformations of culture brought about by the postmodernization of advanced capitalist society, and the consequent destabilization of identity resulting from the commodification and globalization of culture. I then address the overall shape of postmodernity and its ideological and cultural landscape, employing the notions of fragmentation and pluralization to diagnose and theorize the problems of cultural politics. Finally, I return to questions of theory by exploring the convergent and divergent claims of poststructuralism and Meadian social pragmatism and their implications for theoretical renewal under postmodern conditions.

Chapter 1 begins with a discussion of identity politics, tracing its sources to changes in postwar U.S. society. I characterize identity politics as a modern form of politics and a bridge between modern and postmodern perspectives. I argue that identity politics founders on the problem of difference. I propose an approach based on the writings of George Herbert Mead that addresses the problem of identity and difference from within a self-other framework that recognizes both the structural and processual determinants of identity within a field of social relations. This approach serves as the context for developing a social foundation for a theoretical construction of the problematization of identity in the postmodern era.

While recognizing the political and intellectual contexts in which identity has arisen as a topic of debate, I argue in this chapter that prevailing discourses, by taking identity as a production of strictly cultural and political processes, have neglected the problematization of identity and identity formation at the level of the self and in relation to institutional and structural transformations in advanced capitalist society. In effect, the prevailing focus on gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality as privileged objects of discourse has often culturalized and politicized identity at the expense of other issues associated with identity formation.

Additionally, a social relational approach challenges the unquestioned constructionism at the forefront of contemporary discussions of identity, enabling us to raise issues obscured by a strongly antiessentialist stance. The contemporary rhetoric and uses of constructionism beg fundamental questions about the

nature, form, and scope of identity formation. Reformulating the problem of identity and difference in terms of social relations and the self restores an important balance between discursive and social theories of construction while making it possible to recognize a complex and necessary tension between constructionist and essentialist readings of identity. The approach I propose attempts to nullify the constructionism/essentialism distinction as we have known it by reposing basic questions about social process and social structure and their interrelationship in the context of identity formation.

Specifically, my analysis presupposes important distinctions between cultural identity, on the one hand, and social and personal identity, on the other. While the former locates identity and identification processes in shared collective, historical experience, as constituted in forms of representation, the latter situates identity in the institutional contexts of the individual. Since social relations pervade the formation of cultural meanings and identities, questions of cultural identity are inseparable from their social context. Social relations, therefore, need to be distinguished from discursive relations and problematized as part of the changing structural and cultural conditions of society as a whole. The elevation of culture to a conceptually dominant position in contemporary theory has frequently obfuscated the underlying social and material processes shaping cultural production and consumption. In addressing the conditions of culture, I attempt to contextualize it structurally, considering how it undergoes change and destabilization through the effects of commodification and technology.

By shifting the discussion of identity to a material and social context, I am proposing to reinstate the modern concept of the "individual," with its inherent connection and opposition to "society," as a methodological strategy for conceptualizing postmodern identity crises. A theorization of the problem of identity in postmodernity presupposes a model of the individual tied to its predecessor, modernity. By reasserting a concept of the individual, it becomes possible to broaden current thinking about identity beyond collective entities such as the group and community to institutionalized structures to which the individual often has a more direct functional relationship. Whereas in modern society these included the family, church, and workplace, in postmodern society a shift has occurred toward the means of consumption and technological reproduction as major sites of identity formation. Moreover, by reinvoking the individual it becomes possible to relocate identity in processes of self-definition. Understanding how identity is constructed is therefore no longer solely a matter of the influences of history, culture, geography, and power but depends also on choices and constraints immediately available to individuals who as actors negotiate their lives within a broad field of social meanings and actions and within a range of institutional settings.

Finally, understanding the nature and formation of identity in advanced society, and its problematization in the face of technological and economic change, depends increasingly on the concept of personal identity. The conditions of postmodern society hasten the subsumption of cultural and social definitions of self under the goals of personal fulfillment, growth, and development. In a highly individualized and privatized society, the self becomes relatively detached from collective structures and traditions and more directly rooted in individual need and desire. The self stands at a remove from society, as aspirations, ideals, and myths acquire greater personal specificity through privatization and consumption. The stage at which the search for identity collapses into the construction of narrowly personal meaning poses the problem of how the social self survives in a society and culture that, while promising new forms of community, have become ominously fragmented and attenuated, and correspondingly narcissistic.

In chapter 2, identity is taken up in a historically developmental perspective. Insight into the problematization of identity in our time depends on a set of arguments about the direction of societal change, namely, the transition from modernity to postmodernity. These arguments reject claims of a “break” between modernity and postmodernity by establishing continuities between the two, pointing to the emergence of a set of conditions within modern society that contribute to postmodern changes in the formation of subjectivity and social relations. Identity is seen as a problem of modernity, whose history is inseparable from the rise of individualism and the disintegration of traditional society following the sweeping changes of modernization, in particular the separation of public and private life. Through the creation of a private sphere, modern society posed the problem of knowing oneself in ways that foreshadowed postmodern identity problems. Identity is also seen as more problematic under modernity than many postmodern writings imply. In considering the problems of modern identity, attention is focused on the fate of community, historically the major means of identity formation.

While continuities can be drawn between the predicaments of identity in the two historical types, however, the postmodern period is distinguished by fundamental changes in the bases and processes of identity formation. In this respect, traditional institutions have been threatened by new sites of consumption and entertainment and new means and forms of identification provided by mass media and other reproductive technologies. An overarching world of images and information now creates almost infinite possibilities for identifications extending far beyond concrete personal and group relations. This new environment has extended the locus of identity formation beyond the self-other relation to technologically controlled modes of signification. As a result of a globalized, simulated, and artificially constructed world of communications, the construc-

tion of identity has become increasingly externalized and instrumental in nature. The impact of a consumerist mass culture is seen as posing both opportunities and dangers for self-identity. While privatized forms of consumption offer new freedoms and means of individualized self-creation, trends toward the externalization of identification processes threaten not only a coherent sense of personal identity but the very boundaries of self as constituted by modernity through the distinction between individual and society. As a manifestation of the commodity form, the technologies of consumption and mass communication, as exemplified by television, have the potential for fragmenting the self within a vast world of visual and auditory stimuli. Yet while commodification threatens community and social relations generally, new kinds of community, however attenuated, emerge within consumer culture, offering new but limited possibilities of self-formation and identification.

Chapter 3 turns to the broader context of cultural transformation, examining the transition from modernity to postmodernity in terms of changes in the nature, structure, and condition of culture. The leading theme here, as throughout much of the discussion of postmodernity, is fragmentation through the commodification of culture. Whereas modern society can be characterized as fragmented through the differentiation of social roles and social functions within an urban landscape, postmodernity can be defined as the fragmentation of symbolic experience through new means of signification and technological reproduction within a landscape defined by mass media and mass consumption. This is suggestive not merely of a *change* in identity-forming processes but of a *problematization* of identity through a dissolution of self-unity and meaning accompanied by a crisis of reality itself.

The technological transformation of culture can be understood in relation to two processes at work in the transition from modernity to postmodernity. First, our relationship to culture undergoes dramatic change as a direct consequence of technological innovation. This occurs in the form of a compression of time and space and a reversal of modernity's privileging of time *over* space by new spatializations of culture made possible by its visualization through a world of images. Second, and relatedly, society undergoes massive aestheticization as part of a process of "de-differentiation" of the separate cultural spheres of reason, ethics, and aesthetics, and a loss of autonomy of the cultural sphere from the rest of society. This tendency involves an extensive interpenetration of capital and culture in which the aesthetic dimension is reintegrated into production and consumption, harnessed by the commodity form for purposes of capital accumulation. These tendencies are accompanied by a generalized shift toward consumption as the dominant cultural pattern. Here, the consumer increasingly assumes the role of producer, a paradoxical twist in the commodification

of culture reflective of the incipient populism of postmodern culture. The aestheticization of society, finally, can be considered from the standpoint of Jean Baudrillard's claims (1983a) that technologies of cultural reproduction have created a "simulacrum" or "hyperreality" that replaces "reality" as it is normally defined.

The postmodern transformation of culture undermines unitary conceptions of identity in numerous ways. The modern self is problematized by a privatized mode of consumption, the fragmentation of symbolic experience, and a present-oriented culture in which conventional notions of self-formation through socialization are undermined by absorption of the self in images. At the same time, the reorientation of culture toward the consumer introduces new, potentially democratic possibilities.

Such possibilities are the topic of chapter 4, which explores the relationship between postmodernization and the decline of cultural hierarchy. Modernity monitored a set of exclusionary boundaries whose legitimacy has been thrown into question by the impact of postwar economic and technological development and the new social movements. Persistent patterns of social exclusion notwithstanding, the logic of capitalist development during this period has weakened many formal and structural barriers to democratic cultural relations, setting in motion a process of cultural democratization disruptive of hierarchical structures of identity.

In this sense, the incipient decline of modernity can be accounted for by a number of institutional shifts in capitalist social and cultural relations. These shifts are attributable to specific developments in economic organization, technology, and forms of cultural and political participation. First, innovative economic practices, based in what David Harvey (1989) has called a regime of "flexible accumulation," have disrupted modern status hierarchies and class relations through an enlargement of a consumer economy increasingly destructive of cultural distinctions. An eclectic and adaptable consumerism has weakened class identities and loyalties in favor of more ephemeral identifications with corporate-based images of leisure, pleasure, and celebrity, in which a regime of regulated and institutionalized "taste" is replaced by a system of commercially mediated and highly fluid "lifestyle." From this vantage point, the condition of postmodernity is inseparable from the rise of post-Fordist economics, whose major impact has been to create a highly differentiated and fluctuating marketplace of goods and images. Second, commercial media have intensified these trends by replicating and strengthening consumption relations through various technological strategies facilitating a recycling of cultural images. As a commodity form, mass media reproduce the consumptive mode through simulation, whose logic is to further destabilize inherited social and cultural hierarchies. In

the functionally autonomous world of the media, the subject is cast adrift in an eclectic world of images characterized by a dissociation of class and other collective identifications. Third, in a series of changes involving migration, transnational capital, communications technologies, and cultural exportation, new processes of economic and cultural globalization have been destabilizing identity in the West and throughout the world. Finally, the reconfiguration of political discourse by the new social movements represents yet another set of forces working to dismantle hierarchical cultural conceptions and notions of self predicated on modern conceptions of identity and authority relations. These developments have worked in combination to undermine forms of collective identity embedded in modern social and political arrangements and to create a multitude of democratizing tendencies in the realm of culture. In these ways, postmodernization has set in motion numerous inclusionary trends, forcing difference from the cultural margins to the center.

In an attempt to further clarify the overall shape of postmodernity, as well as multiple and inconsistent uses of the term “postmodern,” chapter 5 discusses two separate and antagonistic but overlapping processual logics contained in the themes of heterogeneity and democratization characterizing the postmodern condition. Tendencies toward fragmentation and simulation generate the widely commented-on crises of meaning and reality attributable to commodification and the effects of media-based technologies of reproduction problematizing subjectivity in everyday life. However, the dismantling of broad patterns of social and cultural hierarchy by social movements and globalizing trends represents an opposing tendency toward pluralization, a destabilizing but formative process consisting of the construction and assertion of a range of new identities, meanings, and communities as against the commodification of culture and the consensual frameworks of modern society. These interrelated but opposing currents of postmodernity are manifest, respectively, in what I call “commercial” and “political” postmodernism. Whereas the former is shaped by the forces of commodification, the latter refers to the formation of a new realm of cultural politics.

The frequent conflation of this distinction stems from the observable trends toward democratization and eclecticism in mass culture and the valorization of “particularity” and “difference” in postmodern theory. These trends tend to obscure the inherently contradictory relationship between processes of fragmentation and pluralization. While the fragmentations of consumption and technology reflect the workings of the consumer marketplace, movements that politicize culture and identity involve group formation and collective struggles for change. Commercial culture works to create a democracy of consumerism that enlists difference in the interest of the market, while cultural politics works

to articulate difference in the name of group identity, in both politically progressive and reactionary directions. These opposing tendencies stand in a dialectical relationship, mutually influencing each other in complex and unpredictable ways.

Furthermore, the distinction I am proposing provides access to a much deeper phenomenon in postmodern culture. Spanning the contrast between the commercial and political forms of postmodernity is a *revivalist culture* seeking to retrieve a sense of authenticity, often through a reassertion of tradition and the historical past. Precipitating a loss of place and meaning, mass culture motivates a search for personal moorings through an attachment to diverse groups, communities, value systems, and cultural traditions. Thus, while destabilizing identity, postmodernity simultaneously produces movements of restabilization and reconstruction. In these movements, an attempt is made to recuperate the past as a source of authentic meanings and identities, a development having complex and ideologically ambiguous consequences. While the cultural politics of gender, racial, sexual, and other identities frequently draw on historical heritages to mount challenges to the social repressions of modernity, pushing the pluralizing process in a progressive direction, various conservative movements represent a backward-looking quest for stability through the appropriation of tradition and authority. In the disjointed and eclectic political culture of the nineties, many movements, of course, could be read as embodying both progressive *and* reactionary elements. The search for meaning and identity thus crosses conventional ideological lines, disrupting predictable patterns of culture along with liberal consensus politics. As a basic feature of postmodernity in the United States, symptoms of loss and regeneration get expressed in an often volatile identity politics extending from left to right, reflecting a broad and deepening sense of personal crisis associated with the effects of unsettling change and a collapse of modern belief systems.

Finally, in chapter 6 I reconnect my analysis of the problematization of identity in postmodernity to the theoretical themes of social relationality and the self outlined in chapter 1. In searching for a redeemable theoretical response to the postmodern condition—a processual, emergent theory of social relations and the self that speaks to the condition of postmodernity—I critique poststructuralism for neglecting the connections between discursive and social practices. I propose a reconsideration of Meadian social pragmatism and the writings of V. N. Voloshinov as constituents of an alternative theoretical paradigm addressing the social foundations of language and consciousness. I attempt to demonstrate convergences between Meadian philosophy and poststructuralism (an antimetaphysical stance, a belief in the provisionality and contingency of knowledge, a view of the subject as constituted in multiplicity and disunity) as well as



divergences, as represented by Mead's naturalized social conception of the pragmatic and generative capacities of mind, language, and the self.

While representing a number of developments resistant to easy summarization, poststructuralism, it could be said, generally addresses the decenteredness and fluidity of the subject implied by a fragmented mass culture and the proliferation of group identities associated with the interventions of cultural politics. This approach, as exemplified particularly by certain aspects of the work of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Judith Butler, translates these conditions into linguistic and discursive heterogeneity, locating potentialities of resistance in the productiveness and gaps of discursive practices. Poststructuralism thus draws attention to the multiple and unstable character of meaning and identity while at the same time refusing notions of a subject that preexists signification. However, by dissolving the subject in the workings of discourse and power, poststructuralism detaches notions of identity and difference from the social processes in which they are rooted. Instead, most poststructuralist formulations tend to *replicate the logic of signification within the commodity form*, implicitly reifying the salient features of mass culture. Serving as a metaphor for mass culture, as John Mowitt (1992) has suggested, the "text" replaces the subject, obscuring the generative and formative possibilities of the interactive processes shaping and shaped by a self in a field of social relations. The disunities and instabilities textually valorized by poststructuralism thus re-create in a disembodied form the crises of identity and difference in postmodern culture while failing to address their underlying causes and how relations of identity and difference might be reconstituted or transformed within a realm of social action.

The writings of Mead, especially his *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934) and *The Philosophy of the Present* (1932), bear an intriguing resemblance to aspects of poststructuralism but redress the limitations of this approach by focusing on the social production and functions of language while insisting on the centrality of the social self in the interpretive production of meaning. Mead's pragmatic conceptions of the self-other relationship, of the inseparability of self from environment—understood as a problem-solving situation—and of the temporal and emergent qualities of communication and social action complement the poststructuralist attempt to situate the subject in a context of discursive relations marked by fluidity and instability. While rejecting Cartesian dualism, however, Mead nonetheless retains a *functional* concept of a socially constituted consciousness, which he sees as a precondition for a reflexive self. Mead further posits the inseparability of discursivity from what he calls "sociality" and in this fashion links subjectivity to an irreducibly practical relationship of social *intersubjectivity*. In these ways, Mead's pragmatism overlaps with poststructuralist

textualism and indeterminacy while retaining the idea of mind as a socially constituted form of reflexive consciousness.

A theory of identity in postmodern society must address the simultaneously fragmented and pluralized conditions creating the tensions and dilemmas of identity and difference. The themes of interpretation, becoming, and multiplicity common to poststructuralist writings and Meadian philosophy capture the sense of contingency pervading the postmodern condition. In its emphasis on the inherently emergent character of social life and the self-reflexive subject, Meadian pragmatism implicitly recognizes the provisional nature of identity and the constitution of identity in difference. Contrary to poststructuralism, however, Meadian thought provides conceptions of the subject that incorporate these themes into a socially grounded, naturalistic, and empirically oriented framework of analysis.

My goal in this study is to outline a diagnostic foundation for a reconstruction of social theory by laying out the sociohistorical ground of the postmodern condition. But this task can only be accomplished through a rehabilitation of the idea of a *social* subject shaped by but reflexively engaging this condition. By recognizing language and discourse as social products and therefore as having a social form and structure, thinkers like Mead and Voloshinov thematize the poststructuralist emphasis on multiplicity and difference within a context of social interaction and group life while still acknowledging the significance of language in social processes. Significantly, however, both thinkers recognize the impossibility of explaining the workings and effects of language and discourse *except* in social context. Finally, I argue that a focus on social relations has important political consequences. Social relations and social selves are necessary foundations of communication and action, of community, culture, and politics. Textual reductionism and the reification of mass culture are shortcomings for which poststructuralism can be redeemed by a social pragmatist account that grounds symbolic processes in the social relations of the problem-solving acts of individuals and the reflexive capacities of social selves.