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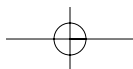
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7 The Universal Voice of the Other

In the previous chapter we observed the paradoxical outcome of radical pluralist thought. The harder one pushes the radical elements – either differences as absolutely singular or the deconstruction of the identities that define differences – the more one advances conditions opposed to the existence of social differences. Rather than strengthening the position of those on the margins, then, radical pluralism either undermines the unity the margins themselves assert or accepts a belief in absolute differences that encourages the degeneration of struggles into conflicts between oppressed groups. In both cases the politics of differences draws political attention away from the global forces responsible for cultural homogenization. Radical pluralism, thought through consistently, does not secure the conditions for a society that is more tolerant of cultural differences but undermines those cultural differences, because it repudiates unity and universality.

Nevertheless, we have also noted that the self-assertion of oppressed differences can take the form of exclusionary practices. It is the case, for example, that the politics of Québécois nationalism have polarised the opposition between “*pur laine*” Québécois and non-Francophones. The pertinent question is, therefore, how critical philosophy can defend the values both of difference and pluralism without making concessions to the violence of the discourse of racial purity? Contrary to the politics of difference, I will maintain that the only way to accomplish this goal is to begin not from difference but from a critical understanding of a universal human essence. This

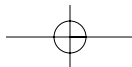


essence, we have begun to see, is not the tendentious product of a modernist metanarrative but the necessary presupposition of struggles against oppression that is brought to light by the struggles of the oppressed themselves.

By insisting on the humanist grounds of cultural difference, this argument puts itself at odds with the main strains of contemporary critical philosophy,¹ all of which, as we have seen, condemn "the totalizing logic of humanism" for "disconnect[ing] and hierarchically separat[ing]" oppressed identities.² Humanism, as we are about to see, is not necessarily totalizing in the pernicious sense Emberly and other theorists of the politics of difference assume it to be. While it is of course true that the idea of humanity has been invoked to justify the exclusion and oppression of the nonwhite, nonmale world, there is a much deeper meaning of the term that is manifest not in the ideology of the oppressors but in the struggles of the oppressed against their oppressors. To discover this sense of humanism, however, one must work beneath the surface level of struggles to the depth of their metaphysical enabling conditions, a strategy that has become taboo in the last thirty years. Nonetheless, a recovery of a properly understood universal metaphysical ground of struggle is the best hope for ending the destructive antipathies of the contemporary world. Once we go beneath the surface, we will discover that the oppressed assert a capacity for self-determination that is not relative or unique to specific groups but is the universal essence of human being and the necessary condition of those struggles themselves. I will bring this deep ground to light by examining some recent struggles of Canada's First Nations, in particular struggles that have brought them into conflict with the Québécois. If these opposed struggles can be shown to follow from a failure to recognize the underlying essence shared by the Québécois and the First Nations, I will have uncovered the framework for a solution to their conflicts and, by extension, other conflicts between the oppressed that mark our world and detract from the struggle for freedom.

THE UNIVERSAL GROUNDS OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCE

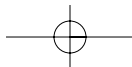
It is essential to keep in mind that postmodern criticism argued that the key to understanding the struggles of oppressed minorities was to accept the fact that those struggles did not rest upon universal normative grounds and did not have universal aims. The politics of difference would argue, then, that to interpret minority struggles in a universal fashion runs the risk of distorting the real character of those



struggles. The postmodern reading is not without evidence in its favour in the continuing proliferation of difference-based struggles against imposed normalcy, as well as in more classical struggles for national self-determination. It is in the latter, however, that we see the real danger of a politics of difference cut off from its universal grounds. The last ten years have been witness to shocking struggles between groups, each of whom claims to be an oppressed minority. The civil wars in the Balkans are of course the most obvious examples, but Canada has not been spared these conflicts. The clearest example in the case of Canada is the confrontation in Oka, Quebec, between the Sûreté de Québec, the Canadian Army, and the Mohawk Nation. This conflict will serve as the test case for my claims, first, that there is a universal ground for minority struggle that has been overlooked by postmodern critique and (at times) the struggling minorities themselves and, second, that this ground must be brought to light and made into the conscious principle of struggles against oppression as the necessary condition of success.

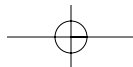
On first glance the struggles around Oka seem to emphasize the need for the deconstruction of all absolute claims to difference. The Québécois who stoned Mohawks fleeing the army's occupation at Ville Lasalle appear to be a paradigmatic example of the dangers of insisting upon the purity of their differences. On the other hand, from the deconstructive perspective the Mohawk warriors who took up arms might appear equally dangerous to a politics of openness, tolerance, and difference, insofar as they usurped the voice of the whole community.³ The deconstructive response to a naked conflict of differences would seem to have to follow Iris Young's prescription and set out to break down the hard and fast lines dividing Québécois from Mohawk, to set out to reveal the relational character of the differences, the co-dependence, so to speak, of differences upon one another. Under the glare of deconstructive criticism, suppressed differences within each community (Québécois who supported the Mohawks, Mohawks who preached negotiation, etc.) might have been brought to light and a nonviolent reconciliation might have become possible. Examined closely, however, what such an approach brings to light is precisely what the other side of deconstruction (the side that insists that difference and not identity is fundamental) denied, namely, shared interests across the divisions of difference. Those shared interests are the universal voice of the other that critical philosophy must heed if it is to play a part in advancing the cause of pluralism and tolerance.

On the surface, of course, this universal voice is not apparent. The struggle at Oka (and subsequent confrontations in Southern Alberta,



Gustafson Lake in British Columbia, and, more recently, in Burnt Church, New Brunswick) seems to be rooted in the First Nations' exclusive claim to control the land, which runs up against, again in the case of Oka, the claims of the Québécois to sovereignty and the indivisibility of their territory. Viewed in that light, the struggle of the Mohawks of Kanesatake and Kahnawake goes back more than one century and is grounded in a particular claim to a right to control traditional lands. The arguments to which the Mohawks of 1989 appealed were first formulated in the late nineteenth century. Consider, for example, the words of Joseph Onasakenarat, chief of the Mohawk nation in 1868. He argued that "this land is ours; ours by right of possession; ours as a heritage, given to us by a sacred legacy. It is the spot where our fathers lie; beneath whose trees our mothers sang our lullaby, and you would tear it from us and leave us wanderers at the mercy of fate."⁴ There is little in this quotation that would lead one to conclude that there is a universal normative basis for the claim over the land. It bears more in common with Lyotard's understanding of minority struggles as the struggle of groups striving to remain minorities. It makes reference only to the particular, specific history of the Mohawk people.

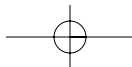
If, however, we examine the argument of the Mohawks more fully, we see that this claim to the land is not rooted simply in an exclusive "right of possession." That right of possession is in turn grounded in an understanding of the relationship between a people and the earth. The understanding of the earth as the ground of survival and flourishing of all people is a universal normative ground, not a private and exclusive claim of one specific minority. As Johnny Cree, faith-keeper of the longhouse of Kanesatake explains, "[Mother Earth] gives the land and the trees that breathe the oxygen that sustains all life on earth. Her breath is all over the world giving and sustaining life. Without Mother Earth and the trees there would be no life ... We do not have a sense of ownership like the white man. We are the caretakers of the land for our children and for future generations but we are responsible to Mother Earth to see that our children and their children will be able to walk the land and still see the green trees and grass and clear streams that give clean water and fresh air."⁵ Cree here appeals not to a particular tradition of the Mohawk people but to a universal value – the earth as the force that gives and sustains all life – to justify the struggles of this particular group of people. This understanding of the earth as the universal life-sustaining force is not unique to the Mohawks of Kanesatake and Kahnawake: it is shared by indigenous peoples around the globe.⁶ That universalism is poignantly evident in a photograph that forms part of the photo



essay that makes up *This Land is Our Land*. It pictures a small child near the barricades in Kanesatake beneath a homemade sign that reads simply, "All Native people want peace and sovereignty." "Peace and sovereignty," it reads, not sovereignty at any cost and to the exclusion of everyone else. The particular claim to difference made by the Mohawks of Quebec is thus grounded in a universal value, namely, a nondestructive relationship between humanity and nature (remember that the struggle was sparked by the decision of the town of Oka to expand a golf course onto lands sacred to the Mohawk community), and articulated as a particular demand for self-government.

To be sure, the spiritual moment of the Mohawks' struggle is not universally shared with other minority struggles. The specific content of the spiritual claim can be set to one side, however, in order that the form it shares with all struggles of oppressed minorities may come to light. Cree's argument understands the relationship between peoples and the earth as one of nondestructive life maintenance. The particularities of a people, any people, depend for their existence on the availability of resources, through the transformation of which a people defines itself. Here again we see that the basis of the struggle for cultural particularity is not particular but universal, a relationship to the earth as the origin of the resources of cultural difference. The demand for control over the land is thus not a demand made simply on the basis of a private and exclusive right; rather, it is made in universal terms on the grounds that the earth exists for all people and makes available what every culture needs to sustain itself. It argues against the practices of the "white man," but at the deepest level it is not attacking a particular group (the white man *as* white or the Québécois *as* Québécois) but a destructive mode of land use that, as I have implied, is the real cause of cultural homogeneity.

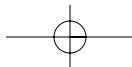
The universal grounds of cultural difference were not lost on some elements of the Québécois people. Madeleine Parent, president of the Solidarité Populaire du Québec, wrote Robert Bourassa, who was premier at the time, denouncing the plan to call in the army and drawing a parallel with the October crisis of 1970.⁷ More instructively, the present premier, Bernard Landry, who was then a PQ opposition member, articulated precisely the identity that underlies the cultural differences dividing the Québécois from the Mohawks. "How can we claim the right to independence," he asked, "and deny that right to the First People? It is not reasonable. It is not logical."⁸ Indeed it is not reasonable or logical, but that conclusion follows only from a philosophical perspective that has not bid adieu to reason and logic.



The claim that we are dealing with a critique of socioeconomic forces and not with the particular culture of the white man can be further supported by briefly examining the most famous struggle of indigenous peoples of the last decade, the Zapatista Rebellion in Mexico. The indigenous people of Mexico, like the indigenous people of Canada, also faced economically motivated threats to their traditional lands. The grounds of their resistance are instructive insofar as they are the same as the grounds claimed by the indigenous people of Canada and, as we will see, the Québécois.

On 1 January 1993, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) came into effect. While North American capital celebrated the securing of a free-trade zone stretching virtually from the North Pole to the equator, workers, social activists, feminists, and indigenous populations sensed that the increase in the freedom of capital promised by NAFTA meant an increase in their own servitude. Although capital had secured for itself a trade bloc capable of competing against the European Community (EC) and the growing power of the Pacific Rim, for workers and others marginalised by the market, NAFTA represented yet another diminution of their power and rights. While protest was on the whole rather quiet, in the jungle of the Chiapas region of Mexico shots rang out and villages were seized by the Zapatista Liberation Army. "Today we say ENOUGH IS ENOUGH. We are the inheritors of the true builders of our nation. The dispossessed, we are millions, and we thereby call upon our brothers and sisters to join this struggle as the only path, so that we will not die of hunger."⁹ Thus was war declared on the Mexican state and, by extension, on North American capital on the day that NAFTA took effect. This was no arbitrary act, however. The Zapatistas argued that their revolt accorded with the Mexican Constitution and flowed from the underlying freedom definitive of human beings. Their declaration rejects "any attempt to disgrace our just cause by accusing us of being drug traffickers, drug guerrillas, thieves, or other names that might be used by our enemies. Our struggle follows from the Constitution, which is held high by its call for justice and equality."¹⁰ The declaration concludes with the observation that the people who have undertaken the struggle are "full and free" and that the struggle seeks to create a political and economic system in which this freedom is concretely realized.

Although the Zapatistas emerged from the specific circumstances that endangered the very survival of the indigenous population of Mexico, they did not, as the above document makes clear, rest their struggle on this particularity but rather sought universal foundations in the notions of justice, equality, and freedom. This was not, as

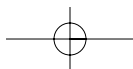


Lyotard claims anti-imperialist struggles are, “struggles of minorities intending to remain minorities and to be recognized as such.”¹¹ Luis Hernandez argues that “the great virtue of the Zapatistas has been that their discourse is sufficiently wide to be interpreted by many sectors according to their own interests and objectives. At a moment in which nobody was betting on great change, in which there was enormous skepticism about possibilities of bringing about satisfactory change through revolution, the January 1 insurrection was a breath of fresh air blowing from the South ... The uprising seems to want to tell us that we don’t have to conform to the way things are going, that the particular authoritarian and vertical form of modernization is not necessarily the only path.”¹²

The global outlook of the Zapatistas is passionately confirmed in the words of their leader, Commander Marcos: “Marcos is gay in San Francisco, black in South Africa, an Asian in Europe, a Chicano in San Ysidro ... a communist in the post-Cold War era.”¹³ In other words, Marcos is not a “territory of language” but a link in a chain of struggles forged by the outsiders and the oppressed against liberal-capitalist society. Marcos reconfirms this global, universal outlook in an interview concerning the effects of capitalist globalization on marginal cultures. Against the myth of openness that sustains fantasies of the progressive effects of globalization, Marcos argues that “the world is becoming more closed, and it’s becoming increasingly intolerant, and it’s causing absurd fundamentalisms to proliferate. They’re absurd, it’s nothing else. And look ... the one promoting it is the man with money ... saying that suits me, because the fragmentation works for me. We are saying that what’s going on here is a world war. They are destroying land like never before, riches like never before, they are eliminating populations like never before.”¹⁴

Marcos’ point is clear. What threatens indigenous culture and particularity is not universal rationality or an essentialist conception of subjecthood but rather the forces of capitalist globalization. Responses that rest on the radical assertion of differences are the reflex of the imposed homogenization of the globe, but they are powerless to resist it insofar as they remain dispersed. Instead, local cultures under threat must work down to the common source of their problems and draw on their common strength – the very power the postmodern politics of difference denies – the power of self-determination.

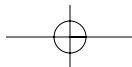
The globalism of Marcos’s position is hardly surprising given the global source of the particular problems the indigenous population of Chiapas faces. NAFTA was a step in the present restructuring of the North American economy in response to the increase in competitive



pressures. The same forces that threatened the Mohawk Nation (profit-driven expansion onto sacred land) threatened the indigenous population of Mexico. But those same forces are responsible for threatening the specific differences of the Québécois, even though the leaders of the Québécois nationalist movement are for the most part fully integrated into the system of capitalist market relations. What these facts reveal is that the axes of struggle today are fundamentally between not different cultural groups but different understandings of life. On the one hand are the *human* values of self-differentiation, toleration of otherness, and pluralism, all of which presuppose a system of resource appropriation based on need, and on the other are the market values of exploitation, privatisation, and profit maximization. In order to understand this claim, however, we must bring to light the way in which the struggle of the Québécois to maintain their language and the struggle of indigenous communities to maintain their land base both rest upon an understanding of the essence of human being as self-determination and how this universal essence can form the ground of solidarity rather than division.

This ground can be disclosed by comparing the object of struggle in each case. For the Québécois, their goal has always been to create conditions in which the French language is secure. For the Mohawks, their struggle has been for a secure land base. As everyone knows, these two struggles have brought the two communities into conflict. The deep cause of the conflict is a failure in both groups to see the common source and common goal of their struggles. The common goal has often been recognized at the political level. As Kymlicka argues, "the demands of the two groups share an important feature: they rest, at least in part, on the sense that both are distinct nations or peoples whose existence predates that of the Canadian state. As nations or peoples, they claim the right to self-determination."¹⁵ What is most often overlooked, however, is the shared nature of the threats their right to self-determination faces and, more deeply, the grounds of this private *right* to self-determination in the universal *capacity* for self-determination.

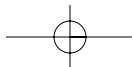
In both cases the communities have historically lacked the material securities for their cultural differences, because someone else has controlled the resources necessary for cultural survival. Consciousness of the fact that the resources for cultural survival have been controlled by groups opposed or indifferent to cultural survival gives rise to a consciousness of oppression. The Québécoise who is forced to speak English or the Mohawk who sees her land swallowed up by a golf course becomes aware in that experience of being determined



by forces external to what she takes to be her fundamental identity. If both simply insist on their identity to the exclusion of its material grounds, then conflict between the two is possible. If, however, both refer to the structure of the experience of oppression, a deeper identity of interests becomes apparent. In both cases the members of the group are conscious of not-being what they take themselves to be essentially. Both struggles are possible because both groups are not in fact what they are in essence, self-determining. Both groups are shaped by forces opposed to the specific difference constitutive of the community. But what makes those specific differences possible – the capacity for self-determination, subjecthood – is not unique to either group but is a human capacity variously articulated.

The underlying ground of the struggle for cultural difference in the human capacity for self-determination is most beautifully evoked in the work of Lee Maracle. Maracle, a member of the Stoh:lo Nation of British Columbia, has long been a fighter for Aboriginal and women's freedom. She does not give into the disintegrative logic entailed by the postmodern understanding of difference. That is, she does not assert her womanhood against her Aboriginal identity and her Aboriginal identity against racist traditions. Instead, she expressly articulates her identity as an Aboriginal woman as the reality of her human being. Thus she argues that "the denial of native womanhood is the reduction of a whole people to a subhuman level."¹⁶ It drives the people to a subhuman level precisely because it denies to them what is most human, and what is most human is no particular feature of Natives, of women, or of Native women but rather the capacity to determine themselves. Maracle writes that "until we are also seen as people we are not equal and there can be no unity between us. Until our separate history is recognized and our need for self-determination satisfied, we are not equal."¹⁷

For Maracle humanity is neither a particular feature of a particular identity nor an abstract universal invented by the colonizer in order to justify his rule but rather the necessary basis of resistance to colonialism. In claiming her humanity she claims back from the coloniser the power to determine her identity. Her humanity is expressed in this power to resist, the power to assert against the oppressive determining force of colonial racism her ability to create herself. Human being is thus in Maracle's eyes the power to create differences in a context of mutuality and freedom. Acting on the basis of this humanity means in part recovering her "separate history," but the recovery is for the sake of new creations. Cultural differences are not the products of symbolic codes that merely position subjects within them; they are the living creations of subjects who have secured the condi-

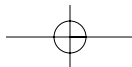


tions for a free existence: "culture changes ... and it will do so as long as people busy themselves with living. It is a living thing."¹⁸ Insofar as culture is an expression of a people's "busying themselves with living" the interest in cultural difference is a human concern, and thus Maracle declares her solidarity with "ordinary white folk" and with other oppressed minorities throughout the globe.¹⁹

Twenty years before Maracle's text, Harold Adams, a Métis scholar and activist from Saskatchewan, declared that a forward-looking Native nationalism would usher in a "new humanism" that would establish the conditions for "new cultural developments" not only within Native communities but in the white world as well.²⁰ The nationalist Guy Laforest also justifies the struggle of the Québécois on humanist terms. In his view it is not a struggle against other differences but a struggle for the conditions in which new differences can be created on the basis of mutual respect and interaction.²¹

Let us at this point contrast the underlying identity between oppressed groups in a concept of human being as the power of subjecthood, as the power of self-determination, with the understanding of cultural difference definitive of the postmodern politics of difference. We have seen in the previous chapter that postmodern theory adopts two opposed understandings of difference. Both, as we will now see, are in definite tension, indeed, contradiction, with the expressed understandings of oppressed groups in struggle. On the one hand, postmodern theory insists on the absolute singularity of cultural difference. To be sure, there are always voices in cultural groups who insist on the group's purity, but these voices can hardly be accepted if one's overriding goal is to promote tolerance and protect difference. Because that is its overriding goal, postmodern theory is forced to the opposite approach to difference: to deny absolute singularity and to deconstruct discourses of racial or ethnic purity. This approach, however, ends up deconstructing the very differences that it is the goal of postmodern theory to defend. In both cases postmodernism maintains that in no case are differences the products of self-determining activity, because their defining deconstruction of the concept of subjecthood concludes with the claim that all differences are the function of symbolic codes that determine, and are never determined by, active human beings.

The oppressed themselves, as we have seen, do not simply base their claims to difference by insisting on the specificity or uniqueness of their differences. That is, they point to universal normative grounds to legitimate their struggles. As Charles Taylor argues, "the development of modern notions of identity has given rise to a politics of difference. There is, of course, a universalist basis to this as

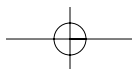


well ... Everyone should be recognized for his or her unique identity ... with the politics of difference, what we are asked to recognize is the unique identity of this individual or group.”²² Thus, the Québécois have not simply insisted on their private right to speak French, they appeal to a “right” to self-determination that is universally recognized as a legitimate claim. The Mohawks do not simply appeal to a right to possession; they go further and ground that right in an understanding of the earth as the fundamental ground of all life. Those rights make sense, however, only if there is a real capacity shared by both groups (and historically denied by the oppressor groups) to determine their own cultural horizons. Hence the universal basis of claims to difference is the essential capacity of human beings to become the creators of their own life-horizons. Minority groups enter into struggle when social conditions contradict that essential nature.

The postmodern politics of difference, however, stakes its claim to radicality on a denial of subjecthood and a deconstruction of all ideas of the human essence. In other words, the politics of difference sets itself against the necessary ground of the struggles of the oppressed groups it purports to support. If it is true that the understanding of human being as essentially self-determining is inevitably exclusionary and oppressive, then the struggles of the oppressed, which are precisely struggles for self-determination, must be adduced as part of the problems plaguing the modern world. But those struggles become exclusionary and oppressive when they are not consciously rooted in the universalist understanding of human being. That is, when the groups in struggle fail to understand that their specific differences are in essence moments of an underlying human capacity for self-determination, they conflict with other struggles for the same. For the same. That is the crucial truth to be gleaned from this comparison of the ground of the struggles of the Mohawks, Zapatistas, and Québécois. All stem from the same contradiction between the essential capacity for self-determination and social conditions that determine them from without, i.e., oppressively. Both aim at the same general solution – social conditions that express rather than deny that essential self-determining capacity.

POSTMODERNISM'S DOUBLE BIND

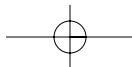
The politics of difference recommends itself as more attuned to specificity and difference, and yet in concrete instances of struggle to preserve and extend differences, the groups in question appeal to universal goals and values and set themselves against social conditions



that thwart their capacity for self-determination. If Young, for example, is right, and postmodern thought "critiques ... the logic of identity because ... [it] denies or represses the particularities and heterogeneities of sensual experience," then she must extend this critique to oppressed peoples who also ground their struggles in the "logic of identity."²³ To do so, however, would be to set herself against the very groups she hopes to support. Not to do so, on the other hand, puts her at odds with the philosophical deconstruction of identity thinking that motivates her politics. This 'double-bind' affects the politics of difference generally.

The politics of difference cannot both affirm struggles against oppression, as it does, and deny that these struggles are rooted in the capacity for self-determination, which it also does. To understand this claim at the necessary philosophical depth, we must entertain a digression on the meaning of the terms "self" and "other." These terms are not unique to postmodernism but extend back in the history of philosophy to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. What the postmodern use forgets is what Hegel took to be essential, that the difference between self and other is the result of a one-sided understanding of selfhood. In other words, the difference between self and other is really a matter of hidden identity. Bringing this hidden identity to the surface does not entail the subordination of the other to the self or the reduction of difference to an identity without remainder but expresses, rather, an achieved equality between unique and self-determining individuals.

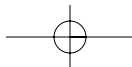
There can be no *essential* difference between self and other, because the positions are completely reversible. Let us take a clear political example. Consider the colonial relationship as a relationship between self (the coloniser) and other (colonised). From the perspective of the coloniser, the colonized is other. Yet, from the perspective of the colonized, the coloniser is other. Together, both categories have universal extension; apart, each implies the other. As such, there is no substantive difference between them. What is different is that the colonizer does not recognize in the other what cannot in substance be recognized by postmodernism: the capacity for self-determination. Postmodernism attempts to maintain this distinction between self and other as the basis of its critical project. But it does so by contending that the other stands on the side of "difference." We have seen, however, that this postmodern position, thought through, is incoherent. It presupposes what it denies, namely, a capacity on the part of the other to assert its proper identity against the forces that oppress that identity. At the same time, the reality is that actual struggles against oppression do not base



themselves on a claim to the possession of pure difference but rather on a claim to a shared humanity, a capacity for self-determination that is violently denied the oppressed. If one approaches this struggle from a certain interpretation of the Hegelian perspective on the relation between self and other, one can both understand the specificity of the other and account for why the other tends to situate its discourse within a universal framework.

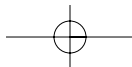
What one witnesses in the struggle between self and other is not a conflict between “the logic of difference” and “the logic of the same,” but rather a struggle between two forces, one of humanity, one of denying this humanity in the other. This struggle is characterized by Hegel as a “struggle to the death” in chapter 4 of *The Phenomenology*. There he notes that “what is ‘other’ for it [self-consciousness] is an unessential, negatively characterized object. But the ‘other’ is also self-consciousness; one individual is confronted by another individual.”²⁴ What postmodernism characterizes as a necessarily unbalanced relationship is, in fact, a relationship of unrecognized equality in a shared human essence. This equality can be recognized only after each proves to the other his or her essential freedom. Hegel continues: “Thus the relation of the two self-conscious individuals is such that they prove themselves and each other through a life-and-death struggle. They must engage in this struggle, for they must raise their certainty of being *for themselves* to truth, both in the case of the other and in their own case. And it is only through staking one’s life that freedom is won.”²⁵ Before their antagonistic relationship each posits the other as unessential, merely other. Once the struggle has been joined, the underlying equality in essence, the fact that each proves himself or herself a self, an active, self-determining force, emerges and breaks down the apparent difference between the two.

This abstract characterization is certainly no substitute for concrete empirical analysis of definite struggles. Nevertheless, it discloses an issue of profound metaphysical importance, particularly in the context of the postmodern attempt to conceive of struggle apart from this underlying essence of the human subject. Lest it be thought that I am falsely imposing a modernist “metanarrative” on struggles that are not amenable to this Hegelian reading, consider for a moment how Franz Fanon, arguably the greatest theorist of anticolonialist struggle, conceives of the grounds of struggles against oppression. Commenting on the Algerian civil war, Fanon argues that it is at the moment when the colonized person recognizes his or her humanity, the universal expressed in the particular, that s/he begins to resist: “General de Gaulle speaks of the ‘yellow multitudes’ and Francois Mauriac of the black, brown, and yellow masses that will soon be unleashed.



The native knows all this and laughs to himself every time he spots an allusion to the animal kingdom in the other's words. For he knows he is not an animal, and it is precisely when he recognizes his humanity that he begins to sharpen the weapons with which he will secure his victory."²⁶ When the native recognizes his humanity what he recognizes is that he is not "other" but "self," not an object fit to serve but a subject fit to determine his own horizons. Moreover, he proves this not only to himself but to the colonizer, i.e., the one who tries to reduce the native to the status of mere object.

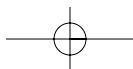
Furthermore, Fanon does not believe that anticolonial struggle is simply concerned with the particular freedom of the colonised or with merely preserving non-Western cultures against the onslaught of oppressive modernization. He argues instead that "all the elements of a solution to the great problems of mankind have existed at one time or another in European thought. But the action of European man has not carried out this mission which fell to him ... Today we are present at the stasis of Europe ... Let us reconsider the question of the cerebral reality and the cerebral mass of all mankind, whose connections must be increased, whose channels must be diversified, and whose message must be re-humanized."²⁷ Fanon, theorist from Martinique and militant in the Algerian War of Liberation, does not see that the ground of anticolonialism is the minority character of the oppressed, nor does he conceive of emancipation as an increase in the fragmentation of the globe into smaller and smaller differences. Fanon reaches a conclusion in direct opposition to that of the post-modern politics of difference but perfectly in line with what I am arguing for – the struggle for national self-determination is a struggle waged in the name of the *humanity* of the oppressed and for the sake of the full expression of the cultural differences that concretely define what *human* being is. Lewis Gordon, commenting on Fanon, explicates these critical-humanist implications. He argues that by "identifying European man *qua* European man, we, following Fanon, signal the importance of decentering *him* as the designator of human reality. But this does not mean that the project of constructing or engaging in human science must also be abandoned. Instead, in the spirit of Fanon's call for radicality and originality, the challenge becomes one of radical engagement and attuned relevance."²⁸ In other words, the point is not to abandon the universal foundations of the critique of oppression but to make the abstract universal "man" (which is nothing more than the particular idea of European man falsely generalized and imposed on others) into a concrete universal (the self-determining capacity of human being realized as a multiplicity of freely interacting cultures).



In a related vein, Cornell West brings to light the universal human capacity underlying what he calls the "cultural politics of difference." His focus is on the struggles of marginalised groups to reclaim and transform the representations that have been imposed upon them by the culture of the oppressors. He is thinking of the manifold artistic practices by which women, gays and lesbians, and African Americans, amongst others, have, over the last thirty years, sought to change their social standing by transfiguring the images through which they are represented to the popular consciousness. Although what is contested in each struggle considered singularly is something particular (the representation of woman as handmaiden to man, the African-American man as dangerous, etc.) underlying and connecting them all as a form of *politics* is a universal value. West argues that "the most significant theme" of the cultural politics of difference is "the agency, capacity, and ability of human beings who have been culturally degraded, politically oppressed, and economically exploited." He continues, maintaining that "this theme neither romanticizes nor idealizes marginalised people. Rather, it accentuates their humanity and tries to attenuate the institutional constraints on their life-chances."²⁹ Like Maracle, West neither reduces humanity to particular differences nor elevates one difference to the status of universal truth. Instead, humanity is identified with the culture-creating capacity of the oppressed: their ability to consciously transform their situation.

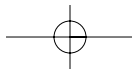
The fundamental point of this section is that the struggles of the oppressed are not really struggles between self and other but in fact struggles between two selves, one of which, the oppressor, refuses to recognize the selfhood of the other (the oppressed). What becomes manifest through the struggle is that the free development of each position requires the transcendence of the unequal relationship. By proving itself in victory, the formerly oppressed side proves itself to be in essence human, that is, the same as what the oppressive side asserted itself to be: a subject capable of ruling itself. What is changed is that the one-sidedness of the oppressor's claim to difference has been overcome. In showing itself to be a people capable of self-determination, the oppressed people destroys the oppressor's claim to difference. "Otherness," then, is really a concept that belongs to the thinking of the oppressor. The struggle of the oppressed is a struggle to make manifest precisely what the oppressor denies. Success in such struggles opens the way for reconciliation, reciprocity, and mutual recognition of a common humanity underlying the activity of creating new cultural forms.

Thus we return to the examination of the central problem. If the



struggle between self and other is a struggle between two selves, one of which is struggling for what the other already has – the material and institutional means of self-determination, then the postmodern conception of this struggle contradicts not only the nature of the struggle but also itself. If postmodernism insists that the other must remain other, then it is once again telling the other what it should be; it is once again imposing a discourse (which, we might add, was also developed in Western universities) upon non-Western peoples. By presupposing that the arguments it has made against modern political criticism are applicable to the zones where exploitation and oppression are most extreme and by ruling out the efficacy of radical economic and political transformation in these zones, postmodern critique can wrongly substitute itself for the actual character of the historic struggles against imperialism. It ignores the fact that no one has forced the discourse of critical humanism upon the oppressed, that they themselves have taken up the notion of human essence as self-determination and applied it concretely in their own situation. To the extent that postmodernism is a radical critique of essentialism, therefore, it is in contradiction with what the oppressed say for themselves and is thus in contradiction with itself, since it holds that the other “cannot speak the language of the same” or is a “minority seeking to be recognized as such.” If it presses forward with this analysis, therefore, it is in practice telling the other what the other is. It also deflects attention away from the basic, global causes of oppression.

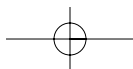
For the Mexican teenage woman being poisoned in a factory in one of the Maquiladoras, Marxist political economy may have a great deal more relevance than the deconstruction of the subject. Indeed, she might benefit from reading a text that tells her that she is linked by her situation to sweatshop workers in Indonesia and on Spadina Avenue in Toronto and that together, by forging the links of solidarity on the basis of the humanity denied to them, they can one day become in actuality what they are in essence, free beings. As Kate Soper argues, “revelling in the loss of progress is a Western metropolitan privilege which depends upon living in a state of grace where no one is starving you, no one is torturing you, no one even denying you the price of a cinema ticket or tube fare to the postmodernism conference.”³⁰ It is possible that in a liberal democracy, where tolerance is already to some extent an operative value, the deconstruction of the subject *may appear* to offer the possibility of increased pluralism, but in contexts where these formal guarantees have not been achieved, such a deconstruction would deprive groups of the concepts for struggle *that they themselves* lay claim to.



In either case, the relationship between self and other is wrongly conceived and the struggle against the material grounds of oppression is not advanced.

What has become apparent is that the essential problem underlying the postmodern position is that its desire to listen to the other as the other would speak itself implies emancipation from external forces that determine the other but also criticizes the only foundation upon which emancipation can be coherently conceived – a defining capacity for self-determination. The belief that the other has something to say and that this cannot be heard today calls forth the idea, manifestly criticized and deconstructed, that human beings have the capacity to determine themselves and the society in which they will exist. Nevertheless, just that idea is held to be behind “the worst political systems ... [of] the twentieth century,” and for that reason it is deconstructed.³¹ In so deconstructing this idea, however, postmodernism deconstructs the very grounds upon which the other could speak *freely*. The feminist theorist Nancy Hartsock asks a pertinent question in this regard. “Why is it,” she questions, “that just at the moment when so many of us ... begin to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic?”³² Kirstie McClure, although she ultimately rejects the notion of subjecthood she invokes, reveals the ultimate problem with the deconstruction of the human capacity for self-determination. “Just when marginal and oppressed people are asserting their rights as political subjects is no time deconstruct the categories ... to do so is to become complicit with the neo-conservative agenda.”³³

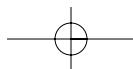
The politics of difference is not, of course, neoconservative in its goals. Its problem lies rather in a systematic confusion about the nature of subjecthood and the political implications of the concept of human essence. This confusion, which will be explicated in detail in the final chapter, results in a pervasive failure on the part of postmodernism to think through the necessary grounds of the concept of oppression. Failure to see that oppression presupposes an essential difference between what people have the capacity to become and what they are in fact made to be, the difference between subjecthood and subject-position, led to the belief that oppression could be overcome without this occurrence being viewed as the release of oppressed subjective capacities. The idea of freedom in postmodern philosophy is the maximization of subject-positions. However, as subjecthood is reduced to subject-position, the idea of freedom becomes incoherent, because all subject-positions are determined by dynamics that are beyond human control.



Let me stop at this point in order to sum up the results of the present chapter. The central problem examined here stems from the contradiction between the postmodern claim that universal history and essential subjecthood are exclusionary modes of thinking and the actual use made of these very notions by different groups struggling against Western imperialism. The claim that modernist theory and practice are oppressive is contradicted by the appeal made to these very modes by actual groups in struggle. This implies a contradiction in the postmodern argument as soon as it is put into practice in any act of solidarity with struggles against oppression. Support for such struggles entails support for principles that are the antithesis of postmodern principles. Thus, the specific content of postmodern politics is negated in proportion to the support lent to struggles which employ universal ideas of history and subjecthood.

On the other hand, if postmodern thinking resists such an outcome and criticizes such struggles, it falls into a second contradiction. That is, it will contradict the claim that others must be allowed to speak in a voice of their own choosing. The middle path between these two contradictions, i.e., attempting to isolate, from within what appears to be a modernist discourse, elements that are in fact radically different, either returns postmodernity to the incoherence of radical pluralism or it again runs up against the fact that when the oppressed speak they manifest a capacity for self-determination and a desire for a different world, one which corresponds to this capacity.

The more fundamental question remains. What is it that explains the concern postmodern thinking shows towards oppressed and marginalised people and groups? If, as the postmodern analysis shows, all subjects are in fact discursively constructed subject-positions with no capacities proper to themselves, what is it that allows postmodern thinking to even conceive of an oppressed subject-position? At root, all positions are equally determined by forces beyond individual and collective control. At root, there is no basis upon which one could determine the difference between an oppressive and a free society. If there is no normative value to the idea of humanity, then there is no normative weight to the notion of inhumanity either. In other words, there are no social systems that are fundamentally opposed to human freedom, because human freedom has no meaning if humans are mere positions determined by social dynamics. Human freedom, as I will argue in the next chapter, must mean more than the unbounded proliferation of sites for the production of differences. The production of differences must be tied in a fundamental way to an essential capacity to produce those differences. While



postmodernism affirms the production of differences, it cannot connect this to a capacity to self-consciously create differences without contradicting its deconstruction of subjecthood.

However, it is clear that there is genuine concern for the amelioration of social and political problems among the major postmodern thinkers. The critique of the modern idea of subjecthood is essentially political. This idea of the subject as the creator of its own reality, the politics of difference argues, is the cause of the marginalization of nonconforming groups. However, as I will now argue, this critique makes sense only if human beings have a shared capacity to determine the social environment. Only if there is something proper to humans themselves that is repressed but not destroyed by society can oppression or marginalization be coherently conceived. In other words, by concerning themselves with questions of oppression and marginalization, postmodern thinkers presuppose subjecthood as *that which demands that differences be expressed*, even as their deconstruction argues that this capacity is a destructive fiction. Only if subjecthood is presupposed do the political concerns of postmodern thought make sense. Some capacity that ought not to be oppressed or marginalized is presupposed by those concerns as the ground against which they take on their normative meaning.

