

Introduction

The contemporary reconfiguring of social theory

In academic and public life in the United States, in many European nations, and elsewhere, major social conflicts now pivot upon how to think about social differences. Do cultural differences (ethnic, racial, national, gender, sexual, or religious) override human or social commonalities? Should public policy, law, and institutional norms take account of social differences? If differences structure moral and epistemic values, how does this affect the shape of knowledge? And how should political organizations and movements organize themselves around social differences? Diversity management practices in corporations, multicultural curricula in schools, the discursive politics of deconstruction – in these and numerous other areas the “problem of difference” is a key issue today for policy makers, educators, corporate leaders, unions, social activists and, most importantly for this book, intellectuals.

For intellectuals, this reconfiguring of the field of public debate and conflict has been marked by the emergence of a new division between “modernists” and “postmodernists.” The former are said to defend cultural universalism and the idea of Western social progress; the latter criticize the former as holding an increasingly anachronistic world view based on narratives of reason and progress which conceal the dynamics of domination and social control. At the core of this debate is the meaning of social differences for concepts of reason, morality, and democracy. Modernists tend to defend universalism or the idea of a transcendent truth and morality that ultimately appeals to some notion of the unity of reason or humanity. Postmodernists aim to expose universalism as illusory and as erasing, submerging, or marginalizing sociocultural diversity; they champion the values of individuality, locality, diversity, and ambiguity as the conditions of a democratic society (for efforts to stake out a third, alternative position, see, on the side of modernism Benhabib 1992 and Taylor 1994 and, on the

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side of postmodernism Fraser 1995 and I. Young 1990). Similarly, the current debate over democracy often pivots on the problem of how to conceive and handle issues of social and cultural difference. Conservatives and many liberals champion social differences but only within a tight cohesive framework of consensus and sociocultural unity. In contrast, “radical democrats” often press for a notion of a strong democracy as resting on a robust concept of social difference while assuming only a weak, shifting, at best temporary, transient notion of consensus. At issue is the question of whether today it is still credible and desirable to invoke an ideal of a unified humanity, of a transcendent truth, a strong notion of cultural consensus, and the very idea of social progress.

In many Western societies, intellectuals, especially academics, have posed the question of difference not only in terms of the social dynamics of class, race, nationality, or gender but in relation to the *question of knowledge*. Indeed, the problem of difference has become so important today in part because social differences are, according to some thinkers, important influences upon moral values and knowledges. A major issue of contention is less whether or not to acknowledge or seriously consider difference but whether differences of, say, ethnicity, race, or religion, penetrate “deeply” into cultural life. If gender or race are differences that shape moral outlook and epistemic values in profound ways, this suggests a world, and a world of thought, fractured and fragmented in ways unimagined and perhaps unimaginable within Enlightenment cultural traditions. Furthermore, if the way we comprehend the world is influenced by our particular social statuses and interests as, say, white, middle class, or American, our knowledges will be neither value neutral nor politically inconsequential. I will suggest in this volume that taking difference seriously compels us to rethink questions of ethics and truth from the vantage point of assuming that knowledge and power are closely intertwined.

In schools and universities, in corporations and the mass media, in politics and the law, *the problem of difference* has become inescapable. This issue revolves around determining how social differences, for example, differences of religion, age, race, ethnicity, ableness, sexuality, gender, class, and nationality are to be understood. On the one hand, such differences may be viewed as simply creating social variations of a common humanity or producing diversity within a unified social system. On the other hand, social differences may at times be said to run deep and override social similarities, thereby troubling notions of human commonality and social unity.

The awareness of the problem of difference and the efforts to engage it theoretically and politically are hardly recent developments. The question

of how to theorize social difference was present at the very beginning of the modern Western era. Western modernity was inaugurated with the age of global exploration and commerce between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries, which involved the theoretical and political encounter with different or strange cultures and civilizations. Modern social thought in part originated and took the form that it did from the effort to understand these social differences (Hodgen 1964; Seidman 1983). One mode of understanding is perhaps especially telling. Beginning in the eighteenth century European thinkers developed a stage theory of social evolution and progress (Bury 1955; Meek 1976; Nisbet 1970). All societies, past and present, were arranged in a temporal, hierarchical evolutionary pattern. Past or “simple” societies represented a “primitive” state of humankind, while the new industrializing societies represented the most “advanced” condition of humanity (for arguments regarding the “racialization” of this evolutionary narrative, see Stocking 1982; Young 1995). Predictably, those societies of “primitive” social development were non-European, in contrast to Western societies whose industrializing dynamic was thought both a sign of social advancement and the future of *all* humanity.

The idea of social progress which occupied Western thought from around the late seventeenth century through to the twentieth incorporated social differences but only as they were understood as non-threatening – for example, as suggesting the inferiority or transience of “otherness.” Societies or civilizations whose social institutions, values, and knowledges were non-Western or premodern were not a challenge to the superiority and inevitable globalization of modern Western institutions and culture. Social differences were denied in the sense that so-called nonmodern and non-Western societies were not viewed as alternative social formations to Western industrializing societies, with their own complex and integral sociocultural values and forms of life.

The theoretical denial of difference by means of figuring non-Western societies as “the past” (“primitive,” “ancient,” or “traditional”), as “non-rational” or as inherently despotic or “child-like” and therefore as inferior and as destined either to extinction or “modernization” can be interpreted as part of Western colonialism and empire-building (Fabian 1983; Said 1979; Young 1990, 1995). Modern social theory was formed as part of the formation of nation-states, the shift from absolutism to the modern bureaucratic state, the emergence of a world capitalist system, and as part of the age of Western colonialism and imperialism (on the link between empire and social science, see Asad 1975; Fabian 1983; Said 1985, 1994). Few modern social theorists, not Marx, not Durkheim and not Weber, doubted that Western modernity pointed to the future of *all* humanity and that the

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globalization of the West was the necessary and desirable vehicle for driving humanity forward towards its destined endpoint – one world prefigured in the universalistic aspects of contemporary Western nations. This was the vision of Marx who, we might recall, in *The Communist Manifesto* reveled in the imagery of modernity steamrolling over non-Western and non-modern societies as history spiralled towards the communist millennium. Who can forget Marx's rapture as he considered British colonization and the "Western modernization" of India (cf. Said 1979; Turner 1978; Young 1990 and Ahmad 1992 for a dissenting view). The globalization of the West was no less the fated outcome of history for Max Weber. The "Author's Introduction" (1958) to his comparative study of society and religion (*Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*) grandly pronounced the universality and anticipated globalization of Western social developments such as bureaucratization, capitalism, science, and formal-rational law. If social thinkers such as Condorcet, Comte, Saint-Simon, Marx, Spencer, or Durkheim embraced the Westernization of the globe as social progress, Weber was more apocalyptic but no less certain that the world was becoming the image of Western modernity. Whether social thinkers shared the millenarianism of Marx or gravitated towards Weber's mournful perspective (e.g. Simmel and Spengler), their contemporaries and successors, from Comte to Parsons and Habermas, hardly wavered in their presumption of global Westernization. From this perspective, non-Western and pre-modern social institutions, values, and knowledges which diverged from "modernity" would likely face social extinction or at best survive as cultural objects destined for the museum or the guided tour.

Modern Western social thought – and Western histories – are neither homogeneous nor uniform. Despite the emancipatory impulse of the Enlightenment, the social knowledge developed around narratives of progress, identitarian logic, scientism, and the assertion of a transcendent reason and humanity (see Adorno and Horkheimer 1972; Baudrillard 1983; Bauman 1991; Jardine 1985; Lyotard 1979), often had the effect of sacrificing or suppressing individuality or social difference. By contrast, counter-Enlightenment discourses often defended the integrity and value of social differences – of local, regional, and national cultures and traditions. Some critics of the Enlightenment sought to avoid, though not always successfully, perspectives that framed social differences in terms of the tropes of the "past," "transition," "inferiority," or "cultural survival."

In nineteenth-century European and American romanticism (e.g. in the social ideas of Herder, von Humboldt, and Walt Whitman), in strains of German historicism (e.g., Ranke, Dilthey, and Meinecke), and in the "philosophical conservatism" of Edmund Burke, de Bonald, and de

Maistre, there was a defense of social difference. Folk cultures, religious communities, ethnicities, and local and national traditions were imagined as simply “other,” without being stigmatized as “the past,” “transitory,” or “inferior.” Indeed, some of these discourses (e.g., Herder) celebrated the proliferation of human and social differences as a sign of the glory of humankind and God’s creation (see Berlin 1980; Taylor 1989). However, at least certain prominent strains in these counter-Enlightenment discourses promoted difference in the interests of defending tradition and social hierarchy against modernity and movements of democratization. Moreover, neither romantics nor philosophical conservatives in the end avoided an appeal to a notion of human or social unity (e.g., the *Volk*) or to a divine or transcendent reason, nature or “tradition,” which functioned to restrict or mute social differences. For example, German historicism posited a view in which history was composed of a multiplicity of distinct national societies, each of which needed to be understood according to its own unique cultural traditions. Nevertheless, from Ranke to Troeltsch and Weber, historicists defended a notion of a unified national identity, often conceived in ethnic terms, which effectively suppressed social differences *within* the nation (e.g., Popper 1957; Loader 1976).

Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment themes and viewpoints have often coexisted uneasily in the same thinker or school of thought. An example is the Chicago School of American Sociology which flourished in the early decades of this century. Abandoning the goal of fashioning grand evolutionary theories in the style of Comte, Spencer, and their American disciples (e.g., Lester Ward), the Chicago sociologists preferred descriptively rich, local ethnographic types of research which focused on individuals or groups (the negro, immigrant, the “marginal” individual, the prostitute, and delinquent) often forgotten or overlooked in the optimistic evolutionary theories of their colleagues. The aim was, in part, to show the costs of progress and to give voice to those who were marginalized or left powerless in the march of history. Nevertheless, while the Chicago sociologists wished to recover the lives of marginalized individuals, they viewed these “others” as instances either of individual pathology or of social maladjustment, and thus the inevitable casualties of social progress.

Even allowing for its complex and contradictory character, a good deal of modern social theory has misconceived the nature of social differences. There has been a persistent failure to preserve the tension that is located when “otherness” is understood – as neither past nor future, as neither inferior nor superior. This tension arises, in part, from the way social differences challenge the ethnocentric presumption of the superiority of one’s

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own form of collective life and defamiliarize “the natural” or “the order of things.”

In the main, Western social thinkers have not doubted the veracity of Enlightenment narratives of progress or the belief that Western modernity marked a definite advance of human reason and freedom. Differences of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and nationality that sometimes divided humanity into antagonistic communities have been understood as a product of irrational prejudice or cultural traditions based upon custom and myth. In other words, social differences between individuals and collectivities, including entire civilizations, have often been interpreted as indicators of irrational human or social forces and, accordingly, perceived as impediments to social progress. Most defenders of the Enlightenment believe, moreover, that, with the advance of modern rationality through the sociohistorical agencies of science, formal-rational law, bureaucracy, and capitalism, differences of, say, ethnicity or religion, are destined, if not to disappear, then to become merely superficial variations of a human commonality, adding nuance to social life but not threatening harmony or progress. Within the West, this social vision has been widely assumed to be both necessary and desirable. For at the root of Enlightenment thought is a utopian ideal of a “world society” made up of abstract citizens equal before the law and governed by a common social reason. Whatever social good has been done in the name of this emancipatory social vision (and I think its social benefit to be considerable), it has also, and quite unintentionally for the most part, legitimated the destruction of particular social identities and multiple local communities and traditions that have given coherence and purpose to the lives of many peoples. It is perhaps an odd paradox that the deeply moral vision of a rational society associated with the Enlightenment has unleashed a fiercely nonrational colonizing social force that makes the power of tradition or religion almost pale by comparison (cf. Adorno and Horkheimer 1972; Bauman 1991).

Much of the debate in modern social theory has occurred within an Enlightenment framework. Whatever the differences between, say, Marx and Weber, Durkheim and Spencer, Small and Park, or Parsons, Dahrendorf, and Habermas, they have not seriously questioned an Enlightenment perspective that assumes a narrative of progress, a universalistic concept of reason, and a homogenizing, linear view of history. In truth, there have been very few dissenters from this tradition. Even so, some social thinkers did stretch, even challenge, certain aspects of the Enlightenment tradition. Marx, as we know, criticized the notion that bourgeois capitalism represented the “end of history,” but only to historicize this epoch as the necessary precursor, and unconscious vehicle, of historical

progress. Weber criticized the narrative of progress but never questioned the inevitability of the globalization of the West nor did he doubt the superiority, at some level, of developments such as modern science, formal legal systems, or “monocratic” bureaucracy. In the American context, the pragmatic philosophical movement of the early decades of this century revealed a hospitality to difference that also found compelling sociological articulations. For example, against “Americanizers” who defended an aggressive program of assimilation through detaching immigrants from their ethnic traditions, Robert Park and W. I. Thomas, at least in some of their writings, defended the importance of maintaining particular ethnic communities and identities (Wacker 1983). However, where cultural pluralists such as Horace Kallen and Randolph Bourne argued that social pluralism sustains a robust, dynamic society, Park and Thomas justified ethnic particularism as a *temporary* measure to ease the way towards assimilation while avoiding pathological social consequences (Persons 1987). Broad philosophical movements such as romanticism, historicism, and pragmatism contained important openings to imagining a vital social pluralism. In truth, however, there were few social thinkers who actually crafted such a social theory and politics, at least in the first half of this century.

This intellectual culture began to change after World War II. To be sure, the transformation was neither abrupt nor sweeping. Both within and outside the disciplines, Enlightenment modernizing perspectives remained dominant. And yet a sea-change in social knowledges was unmistakable. A number of more recent theoretical perspectives – varieties of feminism, gay liberationism, queer theory, anti-racist social theory, postcolonial discourse, poststructuralism, cultural studies, and postmodernism – recenter social thought and politics around the theme of difference (cf. West 1994). The shape of intellectual culture in the 1990s is decidedly different from the pre-World War II period. Today, at least in many European nations, and very definitely in England, the United States and Australia, the Enlightenment heritage, one that has been institutionally elaborated in medical, therapeutic, criminological, and penal practices and knowledges, and not least in the human science and humanistic disciplines, is being challenged in a way that puts into doubt some of the key ideas and social hopes of this tradition. Whether it is feminist critiques of particularistic masculinist knowledges parading as universal, queer theorists exposing the role of medical and scientific knowledges in producing a sexual social regime organized around normative heterosexuality, the poststructural deconstruction of a unified, stable “subject” of knowledge and history, or the postcolonial critique of Western constructions of the “colonial other,”

these new social knowledges have compelled many of us to rethink the heritage of the Enlightenment.

Why this shift in public intellectual culture? Why this effort to recenter social knowledges and politics around the problem of difference? What social hope, with what ethical and political import, does this cultural shift entail? In this book I will suggest ways of explaining this shift, though this is not my principal aim. Others have outlined broad sociohistorical explanations that I have at times referenced but have not critically engaged with (for an overview, see Kumar 1994). My own account of this shift has emphasized the importance of the so-called “new social movements” (see chapters 6 and 9). The critical perspectives generated by these movements expose the ways differences of gender, race, sexuality, and ethnicity are naturalized and normalized in the dominant culture, thereby contributing to the making of social hierarchies. For example, feminists have criticized the discourses and social practices that figure women as the inferior, subordinate “other” to men. Similarly, anti-racist social critics have contested the constructions of the “nonwhite other” as the inferior or subordinate counterpart to the privileged, superior “white.” In short, these critical social analysts aim to reveal the ways in which social practices and representations conceive of social differences as markers of social inferiority and position the “other” (e.g., women or African-Americans) as subordinate. Moreover, new social movement theorists have emphasized the role of expert knowledges in this process. Finally, while the intent of some of these new social movement theorists has been to assert the equality between “the subordinated other” and “the dominant group” by claiming a human equivalence or identity between them (“homosexuals are like heterosexuals” or “women are like men” or “blacks are no different than whites”), others have sought to defend the value of preserving social difference. In these latter discourses, difference is said to penetrate “deeply” into the self and group life but is not understood in terms of inferiority or deviance. In certain currents of the discourses and practices of the new social movements we can observe a rethinking of social knowledge which proposes a robust social theory, politics and ethics of difference.

Of course, the development of the new social movements, and especially the postmodern turn in some of their social knowledges, has to be situated in relation to broader social events. Perhaps it is impossible to imagine these movements without grasping the global turmoil and events associated with movements of decolonization (Grimal 1978; Holland 1985; Said 1994). The American civil rights movement, and subsequently the black power movement, which arguably served as the model for many of the protest movements of the period, were prefigured by nationalist revolts against

European colonial powers. Is Huey Newton or Eldridge Cleaver imaginable without Frantz Fanon and Pan-African thinking as it evolved in Africa and the Caribbean? Similarly, the student movements and the New Left were, in part, sparked off across Europe and the US by the colonial struggles in Vietnam and the popular revolts in Cuba and the Chinese Cultural Revolution. These international developments must, in turn, be grasped in relation to broad changes in the social structure and political economy of Western societies. Current discussions of post-Fordism, globalization, deindustrialization and telematic (information-based) societies, point to a social structural context for the new social movements. For example, shifts to regimes of decentralized and customized production, flexible labor specialization, economies of scope, and the rise of a distinctive service class of workers, impacts on the social and political organization of the body, desire, identity, and dynamics of domination and resistance (Haraway 1985; Lash and Urry 1987, 1994; Offe 1985). The writings of Harvey (1990), Jameson (1991), Lash and Urry (1987), Offe (1985), Portoghesi (1992), among others, have sought to identify these changes, and chart their significance for the politics of identity and difference. This is important work, though I detect at times a reductionist current in their heavy reliance on an overdetermined marxist political economy. My own sympathies are with efforts to frame the broader social context of identity-based social movements by rethinking the concept of civil society (Alexander 1993; Cohen and Arato 1992; Seligman 1992), by offering original analyses of telematic societies inspired often by Baudrillard and Lyotard (e.g., Bogard 1995; Haraway 1985; Lyon 1994; Poster 1990), and by developing the post-marxism of Foucault's theorization of a disciplinary society. Wherever one comes out on these discussions, the larger point is that for many intellectuals in the West there is a perception that the present is a period of major social change, shown in one aspect by a new alignment of the politics of culture and in new configurations of identity, political economy, and social structure. This has prompted attempts to craft original social perspectives – new narratives of social change and new vocabularies of the self and the social to grasp the present and its possible futures.

If we can describe the current changes in the West as a shift from “modernity” to “postmodernity,” it might be instructive to imagine a parallel with what many nineteenth-century theorists characterized as the great transformation from a “traditional” to a “modern” type of society (on the dangers of this dichotomous thinking, see Yack forthcoming). My purpose in raising this parallel is not to argue that the depth and breadth of change is identical but that there is a similarity which helps place the theorization

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of social change. For Comte, Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, the conceptual dichotomy between tradition and modernity that framed their social narratives was experientially based. The notion of “tradition” described the milieu in which they came of age. These men grew up in households and locales that were often village-like, agrarian, organized around revered or traditionally legitimated conventions and customs, and still very much religiously robust cultures. For example, Durkheim “grew up within the confines of a close-knit, orthodox and traditional Jewish family” (Lukes 1973: 41). Is it mere coincidence that his concept of “mechanical solidarity” (referring to traditional social formations) was defined as a type of social bond based on strong affective ties and religiously based common beliefs? At the same time that these social thinkers were firmly rooted in a traditional-like society, their coming of age was in one sense a personal encounter with modernity, as they were progressively exposed to secular reason, industrialization, urbanization, science, and democratization. Durkheim’s anguished break with Judaism occurred after he had moved from the small town of Epinal to Paris, and after being exposed to the cosmopolitan ideas of Jean Jaures and Henri Bergson, among others, at the *École Normale Supérieure*. Durkheim’s defense of role-specialization, his substitution of society for God, and his defense of individualism despite its anomic and egoistic dangers was a way of positioning himself as a modern. Similarly, Weber can be said to have experienced the tradition/modernity divide in the two women who were most central to his life. With her religious piety and conventional feminine identity, Weber’s mother exemplified tradition. As a feminist and writer, Marianne Weber’s intellectual independence signaled her positioning as a modern. The narratives of modernization and its costs by Durkheim and Weber were, in part, expressions of their own personal struggles, in which the tensions between tradition and modernity often remained unresolved.

Is it any different for some of us today who have come of age in a society exhibiting the contradictory, conflicting currents of modernity and post-modernity? If these two terms refer less to two distinct, polar-opposite social epochs than to conflicting but co-present sociocultural currents touching on core personal and social values and hopes, are our struggles any different from those of Marx or Weber or Spengler or Spencer?

My own intellectual trajectory often feels parallel to the sociological classics in the limited sense of trying to articulate conflicting personal experiences through the language of social theory. Like many people of my generation (b. 1948), I reached adulthood even as I absorbed modernity, with its emphasis on individualism, autonomy, the privatization and eventual abandonment of religion, scientism or the belief in science as universal