

acknowledged the collapse of any hopes once vested in Marxism or other such delusory 'meta-narrative' creeds.⁴ This realignment of theoretical positions on the left went along with a widespread tactical retreat from socialist principles among Labour Party politicians, policy-makers, and (more or less) well-disposed media and academic pundits. Such thinking was presented as a victory for the 'new realism', for a programme that sensibly adjusted its sights to the horizon of a broad-based popular appeal defined in accordance with the latest opinion-poll feedback. On a range of issues - nuclear disarmament, trade union law, privatization, public sector funding etc. - it was thought to be in Labour's best electoral interests to adopt a more pragmatic line, or one more responsive to perceived changes in the currency of popular belief.

This involved a great deal of awkward (not to say devious and shuffling) argumentation, most of all with respect to Labour's erstwhile unilateralist stance, which had now to be presented - absurdly enough - as an option that somehow lacked credibility in the post-Cold War era. Better dump such commitments, it was felt, than carry on arguing a reasoned and principled case for this or that item of old-style socialist policy. For on one point at least the commentators were agreed: that elections were no longer won or lost on the strength of valid arguments, appeals to moral justice, or even to enlightened self-interest on the part of a reasonably well-informed electorate. What counted now was the ability to seize the high ground of PR and public opinion management by adopting strategies that faithfully mirrored the perceived self-image of the times. No matter if this led to a series of policy climb-downs that inevitably left the Labour leadership exposed to charges of inconstancy, tergiversation or downright cynical opportunism. No matter if it rested on a *false* consensus, a devalued and distorted version of the pragmatist appeal to what is 'good in the way of belief', more aptly characterized (in this case) as what is 'good in the way of consensus ideology as determined by those with the power and influence to shape popular opinion'. For to raise such objections was merely to demonstrate one's failure to move with the times, or one's attachment to hopelessly outworn ideas of truth, right, reason, or ethical accountability.

Small wonder that the end of all this pragmatist adjustment was a situation where many perplexed voters opted for the dubious comfort of sticking with the devils they knew. And on the intellectual left - among the pundits in journals like *Marxism Today* - the same orthodox wisdom prevailed. Thus it was taken as read that Labour's only chance was to update its image by adopting a rhetoric more consonant with these new (postmodern, post-industrial or 'post-Fordist') times.⁵ In the process it would need to dump old alliances, among them its close relationship with the unions, its traditional reliance on a strong base of working-class support, and its claims to represent or articulate such interests in the name of a better, more just and egalitarian social order. These principles no

port, social services, welfare provision etc. In the event it appears that many people switched votes at the eleventh hour, or perhaps (more depressingly still) that they had intended to vote Conservative all along, but concealed the fact as simply too shameful to acknowledge. Anyway the post-election consensus was that this had been yet another great mistake on Labour's part, a piece of high-minded (but pragmatically disastrous) policy-making which once again revealed the widening gap between socialist principle - or principled politics in whatever form - and the 'realities' of life as currently perceived by voters in the crucial interest-groups. As Stuart Hall put it:

[t]he shadow budget's tax bands gave Labour the look of punitive vindictiveness. It drew the line where, realistically, it reckoned people could afford it, forgetting that in post-Thatcher Britain, people calculate their tax liabilities not on what they actually earn, but how much they hope, desire or aspire to earn in the very near future. Labour was playing the economics of realism and fiscal rectitude. The Tories played the 'sociology of aspirations'.

The language of this passage would repay close analysis in the style of Raymond Williams' *Keywords*, that is to say, a socio-cultural anatomy of the times based on the semantics (or the structures of compacted meaning) contained within certain ideologically loaded terms.⁷ To be 'realist' in such matters, on this account, was to abandon that other (more pragmatic or efficacious) kind of 'realism' which might have carried Labour to victory had its strategists only taken heed of the opinion-polls and not indulged their old, vote-losing fondness for values like truth, reason and principle. For such values count for little - so the argument runs - as compared with those 'hopes and aspirations' (however ill-founded) which the Conservatives were much better able to exploit by appealing to a highly seductive realm of imaginary wish-fulfilment.

Stuart Hall would most likely reject any comparison between this kind of hard-headed 'realist' assessment and Baudrillard's wholesale postmodernist espousal of a 'hyperreality' that negates all distinctions between truth and falsehood, fact and fiction, real human needs and their simulated counterparts as purveyed by the opinion-polls, market-research agencies, voter-group profiles and so forth.⁸ His essay is after all a serious contribution to debate, written from a standpoint of sober diagnostic hindsight, and hence worlds apart from Baudrillard's style of puckish nihilist abandon. But this does seem to be where his arguments are headed, especially in view of the way that 'realism' shifts over, in the course of his article, from a usage that signifies something like 'old-fashioned socialist respect for the truth-telling virtues' to a sense much more within the Baudrillard range, i.e. 'willingness to play the postmodern game and make the most of one's chances through a "realist" appeal to the current self-images of the age'. It is hard to know how else one should interpret passages like the following:

Bland and colourless as he is. Mr. Major may indeed be finely tuned, as a political symbol, to these intricate (and perhaps self-deceiving) attempts to square the circle, and to the other underlying sociological and aspirational shifts in the electorate that have taken place. His meritocratic 'decency' registers with extraordinary precision exactly that balance between the desire for a more 'caring' self-image, which led committed Thatcherites with heavy hearts, to ditch Mrs. Thatcher, and that deeply self-interested calculation, which remains her enduring contribution.

On the one hand this acknowledges the specious character of John Major's electoral appeal, his continuation of Thatcherite policies under a different (more 'caring' and 'decent') rhetorical guise, and the extent to which voters had been taken in by this superficial switch of style. On the other it veers away from any such realist judgment, 'realist' (that is to say) in the strong sense of maintaining the distinction between truth and falsehood, or allowing that those electors were actually *wrong* - deceived by the rhetoric of their own 'aspirational' self-image - into voting as they did. What Hall cannot countenance is any hint of a return to notions like 'ideology' or 'false consciousness', terms that might provide at least the beginning of an answer to the questions posed by his article.

Thus Hall's talk of 'squaring the circle' applies most aptly to his own attempt to explain this phenomenon while denying himself recourse to the only adequate explanatory concepts. For on a postmodernist reading of the signs there is simply no escaping the closed circuit - the pseudo-logic of specular misrecognition - which accounts for John Major as a 'finely tuned' (albeit a 'bland and colourless') symbol of voter aspirations, while viewing the electorate as a passive reflector of those same imaginary interests. 'Imaginary', that is, for the majority of voters who would surely lose out (on any realist reckoning) once the Tories were returned to power. Of course there were others - relatively few - whose 'real' (if selfish and short-term) interests John Major could plausibly claim to represent, and who thus had cause (if not justification) for welcoming the outcome. But Hall is in no position to remark such differences, resting as they do on a prior set of distinctions - real/imaginary, true/false, knowledge/ideology etc. - which he regards as simply obsolescent. Not that he wishes to dump the whole baggage of socialist aims and principles. Indeed he goes so far as to acknowledge that these are still 'decent' values, that Labour fought a 'decent' campaign, and that even its fiscal policy was justified - in real if not in 'realist' terms - by the existing maldistribution of wealth. Nor is the reader left in any doubt as to Hall's grim prognosis for the coming electoral term. Thus:

under his [Major's] benign regime. Thatcherism as a model of social transformation will continue to work its way through the system. By the time WC are allowed to vote again, education, public transport and the welfare state will have been reconstructed along the two-track lines of the National Health Service, and broadcasting will have succumbed to the new brutalism. Everything in life will be 'private' ('I have, of course no intention of privatising the NHS') - in the sense of privately owned, run, or managed, driven by the short-term model or powered by the self-interested, profit-motivated goals of British

bosses, the most philistine and least successful ruling class in the Western World. In this sense, Mr. Major is child and heir of Thatcherism. smile and smile as he may.

One could hardly wish for a clearer, more forthright and impassioned statement of the social evils likely to follow from another five years of Conservative rule. Certainly Stuart Hall has no desire to line up with the chorus of ideologues, tabloid commentators, business analysts, captains of industry and the like, all of them greeting the election result as yet another chance to proclaim the demise of socialism East and West. But they could well take comfort from his other, more 'realist' line of argument concerning the need for Labour to move with the times and adapt its image to current ideas of what is good - pragmatically warranted - in terms of consensus belief. For in the end this amounts to a vote of no confidence in any kind of reasoned or principled socialist case that would counter the drift towards a politics based entirely on the workings of (real or illusory) self-interest.

II

It seems to me that the lessons to be learned from Labour's defeat were precisely the opposite of those proffered by Stuart Hall and other commentators of a 'New Times'/postmodernist persuasion. One has to do with the inbuilt limits (or the self-defeating character) of a pragmatist approach that goes all out for electoral appeal by abandoning even the most basic standards of reason, consistency, and truth. In this sense there was justice in the charge against Labour - exploited to maximum effect in the Tory press - that its turnabout on the issue of nuclear disarmament was merely a tactical ploy, having nothing to do with any change of conviction or (still less) any realist assessment of the altered geopolitical state of affairs. By taking the line of least resistance (very much in accordance with 'New Times' wisdom) Labour relinquished not only the moral high ground but **also** its chance to argue a case much strengthened by this turn in real-world events. For their policy shift was all the more absurd when set against the obvious benefits to be gained by sticking to the unilateralist case *on pragmatic as well as principled grounds* and thus pointing a sensible way forward from the deadlock of entrenched Cold War attitudes. On fiscal policy, by **contrast**, Labour came up with a justified (fully workable and right-minded) set of arguments, despite all the sage advice from opinion-poll watchers, media pundits, and those - like Stuart Hall - who counselled a more 'pragmatic', 'realist' or consensus-based line of approach. **Quite** possibly this cost them dear in the **election**, though the case is by no means proven. What seems more likely is that various things combined to sway people's voting intentions at the last moment, among them the distorted press **coverage**, the 'aspirational' factor (as Hall defines it), and no doubt a measure of greed and self-interest on the part of those high-bracket

earners who wished only to protect their own pockets. But none of this touches the central **issue**, that is to say, the question whether Labour was right to adopt such a **policy**, or whether - on a more '**realistic**' assessment - it should have switched course and fine-tuned its message to the signals coming back with each new opinion-poll or latest media sounding. For on this account what is right (pragmatically effective) in any given context just *is* what produces the required results by appealing to the widest possible range of in-place values and beliefs. That the voters might actually be wrong - and that a '**failed**' policy might none the less be *justified* on reasoned and principled grounds - is simply inconceivable, along with all that old-style enlightenment talk of '**ideology**', '**false consciousness**' and the like.

Let me quote one further passage from Hall's article which exemplifies some of the moral and intellectual contortions produced by this effort to analyse Labour's defeat from a post-ideological standpoint.

Choice, opportunity to rise, mobility within one's lifetime, the power to decide your own fate, where anyone, whatever his or her background, can become anything, provided they work hard enough; this is what Mr. Major means by 'classlessness' and 'a society at ease with itself. The claim appears ludicrous to more egalitarian folk. But it is exactly the kind of 'accessible classlessness' that millions believe to be desirable and realistic, and exactly the kind of low-powered motor that takes Majorism beyond traditional Tory areas into a new arena where new constituencies are there to be won. This is the voice that was heard in Basildon and a thousand new 'classless' working-class and suburban communities across the country, the heartland of the new 'sociology of aspirations'.

Stuart Hall knows **full** well how bogus was this appeal to a '**classless**' society that existed only as a figment of the social imaginary, projected on the one hand by shrewd Tory strategists with an eye to the electoral main chance, and on the other by those '**millions**' who doubtless believed such a prospect to be both '**desirable**' and '**realistic**'. He also knows that there is a difference between wish and **reality**; that this gap is not closed (though it may be kept from view) by pragmatic talk of what is '**good** in the way of belief; that voter '**aspirations**' were expertly played upon in the course of the election **campaign**; and that they bore no resemblance - outside this imaginary realm - to anything that might reasonably be expected from a further term of Conservative rule. More precisely: Hall knows all this at the level of straightforward knowledge-by-acquaintance, or on the basis of certain well-documented facts (unemployment, social deprivation, high-income tax breaks, cutbacks in the health service, in public transport, education etc.) which gave the lie to those illusions so sedulously promoted by the Tory propaganda machine. But when it comes to drawing the relevant lessons there are things that Hall either chooses to ignore or somehow cannot bring himself to '**know**'. Among them are the three most salient points: that many people voted against their own and the country's best interests, that they did so for ideological reasons, and - following from this - that despite being out of fashion as a concept among present-day

critical theorists 'false consciousness' still has some useful explanatory work to do.

Hall's reluctance to concede these facts gives rise to some curious argumentative and rhetorical shifts. The symptoms appear in those queasy quote-marks around phrases like 'accessible classlessness', 'sociology of aspirations', and 'a society at ease with itself. For the passage simply won't let on as to whether we should take them at face value (i.e., as both 'desirable' and 'realistic') or whether, on the contrary, they are best treated from a critical, diagnostic, or socio-pathological standpoint. To opt for the first and reject the second reading would amount to a line of unresisting acquiescence in whatever the opinion-polls happened to say, or whatever people could be brought to accept through forms of manufactured consensus belief. It would thus mark the end of any socialist hopes for a better, more just or humane social order achieved by criticizing false beliefs and exposing their imaginary (ideological) character. But from a 'New Times' perspective this looks too much like the old Marxist or enlightenment line, the arrogant idea that intellectuals are somehow entitled to speak up for truth, reason or principle as against the current self-images of the age. Thus Hall winds up in the odd position of recognizing 'Majorism' for the hollow fraud that it is - a re-run (so to speak) of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*, with Thatcher and Major standing in for Napoleon and *Napoleon le petit* - while denying himself the conceptual and ethical resources to come straight out and acknowledge the fact. And this despite his often clear-eyed perception of the means by which voters were persuaded to endorse a mystified version of their own real interests, as purveyed by the Tory media.

One could make the same point about Hall's passing nod to the standard 'left' analysis, his remark that such popular hopes and aspirations must appear ludicrous 'to more egalitarian folk'. For this prompts the obvious question: does Hall still count himself among their number, or has he now moved on with these postmodern times to the stage of abandoning all such high-toned (unrealistic) talk? Hence what comes across as the tonal insecurity, the sense of an irony that somehow misfires and hits the wrong target. For either Hall believes (as surely he does) that egalitarian and socialist principles are still worth upholding, or (to judge solely by the passage in hand) he has redefined 'socialism' in such a way as to sever its links with any principled commitment to notions of equality, social justice, or redistribution of wealth. This is the real irony of Hall's analysis: that in leaning so far toward consensus-values (or refusing to endorse a critique of those values in ideological terms) he effectively denies any prospect of escaping from the goldfish-bowl of imaginary misrecognition. And if the message is directed primarily at old-style left intellectuals - or 'egalitarians' who have failed to register the postmodern signs of the times - then it also rebounds on those other, more representative types for whom

'Majorism' exerted a genuine (if in some sense illusory) appeal. For theirs, as Hall reminds us, 'was the voice that was heard in Basildon and a thousand new "classless" working-class and suburban communities across the country'.

With a little decoding this last sentence has a good deal to say about the problems and perplexities that beset Hall's diagnosis. Again he resorts to quote-marks in order to soften that otherwise oxymoronic conjunction of terms ("classless" working-class') required by an argument which in effect wants to have it both ways, conceding the reality of social class as a matter of everyday experience, while renouncing such ideas - from a 'New Times' perspective - as nominal definitions that no longer correspond to anything in the nature of current social trends. Then there is the reference to Basildon, a place-name that will surely be fixed in the memory of anyone who stayed up late on election night to see the results come in. For Basildon was a Conservative-held seat high on the list of Labour's looked-for gains if it was to stand much chance of forming the next government. What made this result even more crucial as an index of the way things were going was the fact that Basildon presented such a challenge to conventional (income- or class-based) demographic methods for predicting electoral trends. Situated in the border-zone between London and Essex, home to a great many upwardly mobile or hard-to-classify voters, representing as it did (and as Hall rightly notes) the very heartland of the 'new sociology of aspirations', Basildon was indeed a feather in the wind for psephologists and other watchers of the pre-election scene. In the event it was among the first results to be declared and marked the turn from predictions (however guarded) of a workable Labour majority to predictions (increasingly confident) that the Conservatives were back in power.

So Stuart Hall has good reason, on these grounds at least, for his choice of Basildon as something of a test-case in light of the election result. But again there is a difference - a crucial difference - between analysing the causes (socio-economic, psychological, demographic etc.) which conspired to produce that result, and holding it out as an object-lesson, a model instance of the kinds of voter-appeal that Labour would have done well to cultivate. For in that case pragmatism (in its 'Majorite' form) would define the agenda of political debate not only for the Basildon electorate but also for those others - professing socialists or Labour campaign managers included - who sought to learn the lessons of electoral defeat and adapt more successfully the next time around. After all, John Major 'embodies the growing number of people who, though not mystified about their humble class origins, no longer believe they should remain, as he puts it, "boxed in" to them forever'. And moreover, according to Hall, 'he articulates this attitude, not in terms of the reality of, but the aspiration to, social mobility, and the ethic of personal achievement'. This passage would again bear a lot of conceptual unpacking, but a few salient points

must suffice. What can it mean to be non-mystified about issues of class and social origin if this promotes a mind-set perfectly attuned to John Major's spurious *declassé* rhetoric, or a groundswell of imaginary identification with class-interests so remote from those of even the most upwardly-mobile Basildon voter? How should we interpret such talk of an 'ethic of personal fulfilment' if not by realistically translating it back into the language of straightforward Thatcherite **greed, self-interest**, or acquisitive individualism? What remains of the socialist argument against these values if one adopts a new '**realism**' (or a '**new sociology of aspirations**') which models itself so closely on the style and techniques of Tory campaign management? And again: why assume that Basildon (of **all** places!) points a way forward to the only kind of future – or the only '**realistic**' policy options - for a re-think of Labour strategy in light of its latest electoral defeat?

One might have thought - on the contrary - that any lessons to be learned from '**Basildon 1992**' had to do not so much with Labour's need to back down on yet more of its socialist principles as with its need to stand by those principles, communicate them more effectively, and (above all) combat their malicious and distorted presentation in the organs of Tory propaganda. It would indeed be cause for despair if the '**voice of Basildon**', as heard on **election-night**, were taken as a truly representative **sample**, an instance of those '**heartland**' communities that Labour has to win by ditching its every last policy commitment and espousing a rhetoric of "**classless**" **working-class**' values. This message may perhaps carry credence with analysts - especially cultural critics of a post-Marxist '**New Times**' persuasion - whose main interest is in seeking out evidence to support their reading of the signs. Otherwise there would seem little merit in resting one's case for policy review very largely on the vagaries of a localized melting-pot constituency where voting behaviour can better be analysed in causal-symptomatic than in rational terms. Stuart Hall of course draws the opposite **conclusion**, lamenting Labour's failure to press far enough with its revisionist line. Thus: '**the** adaptation has been too shallow, painful without cutting deep . . . More the kind of face-lift marketing men give an old product when launching it with a new **package**, less a shift of political culture and strategy rooted in the configurations of modern social **change**'. In effect this attempts to turn the tables on all those old-fashioned, high-toned moralists by suggesting that the *principled* course would have been for Labour to conduct such a wholesale policy review, as contrasted with a shiftily compromise approach or a kind of **half-way** revisionism that lacked the courage of its own pragmatist convictions. Nothing could be further from the truth, at least to the extent that '**truth**' is still in question (as distinct from its suasive or imaginary substitutes) for anyone adopting this line. What the election results bore home with painful clarity - and nowhere more so than in Basildon - was the fact that

Labour could only lose out by playing the Tories at their own cynical **game**, or adjusting its image to whatever seemed currently good in the way of belief.

On Stuart **Hall's** account the best, most courageous (as well as effective) electoral strategy would have been one that pushed right through with this revisionist programme and denied itself the recourse to such old-left palliatives as '**ideology**', '**false consciousness**' and the like. Such is at any rate the message implicit in his call for a thoroughgoing '**shift** of political culture and **strategy**' responsive to - or dictated by - the '**configurations** of modern social **change**'. In fact Hall's phrase is '**rooted in**', which suggests something more like a Gramscian organic relation, a quasi-naturalized elective affinity between socio-economic structures and their articulation at the level of cultural values and political beliefs. But there is no room here for the role that Gramsci attributes to '**critical**' intellectuals, that is to say, those thinkers who challenge the dominant ideology from a dissident standpoint identified with interests that are marginalized by the current **consensus**.' For they could exercise this role only in so far as such interests achieved articulate expression *over and against* the prevailing set of values, beliefs, or cultural self-images. And this would in turn require a stronger (more adequately theorized) account of '**ideology**' than anything allowed for by Hall's consensualist model, i.e. his understanding of '**political culture and strategy**' as a matter of finely-tuned feedback response, or rapid adjustment to the latest opinion-poll findings. What drops out of sight on this analysis is the difference (again) between real and imaginary interests, or the extent to which people can be swung into accepting a false - systematically distorted - view of those interests through various well-tried suasive techniques.

Clearly there would be small hope of success for any future socialist strategy which ignored the '**Basildon factor**', or which failed to take account of the demographic shifts - the new '**sociology** of aspirations' - noted by observers like **Hall**. Such data provide the indispensable starting-point for a politics aware of the problems it confronts in overcoming those forms of imaginary investment (or ideological misrecognition) so effectively exploited by Conservative Central Office and its allies in the tabloid press. But this is not to say - far from it - that the only '**realistic**' way forward for Labour is to tailor its appeal to the image given back by those same (however accurate or in some sense representative) findings. For it is a counsel of despair, a no-win policy even in tactical terms, to adopt this pragmatist line of least resistance and thus offer nothing but a softened-up version of Tory electoral strategy. Given such a choice many voters will feel that they might as well opt for the genuine article - for a politics frankly wedded to the values of self-interest and appetitive individualism - rather than one that concedes those values in a shamefaced or opportunist manner. This was how it appeared with Labour's climb-down on the

unilateralist issue, and also (contrary to Hall's post-mortem) with its rush to abandon other such policies without the least show of reasoned or principled argument.

Of course there is the danger of **arrogance**, complacency, or worse in the use of terms like 'ideology' and 'false consciousness', terms that may connote an offensively us-and-them attitude, a presumption of superior (undeluded) knowledge on the part of enlightened leftist intellectuals. In Terry Eagleton's words, 'I view things as they really are; you squint at them through a tunnel vision imposed by some extraneous system of **doctrine**'. Or again: 'His thought is red-neck, yours is doctrinal, and mine is deliciously **supple**'.¹⁰ After all, as Eagleton bluntly remarks, 'nobody would claim that their own thinking was ideological, just as nobody would habitually refer to themselves as Fatso . . . Ideology, like halitosis, is in this sense what the other person **has**'.¹¹ No doubt the desire not to strike such an attitude plays its part in current variations on the pragmatist, postmodernist or **end-of-ideology** theme. It is likewise a factor in commentaries on the British political scene which understandably back off from imputing 'false consciousness' to a sizable portion of the **electorate**, or from setting themselves up as somehow in possession of a truth denied to those other, more benighted types. But one should also bear in mind Stuart Hall's reference to the illusions suffered by well-meaning '**egalitarian folk**' who continue to believe - despite all the signs - that socialism cannot or should not make terms with the reality of social injustice. For it is they (Hall implies) who must nowadays be seen as the real dupes of ideology, that is to say, of an attitude which vainly persists in distinguishing truth from its various '**imaginary**' or '**ideological**' surrogates. What thus starts out as a decent respect for the other person's viewpoint - or a dislike of high-handed moralizing talk - in the end becomes a kind of reverse discrimination, a refusal to conceive that anyone could have grounds (reasoned and principled grounds) for adopting such a dissident stance. And this would apply not only to left intellectuals hooked on notions like truth, critique, or ideology but also to those credulous old-guard types - among them the majority of Labour voters - who persist in the sadly deluded belief that '**socialism**' means something other (and more) than a shuffling adjustment to the signs of the times.

III

The debate around postmodernism in philosophy, criticism and cultural theory may appear far removed from the doldrums of present-day British and US politics. All the same I think it is worth pursuing the connection - at the very least the elective affinity - between this *au courant* talk of '**New Times**' on the post-Marxist left and that strain of ultra-nominalist sceptical thought for which the sublime figures as a limit-point of language or

representation, a point where (according to theorists like Lyotard) philosophy comes up against a salutary check to its truth-telling powers and prerogatives. These are specialized concerns, sure enough, and unlikely to rank very high on the list of anyone seeking a persuasive diagnosis of contemporary social and political ills. But the connection may appear less remote if one considers (for instance) some of Lyotard's claims with regard to the Kantian sublime, a topos whose extraordinary prestige and prominence in recent critical debate can hardly be explained without taking stock of that wider cultural **context**.¹² For what the sublime gives us to reflect upon - in Lyotard's account - is the absolute '**heterogeneity**' of **phrases-regimes**, the gulf (or 'differend') that exists between judgments in the cognitive or epistemic mode and **judgments** of an **ethical, political, or evaluative nature**.¹³ These latter cannot (should not) be subjected to the same kinds of validity-condition that standardly apply with phrases in the domain of factual or historical knowledge. That is to say, they belong to a realm quite apart from that of theoretical understanding, where the rule is that phenomenal intuitions must be '**brought under**' concepts by way of ascertaining its operative powers and limits. For there is always the danger (so Kant warns us) that philosophy will overstep those limits, pursuing all manner of metaphysical ideas which may be perfectly legitimate in themselves - i.e., as bearing on the interests of reason in its pure or speculative modes - but which can have no basis in our knowledge of the world as given by the forms of sensuous cognition and adequate conceptual **grasp**.¹⁴

To confuse these realms is moreover a mistake which leads on to some large and damaging consequences. On the one hand it exposes theoretical enquiry (science and the cognitive disciplines) to a range of bewildering distractions, projects that begin by aiming beyond their epistemological reach, and which end up - most often - by reactively adopting some posture of extravagant sceptical doubt. On the other it tends to annul the distinction - so vital for Kantian ethics - between *determinate judgments* (having to do with matters of causal **consequence**, factual truth or logical necessity) and *reflective judgments* that issue from the sphere of 'suprasensible' ideas or principles, and which thus secure a space for the exercise of **freely-willed** autonomous agency and **choice**. Any confusions here are apt to produce the worst of both **worlds**, an illusory freedom (or unrestrained speculative licence) in the realm of theoretical understanding and a bleakly reductive (determinist) outlook with regard to ethical issues. Hence the significance of the Kantian sublime as a name for that which somehow '**presents the unrepresentable**', or which calls forth an order of affective response beyond what is given us to think or understand at the level of cognitive judgment. Hence also its attraction for Lyotard and other revisionist readers of Kant, anxious as they are to play down his attachment to the philosophic discourse of modernity and to stress those aspects of his thinking which supposedly prefigure our current '**postmodern condition**'.

But the result of such readings - as I argue - is a perverse misconstrual of the Kantian project which elevates the sublime to absolute pride of **place**, and which does so solely in pursuit of its own irrationalist or counter-enlightenment aims.

This emerges most clearly in Lyotard's extreme version of the incommensurability-thesis, his idea that there exists a multiplicity of language-games (or '**phrase-regimes**') each with its own *sui generis* criteria of meaning, validity or **truth**. From which it follows - again by analogy with the Kantian sublime, or Lyotard's reading thereof - that the cognitive phrase-regime not only has to yield up its privileged truth-telling role, but must also be seen as committing a form of speech-act **injustice** (a suppression of the narrative '**differend**') whenever it presumes to arbitrate in matters of ethical or political justice. What this amounts to, in short, is a postmodern variant on the drastic dichotomy between fact and value standardly (though wrongly) attributed to Hume, allied to a strain of out-and-out nominalism which denies that statements can have any meaning - any truth-value, purport or operative force - aside from the manifold language-games that make up an ongoing cultural conversation. Only by seeking to maximize narrative differentials - by cultivating 'dissensus' or '**heterogeneity**' - can thinking be sure to remain on guard against those kinds of coercive (and potentially totalitarian) phrase-regime that have so far exerted their malign hold upon the discourse of '**enlightened**' reason.

Thus it is wrong, so Lyotard would **argue**, to adduce historical or factual considerations when assessing the significance of '**great** events' like the French Revolution, the Nazi death-camps, or other such charged and evocative phrases whose meaning eludes such criteria. For this is to confuse the two distinct orders of **truth-claim**, on the one hand those that properly have to do with issues of empirical warrant, eye-witness testimony, archival research **etc.**, and on the other hand those that can only find expression in a language whose evaluative character precludes any straightforward appeal to the facts of the **case**. The crucial point here is the way that certain *names* are taken up into a range of contending discourses which then set the terms - or establish their own criteria - for what should count as a **truthful**, relevant, or good-faith **assertion**. Those names would be '**rigid** designators' (in Kripke's parlance) only to the extent that they served to pick out persons, places or dates whose reference - in some minimal sense of the word - could be taken pretty much for **granted**.¹⁵ Beyond that they would evoke such deep-laid disagreement that the names would function more as surrogate descriptors, nominal points of intersection for a variety of language-games, narrative paradigms, imputed attributes, ethical judgments **etc.**, each of them assigning its own significance to the term in question. Such names might include (to mix some of Lyotard's examples with some of my own) '**Napoleon**', '**Marx**', '**Lenin**', '**Hitler**', '**Auschwitz**', '**Leningrad**', '**Dunkirk**', '**October 1917**', '**Berlin**

1953', 'Prague 1968', 'Berlin 1990', 'Baghdad 1991' and others of a kindred character.¹⁶ In every case - according to Lyotard - their utterance gives rise to a strictly irreducible conflict of interpretations, a dispute (or differend) between rival claims as to their 'true' historical meaning.

Least of all can such issues be resolved through an attempt to establish what actually occurred, or to offer more adequate (factual or evidential) grounds for arriving at a properly informed estimate. For on Lyotard's account there is simply no passage - no possible means of translation - from the phrase-regime of cognitive (or factual-documentary) truth to the phrase-regimes of ethics, political justice, or other such evaluative speech-act genres. And this rule must apply, he maintains, even when confronted with apparently outrageous instances, like Faurisson's right-wing 'revisio-nist' claim that for all we know the gas-chambers never existed, since there survive no witnesses who can vouch for the fact on the basis of first-hand experience or knowledge-by-acquaintance. Of course it may be said that such arguments amount to nothing more than a vicious sophistry, an effort to obscure or deny the truth by adopting criteria grossly inappropriate to the case in hand. But this is to miss the point, according to Lyotard, since Faurisson has not the slightest interest in getting things right by the normative standards of responsible (truth-seeking) scholarly inquiry. Nor, for that matter, is Faurisson much concerned with issues of right and wrong as conceived by most historians of the Holocaust, those for whom the interests of factual truth are indissociable from questions of moral accountability or good-faith ethical judgment. On the contrary: 'the historian need not strive to convince Faurisson if Faurisson is "playing" another genre of discourse, one in which conviction, or the attainment of consensus over a defined reality, is not at stake'.¹⁷ Opponents may have good reason - at least by their own disciplinary or moral lights - for denouncing Faurisson as a rabid ideologue, a sophisticated perverter of the truth, or a pseudo-historian whose 'revisio-nist' project is a cover for the crudest kinds of anti-semitic propaganda. But they will be wrong so to argue, Lyotard thinks. For quite simply there is *no common ground* between Faurisson and those who reject his views, whether professional historians affronted by his cavalier way with the documentary evidence or non-specialists appalled by his indifference to the manifest evils of Nazism and the suffering of its victims.

This is where the sublime comes in, once again, as an index of the gulf between factual truth-claims and judgments of an evaluative or ethico-political order. For what the death-camps signify (according to Lyotard) is an event beyond all the capacities of rational thought, an event that stands as the ultimate rebuke to 'enlightenment' aims and principles. At this point, he writes,

something new has happened in history (which can only be a sign and not a fact) which is that the facts, the testimonies, which bore the traces of *heres* and *nows*, the documents

which indicated the meaning or meanings of the facts, and the names, finally the possibility of diverse kinds of phrases whose conjunction makes reality, all this has been destroyed as much as possible.¹⁸

If 'reality' (or historical truth) were indeed just a matter of 'phrases' - a construct out of various descriptions, vocabularies, language-games, tropes, narratives, etc. - then one might (just about) make tolerable sense of Lyotard's argument. And of course such ideas are pretty much *de rigueur* among the adepts of postmodern and post-structuralist theory, those for whom the referent is a **fictive** postulate, a redundant third term whose role has been eclipsed (since Saussure) by our knowledge of the 'arbitrary' relation between signifier and signified. Otherwise the passage will serve as an index - a cautionary reminder - of the sceptical extremes to which 'theory' may be driven when divorced from any sense of real-world cognitive and moral accountability. For it is a *fact* (not an 'idea' in Lyotard's quasi-Kantian usage of the term) that Auschwitz existed, that it became one of the sites for the Nazi programme of mass-extirpation, that the gas-chambers functioned as a part of that programme, and moreover - as will surely be agreed by any but the most blinkered of 'revisionist' ideologues - that there exists an overwhelming mass of evidence to prove that **case**. Nor would Faurisson's lies (or Lyotard's scepticism) be in any way justified even if it were true that 'all this' (i.e. all the documentary evidence) had in fact been '**destroyed as much as possible**'. For witness to the event would still be borne by those material traces - relics of various kinds - that were not (or could not be) so **destroyed**, together with the archives, the depositions of death-camp survivors, the testimony of convicted war-crime defendants, and so forth.

The same confusions are visible (albeit in less spectacular form) when Lyotard addresses political issues of class, ideology, and **representation**. Here again he falls back on the sublime as a kind of postmodernist **shibboleth**, a reminder - if any were needed - of the problems confronted by left intellectuals who still seek to make sense of history from a standpoint of class-based *Ideologiekritik*. His response to Terry Eagleton during a 1985 debate at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London is a fair enough sample of Lyotard's reflections in this quasi-Kantian vein.

Nobody has ever seen a proletariat (Marx said this): you can observe working-classes, certainly, but they are only part of the observable society. It's impossible to argue that this part of society is the incarnation of the proletariat, because an Idea in general has no presentation, and *that is the question of the sublime* . . . I'm sure we have to read and re-read Marx, but in a critical way: that is, we must say that the question of the proletariat is the question of knowing whether this word is to be understood in terms of the Hegelian dialectic (that is to say, in the end, in terms of science), expecting to find something experiential to correspond to the concept, and maybe to the concept itself; or is the term 'proletariat' the name of an Idea of Reason, the name of a subject to be emancipated? In the second case we give up the pretension of presenting something in experience which corresponds to this term.¹⁹

In some details of phrasing - e.g., its talk of a 'subject to be emancipated' - this passage might seem true to its Kantian lights and even to that critical 're-reading' of Marx that Lyotard here recommends. But the postmodern scepticism shows up clearly in other, more decisive and symptomatic ways. Thus his nominalist language ('the term "proletariat"', 'the name of a subject') betokens Lyotard's refusal to acknowledge that such words could possess any reference outside the discourse of speculative reason. So it is that the sublime does duty, yet again, as an analogue for those strictly unrepresentable ideas of Reason' whose significance lies beyond the furthest bounds of conceptual or experiential knowledge. For the only alternative - as Lyotard would have it - is an Hegelian reading of Marx on history according to which Ideas become incarnate in the form of a universal class (the Proletariat) whose advent marks the definitive transcendence of all such ontological distinctions.

This shows, to say the least, a somewhat limited grasp of debates within the Marxist theoretical tradition since Lukacs's *History and Class-Consciousness*. And as a reading of Kant it is even more skewed and tendentious, chiefly on account of Lyotard's desire to aestheticize ethics and politics by deploying the sublime as a figure of ultimate heterogeneity, a wedge (so to speak) or a deconstructive lever that can always be driven between the cognitive and evaluative phrase-regimes. Such ideas thus serve to immaterialize the language of any class-based social analysis or any account of knowledge and human interests that would assign a more than notional (speculative) content to terms like 'society' and 'class'. This whole line of argument bears a striking resemblance to other variations on the end-of-ideology theme, among them Margaret Thatcher's celebrated claim that 'society' doesn't exist, that 'individual' interests, motives, or talents are the only ones that count, and that talk of 'class' is just a tedious irrelevance in present-day social and economic terms. For whatever their express political allegiance - no matter how remote from the numbing banalities of Thatcherite rhetoric - these theorists must be seen as effectively endorsing the same ultra-nominalist position.

It is here that postmodernism feeds back into the 'New Times' thinking of an otherwise shrewd and perceptive commentator like Stuart Hall. Such, after all, is the message implicit in his article on the 1992 election campaign and the reasons for Labour's defeat at the polls. If there is any way forward for socialism in the wake of this defeat then clearly it doesn't lie through the old left country of class-politics, collective social values, or appeals to enlightened interest on the part of an informed and responsible electorate. Rather it must take full account of those factors - upward mobility, the 'classless society', free enterprise, individual 'empowerment' and so forth - whose appeal may be largely or wholly bogus when set against all the evidence to hand, but which have none the less managed to set the agenda for now and the foreseeable future. Such phrases have a

ready-made suasive power - an ability to chime with the 'new sociology of aspirations' - which leaves no room for the old left analysis, based as it was on obsolete notions like truth, reality, ideology, critique, and genuine (as opposed to false or distorted) consensus values. If words (styles of talk) are indeed all we have, and if those old language-games are now hopelessly outdated, then socialists had better move with the times and adapt their rhetoric accordingly.

Hall is not much given to philosophical excursions in the manner of Lyotard and kindred spirits on the postmodern cultural scene. But his view of current domestic political 'realities' has a good deal in common with that strain of nominalist thinking which claims a starting-point and justification in Kant's idea of the sublime. Thus the language of class, of real human interests or the 'subject to be emancipated' may still (for Lyotard or Hall) possess a certain ethical resonance, a power to evoke 'Ideas of Reason' whose meaning cannot be wholly exhausted by setbacks on the socialist road. But we shall be wrong - both agree - if we think that there is 'something experiential' that could ever 'correspond' to such ideas, or if we cling to the cognitivist illusion of 'presenting something in experience' that might actually bear them out. Now of course there is some truth in these arguments, both as a matter of social observation and (albeit more debatably) in so far as Lyotard would claim to derive them from a reading of the Kantian sublime. Thus it can hardly be denied that class predicates (or socio-economic terms of analysis) become more difficult to apply - at least in any straightforward representationalist mode - at a time of rapid and complex demographic change when so many of the old class indicators no longer seem to have much purchase. To this extent Hall is fully justified in arguing that any workable socialist politics will need to take account of these factors when considering its future electoral strategy. And there is also a sense in which Lyotard is right to invoke Kant by way of controverting any simple correspondence-theory of history, politics and class-interests. Thus he can cite various passages in the third *Critique* which do indeed proffer the sublime as a token of the gulf between cognitive and evaluative phrase-regimes, the existence of a 'suprasensible' realm beyond the bounds of phenomenal self-evidence, or the confusions that arise when 'Ideas of Reason' are wrongly referred to the cognitive tribunal whose competence extends only to matters of theoretical understanding, i.e. those cases where sensuous intuitions may be 'brought under' adequate concepts. In short, there are good reasons for maintaining that the interests of justice - or the hopes of social and ethico-political progress - are not best served by a direct appeal to those interests as embodied in the actual experience of some existing class or group. Of course one might well have arrived at this conclusion without benefit of Lyotard's repeated and circuitous detours via Kant on the sublime. For Stuart Hall it is largely a matter of inductive observation, of remarking those current social trends

and demographic shifts that pose a problem for more traditional (class-based) modes of analysis and critique. But for other theorists on the post-Marxist left there is a plausible (though by its very nature somewhat fugitive) connection to be drawn between the Kantian sublime and issues of a present-day political or socio-cultural import.²⁰

Where this connection breaks down - as I have argued - is with the further move that presses such scepticism well beyond the point of a argued appeal to the evidence of demographic change. For it then becomes a pretext for the kind of wholesale nominalist approach that denies what should surely be apparent to any commentator, that is to say, the continuing *facts* of unemployment, social deprivation, unequal opportunities, two-tier health care, educational underprivilege and the rest. No doubt these data have then to be interpreted with a due regard to all the complicating factors - upward mobility, imaginary investment, Hall's 'new sociology of aspirations' - which will strike any reasonably sensitive observer of the current electoral scene. But there is little purpose in pursuing such analyses if they end up (like Lyotard's obsessive ruminations on the Kantian sublime) by denying both the relevance of class predicates and, beyond that, any version of the argument that would link those predicates - however refined or qualified - to the lived *experience* of class divisions in an unjust social order. It is for this reason, I would suggest, that the sublime has come to play such a prominent role in the thinking of postmodern culture-critics who are otherwise largely unconcerned with issues of a specialized philosophical nature. What it serves to promote - whether overtly or implicitly - is a sceptical ethos which simply takes for granted the collapse of all realist or representationalist paradigms, the advent of a postmodern 'hyperreality' devoid of ontological grounding or experiential content, and the need henceforth to abandon any thought of criticizing social injustice from a standpoint of class solidarity based on communal perceptions and interests. In short, there is a strong elective affinity between this strain of post-Marxist/'New Times' thinking and the current high vogue for invocations of the Kantian sublime.

IV

In his book *Protocols of Reading* Robert Scholes has some pertinent thoughts with regard to this issue of **experience**, class and representation as treated by various schools of post-structuralist **theory**.²¹ His point, very briefly, is that critics cannot have it both ways, on the one hand proclaiming their 'radical' credentials and their concern with questions of politics, race and gender while on the other adopting a nominalist (or 'textualist') stance which denies any possible ground of appeal in the realities of oppression as *known and experienced* by members of the relevant class, community, or interest-group. For theory then becomes just a play-off between different

(incommensurable) language-games, an affair of multiple competing 'discourses' or 'subject-positions' devoid of any real-world consequence. Feminism, conversely, 'is based upon the notion of a gendered reader, and is driven by a perception of injustice in the relations between men and women in specific social, economic, and political terms'.²² Scholes's main target here is the claim advanced by some (mostly male) critics: that since gender is after all a discursive product, a position constructed within language, or according to the roles 'arbitrarily' assigned by this or that set of cultural codes, *therefore* it must be possible for good-willed male feminists to 'read as women', or adopt the kinds of viewpoint typically accorded to the female 'implied reader'. Such arguments understandably possess great appeal for theorists who would otherwise feel themselves *de facto* excluded from having anything relevant to say. But they are none the less mistaken, Scholes contends, since they ignore the manifold differences - the real and material (not just 'discursive') differences of interest - that characterize women's experience as subjects and readers.

This is not to say that males have nothing to learn from the encounter with feminist criticism or with work by women writers that foregrounds the issue of gender-role representation. Where the fallacy appears - as Elaine Showalter argues in her well-known essay on critical 'cross-dressing' - is with the notion that such roles go all the way down, so that male critics can somehow divest themselves of masculine attributes and espouse the other viewpoint through an act of (however well-meaning) readerly choice.²³ For this ignores the stubborn *facticity* of sexual difference, its inscription in a history (collective and individual) which cannot be so blithely transcended in pursuit of some notional view from elsewhere. As Scholes puts it:

Both texts and readers are already written when they meet, but both may emerge from the encounter altered in some crucial respect. Feminist critics have made this semiotic process concrete and intelligible for us all, for gender-if not destiny - is one of those rough spots by which necessity, in the form of culture, grasps us and shapes our ends. Because women in this culture have been an underprivileged class, they have learned lessons in class consciousness that many men have not. Because it cuts across social class, gender brings the lessons of class consciousness into places normally so insulated by privilege as to be unconscious of the structure that supports and insulates them. Feminism, then, has drawn its strength from the ethical-political domain, by showing that women, as a class, have been regularly discriminated against by a cultural system that positions them as subordinate to men.²⁴

This clear-headed passage is important to my argument for two connected reasons. First, it brings out the point that *difference* can only be a fashionable buzzword - like Lyotard's rhetoric of sublime 'heterogeneity' - so long as it is conceived in ideal abstraction from the contexts of real-world experience or the lived actualities of class and gender oppression. Second, it shows how such predicates of class-membership (e.g. 'women as a class') still play a vital descriptive and explanatory role, even - or especially - at times like the present when gender issues must be seen to 'cut across' other, more traditional modes of class analysis.

Scholes's argument here is partly a matter of empirical observation and partly - though he **doesn't** deploy such terms - the result of what amounts to a Kantian deduction on transcendental or *a priori* grounds. Thus practical experience is enough to confirm that any effective critique of social **injustice, oppression, unequal opportunities** and so forth will need to identify the particular group whose lives, prospects or conditions of existence have been consequently damaged or curtailed. Such criticism may indeed come from non-members of the group, from male feminists who strive (so far as possible) to '**read as a woman**', or from left intellectuals and cultural theorists who adopt a standpoint markedly at odds with their own class-interests narrowly conceived. Even so, they will be working on the prior assumption - *contra* the postmodern sceptics and nominalists - that such a group exists, that its name corresponds (in however complex or overdetermined a way) to certain facts of shared or communicable human experience, and furthermore that criticism can best represent the interests of justice and truth by attempting to identify (and identify with) the experiences thus conveyed. At this point the empirical arguments join with the question as viewed under a Kantian (or '**conditions of possibility**') aspect. For just as understanding (in its cognitive or theoretical mode) requires always that the manifold of sensuous intuitions be '**brought under**' adequate concepts, so here it is the case that one cannot begin to grasp the lived realities of class or gender oppression without using terms (like '**gender**' and '**class**') which render that experience intelligible. And this holds - to repeat - despite all the problems (of an empirical *and* a theoretical nature) that are nowadays confronted by anyone seeking to apply such terms in a non-reductive or sufficiently '**flexible**' manner.

One can therefore see why Scholes thinks it important to '**clarify the notion of class**' as deployed in his argument, and to explain that the term is '**not restricted to socio-economic class, even though that remains as a central type or model for the concept**'.²⁵ His point is not (or not only) that we need such enabling categories in order to wrest form from **chaos**, or to represent what would otherwise be lost to the flux of inchoate **experience**. More specifically, he is arguing *on ethico-political as well as on cognitive grounds* that we cannot do justice to these truths of experience - to the record of human suffering and waste brought about by various discriminative practices - unless we acknowledge the applicability of class predicates in this wider sense. The problem about post-structuralism is that it denies the pertinence of all such categorical descriptions, and thus contrives to block the appeal to any kind of real-world knowledge or **experience**. For if everything is ultimately constructed in discourse - truth, reality, subject-positions, class allegiances and so forth - then *ex hypothesi* we could only be deluded in thinking that any particular discourse (for **instance**, that of feminism) had a better claim to justice or truth than the others currently on offer. And there is also a sense - a quite explicit and programmatic sense -

radically disjunct or 'heterogeneous' discourses.³⁰ But in both cases such scepticism follows from a failure (or refusal) to grasp Kant's argument in the first *Critique* regarding the conceptually mediated character of all empirical truth-claims, or the requirement of 'bringing intuitions under concepts' in order to establish their cognitive validity. By ignoring this requirement - switching their sights to the more seductive prospects of the Kantian sublime - these theorists end up with an aestheticized reading of Kant that reduces all forms of knowledge (and knowledge-constitutive interests) to the level of so many subject-positions constructed in and through language. It is worth quoting Scholes at some length here since he offers some particularly telling examples of the confusion engendered by a textualist approach to issues of class- and gender-politics.

Readers who read as members of a class can be distinguished from those who are members of what Stanley Fish has called an 'interpretive community' . . . in that membership in a class implies both necessity and interest. A member of the class *ew* in Hitler's Germany or of the class *Black* in South Africa at present is a member of those classes by necessity and has an interest in the situation of the class as a whole . . . A class, in this sense, is a cultural creation, part of a system of categories imposed upon all those who attain subjectivity in a given culture . . . One may choose to be a feminist or not, but one is assigned one's gender and may change it only by extraordinary effort. The relationship between being female and being a feminist is neither simple nor to be taken for granted, but there is no comparable relationship between being a deconstructionist and belonging to a class - which is of course not to say that deconstruction is free of interest or beyond ideology . . . A feminist literary critic writes for other critics, to be sure, but she also writes on behalf of other women and, as a critic, she is strengthened by the consciousness of this responsibility. A male critic, on the other hand, may work within the feminist paradigm but never be a fully-fledged member of the class of feminists.

My one minor quarrel has to do with Scholes's idea that deconstruction is chiefly to blame for dissolving those various categories - among them (as he argues) the interlinked concepts of class-membership and cognitive representation - which alone make it possible to render such experience **intelligible**. In fact one could say more accurately - at least with reference to Derrida's work - that deconstruction continues to operate with those concepts and respect their rigorous necessity, while at the same time resisting any premature appeal to the binary structures (or logics of exclusion) on which they customarily **depend**.³² This is not to deny that there are some texts of Derrida that do give credence to Scholes's **charge**. Among them are those essays where he touches on the topic of sexual difference and the imagined possibility of '**reading as a woman**' - or exploring all manner of polymorphous gender-roles - as a strategy for contesting received ('phallogocentric') discourses of meaning and **truth**.³³ But elsewhere, that is to say, in the bulk of his more considered and analytical **work**, Derrida is at pains to disavow any notion that difference - as a concept and a fact of experience - can be somehow transformed through the Utopian 'freeplay' of a writing that blithely rejects such irksome constraints. Scholes's criticism applies more justly to that facile strain of postmodern and post-structuralist thought which takes it as read -

with no philosophical qualms - that truth *just is* what we are given to make of it according to various textual strategies, gender-role constructs, signifying practices or whatever. In which case it would follow (logically though absurdly) that 'there is no significant difference between reading about an experience and having an experience, because experience never simply occurs'.

The switch from 'never simply' to 'simply never' - from deconstruction to postmodernism, or Derrida to Baudrillard — is one that occurs with remarkable ease among thinkers of a 'New Times' persuasion. This is why it is important to address some of the muddles and misreadings (especially misreadings of Kant) that currently exert such widespread appeal. For these issues have a relevance - as I have argued here - outside and beyond the specialized enclaves of cultural and critical theory. In fact they are within reach of the single most urgent question now confronting left thinkers in Britain and the United States: namely, what remains of the socialist project at a time when distorted consensus values have gone so far toward setting the agenda for 'informed' or 'realistic' political debate. It might seem extravagant - just a piece of academic wishful thinking - to make such claims for the importance of getting Kant right on the relation between epistemology, ethics and aesthetics, or for pursuing the question 'What is Enlightenment' as raised once more in Foucault's late writings on the politics of truth.³⁵ But for better or worse it has been largely in the context of 'theory' - that capacious though ill-defined genre - that these issues have received their most intensive scrutiny over the past two decades. It is unfortunate that so much of this debate has been characterized by a proneness to the vagaries of Francophile intellectual fashion, as well as by a skewed and superficial grasp of its own formative prehistory. Philosophical confusions can often go along with disastrous failures of political judgment, as recent cases (Heidegger's among them) have demonstrated plainly enough. All of which tends to support the idea that postmodernism is more a symptom of the present malaise than a cure for modernity and its manifold discontents.

NOTES

1. Christopher Norris, *Uncritical Theory: postmodernism, intellectuals and the Gulf War* (London: Lawrence & Wishart and Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992).
2. Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History', *The National Interest* (Washington D.C.), Summer, 1989. See also Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992).
3. Fukuyama, 'Changed Days for Ruritania's Dictator', *The Guardian* (London), April X, 1991.
4. See for instance Jonathan Steele, Edward Mortimer and Gareth Stedman Jones, 'The End of History?' (a discussion of Fukuyama's essay), in *Marxism Today* November 1989, pp. 26-33.

5. See the essays collected in Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques (eds.), *New Times: the changing face of politics in the 1990s* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1989).
6. Stuart Hall, 'No new vision, no new votes', *New Statesman & Society* 17 April 1992, pp. 14-15. This issue also carried a number of other 'post-mortem' articles on the reasons for Labour's electoral defeat and the best way forward for British socialism.
7. See Raymond Williams, *Keywords: a vocabulary of culture and society* (London: Fontana, 1976).
8. See for instance Jean Baudrillard. *Selected Writings* ed. Mark Poster (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989); also *America* (London: Verso, 1988). *Fatal Strategies* (London: Pluto Press, 1989) and *Revenge of the Crystal: a Baudrillard reader* (London: Pluto Press, 1990).
9. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971).
10. Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: an introduction* (London: Verso, 1991). p. 3.
11. *Ibid.* p. 4.
12. See for instance Peter de Bolla, *The Discourse of the Sublime: readings in history, aesthetics and the subject* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989); Neil Hertz, *The End of the Line: essays on psychoanalysis and the sublime* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); Hugh Silverman (ed.), *The Textual Sublime* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990); and Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1990).
13. See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: phrases in dispute*, trans. Georges van den Abbeele (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988); also *The Inhuman: reflections on time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).
14. Immanuel Kant. *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N. Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1933); *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis W. Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1977); and *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. C. Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).
15. Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980).
16. See Lyotard, *The Differend* (op. cit.), p. 179.
17. *Ibid.* p. 19.
18. *Ibid.* p. 19.
19. Lyotard, 'Complexity and the Sublime', in Lisa Appignanesi (ed.), *Postmodernism* (London: ICA Documents/Free Association Books, 1989), pp. 19-26; p. 23.
20. See for instance Dick Hebdige, 'The Impossible Object: towards a sociology of the sublime', *New Formations*, No. 1 (Spring 1987), pp. 47-76 and *Hiding in the Light: on images and things* (London: Routledge, 1988).
21. Robert Scholes, *Protocols of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). For a wide-ranging treatment of these issues from a socio-philosophical viewpoint, see Margaret Gilbert, *On Social Facts* (London: Routledge, 1989).
22. Scholes, *Protocols of Reading* (op. cit.), p. 91.
23. Elaine Showalter, 'Critical Cross-Dressing', *Raritan*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Fall 1983), pp. 130-49. See also Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: cross-dressing and cultural anxiety* (New York & London: Routledge, 1992); Stephen Heath, *The Sexual Fix* (London: Macmillan, 1982); Mary Jacobus, 'Reading Women (Reading)' and 'The Difference of View', in *Reading Women: essays in feminist criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 3-24 and 27-40; and Alice Jardine and Paul Smith (eds.), *Men in Feminism* (London: Methuen, 1987).
24. Scholes, *Protocols of Reading* (op. cit.), p. 92.
25. *Ibid.* p. 92.
26. For further discussion of this and related topics, see especially W. V. O. Quine, *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969) and Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).
27. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (London: Fontana, 1974); also translated by Roy Harris (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1986) with significant changes of terminology and detail.
28. For a vigorously-argued critique of these ideas, see Raymond Tallis. *Not Saussure* (London: Macmillan, 1988). There is also some useful commentary to be found in Jonathan Culler. *Saussure* (London: Fontana, 1976); Roy Harris, *Reading Saussure*

