

ILLUSIONS OF FREEDOM: THE REGRESSIVE IMPLICATIONS OF 'POSTMODERNISM'

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Any critical assessment or discussion of 'postmodernism' requires a common, if tentative understanding, of what the concept means; 'tentative,' because the term, 'postmodernism' surfaces in any number of academic disciplines, from architecture, to philosophy, aesthetics, literary criticism, and theology. As well, the very word 'postmodernism' contains the implicit claim that modernity is finished and done with, which is itself open to debate on two counts: first, is modernity over, and, if so, is the condition of 'postmodernity' as desirable as its exponents would have us believe? As the title of this paper indicates, the concept is itself problematic, not only because of the wide range of subjects to which it is being applied, but also because of its formulations concerning human experience, at least in contemporary Western cultures, as well as the questions postmodernism raises about the intellectual and political traditions of modernity. What most postmodernist theories share is a sustained critique, and at times, even outright repudiation of the Enlightenment and the modernist traditions that developed from it.

Some of the most cherished humanist ideals of the Enlightenment and the modern age contained in concepts such as the autonomy of the human individual, the capacity for independent judgement and reason oriented toward the pursuit of justice, freedom and human happiness, are condemned by postmodernism as 'metadiscourses' of power and knowledge whose social, cultural and political implications serve to suppress difference by subjecting all particularity and 'otherness' to the relentless, imperialist logic of identity. Against the 'totalizing' cultural practices and philosophical systems of the West, postmodernism proclaims its commitment to the 'death' of the subject, understood as an autonomous, **self**-reflective agent; the 'death' of history, understood as the unifying narrative of Man's progress toward self-realization; and the 'death' of Western metaphysics and ontology with **their** attendant claims to knowledge of Being and Truth. In place of these totalizing discourses of Western civilization, postmodernism offers a multiplicity of local narratives whose self-justification is rooted in an immanent appeal to their own specificity.

All claims to universality as a legitimate means of adjudicating values and deciding among possible strategies as authentically oriented toward justice and the satisfaction of human needs, are dismissed as further ploys of domination and the drive to mastery that is understood to be characteristic of modernity.

There are two important questions that arise in any attempt to evaluate the validity of the postmodernist claims sketched above: one involves the justification of the postmodernist critique of modernity, while the other inquires into the emancipatory or regressive implications of postmodernist theory. Hal Foster differentiates two types of postmodernism which he identifies as one of resistance, which issues in a critical 'deconstruction' of modernity, and one of 'reaction', which he describes as little more than an uncritical 'repudiation' of modernity.' The argument to be advanced here is that the 'deconstructive' and 'reactionary' elements of postmodern thought are not as clearly distinguishable as Foster believes, and that what appears as emancipatory critique in postmodern discourse is often little more than a 'verbal radicalism' that conceals a latent, but nonetheless insidious political conservatism which undermines, rather than contributes to, the possibility of human liberation in either theory or practice.

As it is impossible to engage in a full-scale critique of postmodernism within the scope of an essay, I will restrict my argument to a critique of the postmodernist theme of the 'death' of the subject. In particular, I wish to discuss the ways in which this theme has been appropriated by feminist versions of postmodernism in order to show how the postmodernist repudiation of autonomous subjectivity works against the emancipatory interest of feminist theory and practice. The acceptance on the part of an increasing number of feminist theorists of the postmodernist version of the Enlightenment and modernity is resulting in a premature closure of discussions as to how concepts of subjectivity, autonomy, and reason may be reconstructed and expanded to advance the liberation of women. In confining the discussion to the impact of postmodernism on feminist theory, I hope at the same time to show that the 'anti-Enlightenment polemic' characteristic of most expositions of postmodernism has regressive implications that extend beyond feminism:

In his essay, 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?' (1784), Immanuel Kant wrote that,

Enlightenment is man's [sic] emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another. Sapere Aude! 'Have courage to use your own understanding!' - that is the motto of enlightenment.

This definition of Enlightenment understands that human beings are rational, self-conscious subjects with the capacity for autonomous action as agents free to make their own decisions about how to live. This concept of individuality and freedom presupposes notions of truth, justice and

equality, all of which are central ideals of the modern age and deeply associated with it. Feminism, as a theory and praxis whose goal is the liberation of women from all forms of domination, is a thoroughly modern movement insofar as it claims these ideals as legitimate and necessary for women. More accurately, feminism emerges as a counterdiscourse within modernity when it interrogates the ways in which women have been excluded from the project of Enlightenment humanism, thereby demonstrating how this tradition has betrayed itself by degenerating into an exclusivist, male-centred, bourgeois, racist ideology that legitimates the material interests of a particular group at the expense of virtually the rest of humanity.

In doing this, feminism exposes the false universalisms of abstract **humanism** so that a concrete **humanism** may emerge, thereby opening the possibilities of the performative enactment of Enlightenment ideals within the material conditions of life. In this sense, feminism contributes to the political task of the reconstruction and transformation of the ideals, values and goals of modernity. Feminism is a 'modern movement,' and is inconceivable prior to, or outside modernity. In this sense, as far as feminism is concerned, modernity is not over, it remains unfinished.'

The realization of Enlightenment ideals in the cultural and political practices of daily life is impossible in the absence of rational, autonomous subjectivity. One of the most troubling themes of postmodern feminism concerns the repudiation of the concept of the subject under the rubric of 'The Death of Man'. According to Jane Flax:

Postmodernists wish to destroy all essentialist concepts of human being or nature. They consider all concepts of Man to be fictive devices that acquire a naturalistic guise both in their construction and in repeated use within a language game or set of social practices. . . . In fact Man is a social, historical, or linguistic artifact, not a noumenal or transcendental Being. . . . Man is forever caught in the web of fictive meaning, in chains of signification, in which the subject is merely another position in language.

In disclaiming all 'essentialist concepts of human being', Flax perhaps inadvertently, reveals the presence of another essentialism behind that which postmodernism seeks to liquidate when she tells us that 'In fact Man is a social, historical, or linguistic artifact.' (Italics added.) While I can readily agree with the critique of abstract notions of 'Man' with their consequent androcentric, imperialist, epistemological and political implications, I have great difficulty with the concept of the human being as 'artifact'. There must be an alternative notion of subjectivity that lies somewhere between the false abstraction, 'Man', and the inhuman concept, 'artifact.' Not only has one 'essentialism' given way to another, but material structures of power and domination seem to have dissolved into mere webs of 'fictive meaning', and 'chains of signification'. Oppression by signification? We should be so lucky. One of the unsettling aspects of postmodernist language is its remote impersonality and unreal tone, a typical example of which is contained in the passage quoted from Flax."

A much more intensified and sustained feminist attack on the concept of subjectivity along postmodernist lines has been advanced by Judith Butler. Butler is largely concerned with deconstructing gender categories which oppress women by inscribing them with a series of fixed, 'natural' attributes which are culturally constructed devices of social control. As part of her analysis, Butler quite rightly questions the female counterpart to abstract notions of Man in the equally abstract category, 'Woman'. Part of her critique focuses on the way in which feminism implicitly adopts this category as the 'stable subject' of the feminist movement. Butler effectively exposes the repressive and authoritarian implications of a feminist theory that assumes the existence of a unitary category, 'Woman', behind the experience of individual, concrete women.

The concept of a universal female subject functions, in Butler's view, as a regulatory mechanism that dissolves and reduces the multiple differences between women into a compulsory, abstract unity in whose name political goals are defined. The result is that all women become coerced into accepting these predetermined goals as their own, whether they address the actual conditions of their lives and are accurate reflections of their particular experiences or not. It is quite true that the ways in which women suffer oppression and marginalization are specific to their particular life conditions, such as race, class, sexual orientation, and so on. As Butler writes, the unitary category of woman excludes the 'multiplicity of cultural, social and political intersections in which the concrete array of "women" are constructed.' This is why feminism requires a materialist theory that is flexible enough to address the specific nature of women's oppression in given historical and cultural contexts, so that appropriate strategies capable of effectively abolishing their condition as oppressed people may be devised. Given the diversity of women's experience, a feminist theory built on an abstract concept of 'Woman' can only end up producing reifications of *women* that are not only severed from reality, but reinforce their oppression.

At the same time, Butler's critique is highly problematic, not because of her rejection of totalizing, 'identitary'¹⁰ discourses that obliterate all distinction between concepts of female essence and living, individual women. It is precisely this critique that leads to a repudiation of no less totalizing political practices that sacrifice the plurality and multiplicity of human experience in the name of a singular movement motivated more by its own interests disguised as unified goals than by the actual needs of those it pretends to serve. Rather, what is disconcerting about Butler's analysis in the extreme is its profoundly anti-humanist tenor, which becomes clear in her treatment of subjectivity. And no less disturbing is the suggestion that the emancipation of women from gender oppression is to be achieved in changes of style, or gender performances. Butler's work attests to the influence of a postmodernism that values style over politics, and betrays an underlying logic that fits neatly with the demands of consumerism.

In an essay heavily influenced by (and critical of) Lacanian psychoanalytic theories, Butler explains how the interrogation of subjectivity by those theories offer feminist theorists,

a way of criticizing the disembodied pretensions of the masculine knower and exposing the strategy of domination implicitly in that disingenuous epistemological gesture. The destabilization of the subject within feminist criticism becomes a tactic in the exposure of masculine power and, in some French feminist contexts, the death of the subject spells the release or emancipation of the suppressed feminine sphere . . . the political critique of the subject questions whether making a conception of identity into the ground of politics, however internally complicated, prematurely forecloses the possible cultural articulations of the subject-position that a new politics might well generate.

This kind of political position is clearly not in line with the humanist presuppositions of either feminism or related theories on the left.¹¹

Butler's legitimate concern with deconstructing ossified gender identities in order to expose their repressive and regulatory function that restricts women's lives does not require 'the death of the subject', as she comes very close to asserting here. For Butler, gender identity is discursively and performatively constituted, a 'performatively enacted signification' 'behind' which there is no subject, no identity, no 'doer behind the deed'. Since gender acts are performative, 'there is no pre-existing identity by which an act or attribute might be measured'; there is no 'locus of agency' from which various acts follow, but rather gender is 'an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts'.¹³ Given that 'the gendered body is performative', it has 'no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality, and if that reality is fabricated as an interior essence, that very interiority is a function of a decidedly public and social discourse, the public regulation of fantasy through the surface politics of the body'."

For Butler, fixed and repressive gender identities can only be abolished with the extinction of the subject who is nothing more than performance. It comes as no surprise, then, that in the place of concrete freedom, Butler offers the drag performer as the model image of freedom, momentarily achieved in the 'perpetual displacement [that] constitutes a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification and **recontextualization** [thereby depriving] hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to essentialist accounts of gender identity'. For Butler, the drag performer's performances expose the 'radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender', "thereby breaking the conflation of the 'referent' and the 'signifier' which inscribes a set of meanings understood to 'inhere in the real nature of women'. The 'deconstruction' of the abstract subject of feminism opens to 'a future of multiple significations' whereby 'unanticipated meanings'" may come into being at the site of perpetually shifting identities. What Butler proposes is **neither** more nor less than privatized, life-style changes, which is the logical consequence of freedom reduced to resignification, politics to surfaces. and where multiple abstractions stand in for the old repressive one.

The work of Judith Butler is representative of feminist appropriations of postmodernist themes that draw heavily on Foucauldian philosophy and Lacanian psychoanalysis. As well, her work is typical of the treatment of subjectivity and autonomous agency found in expressions of feminist postmodernism, which is one reason why her work deserves attention. The postmodernist dismissal of the possibility of a rational, self-conscious, autonomous, intersubjective subject as the agent of emancipatory change, itself reflects a totalizing theory that collapses all possible notions of subjectivity into the absolute, Cartesian Ego. In disallowing **transformative** reconstructions of modern concepts of subjectivity that are both situated and relational, yet rational and autonomous, postmodernism preserves the concept of the mastering ego which has long been exposed as a transparent caricature of authentic subjectivity. Moreover, the concept of subjectivity has not been uncontested by Enlightenment and modern philosophies, as can be readily seen, for example in comparing Descartes, Kant, **Hegel**, Marx, Freud, Horkheimer, **Adorno**, or Habermas.

It is indisputable that such Western notions of 'the commanding self' bent on pursuing the dream of 'acquiring absolute mastery over nature, of converting the cosmos into one immense hunting-ground,' is bound up with the transfiguration of reason as purposive, instrumental and manipulative, and that this concept of reason emerged as the prevalent one. The notion of instrumental reason is accompanied by an abstract form of humanism that celebrates and justifies the self-creating, ruling, **all-knowing** subject who subdues other human beings and nature to (usually) his dominating control. The critique of such distorted and mutilating notions of subject, reason, and humanism in the name of a concrete humanism, remains as a significant counterdiscourse of modernity, finding its most incisive expressions in the critical social theories of Karl Marx and the Frankfurt School. Postmodernist writers tend toward **superficial** dismissals of critical theorists such as Marx, subsuming his thought under the by-now ubiquitous label of 'master-narrative',¹⁸ that destructive admixture of power and knowledge which reproduces domination on the level of thought. Such attributions, most notably in the case of Marx, derive from an outright misunderstanding of his concept of labour, which becomes reduced to a justifying ideology of the domination of nature by a **self-inventing** subject. This is a misreading of Marx that betrays an inability to attend to the subtleties of his concept of labour as **objectification**, a means of positing one's humanity to and for another. These distortions have their roots in deeper levels of misunderstanding that confuse and conflate the concept of **objectification** with **reification**, which although related, are quite distinct terms." Perhaps the postmodernist obsession with perpetual 'de-centering' has gone too far, with the result that meaningful concepts lose coherence and integrity.

The task of all theories of emancipation, including and especially feminism, is to develop and reconstruct the counterdiscourse of modernity

that also conceives of reason as the possibility of justice, freedom and human happiness. It is theoretically insufficient and politically dangerous to abandon these ideals which derive from and are made possible by modernity with blanket proclamations of the 'death' of the subject, history and Western metaphysics in the name of pluralism, difference and 'local narratives' for their own sake. In severing the particular from the universal, in absolutizing difference and diversity without linking them to justice, freedom and happiness as universally valid ideals for all human beings, we risk a turning inward that threatens to elevate and privilege specific groups at the **expense** of others, the horrifying implications of which we are now witnessing in the ethnocidal disintegration of Eastern Europe. There is a real danger in the postmodern negation of reason and subjectivity that tends to over-valorize the 'irreducible plurality of incommensurable life-worlds and forms of life' apart from all universal ideals. In this sense I can only agree with Thomas McCarthy's assessment of the need for a reconstruction of modernity:

The undeniable 'immanence' of the standards we use to draw . . . distinctions – their embeddedness in concrete languages, cultures, practices – should not blind us to the equally undeniable 'transcendence' of the claims they represent – their openness to critique and revision and their internal relation to intersubjective recognition brought about by the 'force' of reasons. The ideas of reason, truth, justice also serve as ideals with reference to which we can criticize the traditions we inherit: though never divorced from social practices of justification, they can never be reduced to any given set of such practices. The challenge, then, is to rethink the idea of reason in line with our essential finitude – that is, with the historical, social, embodied, practical, desirous, assertive nature of the knowing and acting subject – and to recast accordingly our received humanistic ideals." (Italics added)

Rather than remaining with the self-creating, absolute subject that can only be rejected, we need to conceive of an autonomous subjectivity that is at the same time communitarian and intersubjective, and **which** is fully aware of its social, situated and historical character. A reconstruction of the subject along the lines of the humanist ideal of modernity is especially urgent for women in their efforts toward self-emancipation. In turn, this will entail the transformation of modernity by challenging the very alienation that has resulted in twisted notions of subjectivity connected with material, political structures of domination and oppression. In this sense I can only endorse the views of feminist theorists like Rita Felski: 'Rather than announcing the death of rationality, subjectivity, or history, feminist practices indicate that such concepts must be thought **differently** in relation to the interests and struggles of a gender politics. The eschatological themes and motifs of exhaustion interspersed throughout much postmodernist thought seem in this context to have little relevance to the present concerns of the women's movement'."

I referred earlier to the deeply **anti-humanist** tenor of postmodernist theorists such as Judith Butler, but which applies to most postmodern thought. In commenting on the anti-humanist tenor of postmodernist discourse in general, I am referring to the absence of acting human beings

in the world, who are displaced so that we may focus our attention on the struggles of 'artifacts', 'signifiers', and 'signifying processes'. Similarly, women dissolve into an 'undesignated field of differences'" that constitutes 'another position in language.'" The concept of 'critique' gives way to 'resignification', unaccompanied by efforts to distinguish between emancipator and oppressive 'resignifications'." Perhaps the concept of critique is too evocative of humanist traditions, insofar as it is associated with intentionality, accountability, and self-reflexivity, thereby presupposing a subject capable of critical thought. 'Resignifications' seem more appropriate to postmodern ideas, in that they are uncontaminated by human agency, and are much more compatible with changes that occur as repositioning in language games. Not only Butler, but much postmodernist writing 'seems to valorize change for its own sake',² which is likely due to the concern that nothing be excluded, except of course, the subject, which must finally be dispensed with, since subjects are 'constituted through exclusion'.³

In the context of postmodernism's 'simple evocation of the extinction of the subject',⁴ feminists need to pose sobering questions, such as asked by Nancy Hartsock: 'Why is it, exactly at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes "problematic"?'⁵ Or, with Seyla Benhabib we might also ask if the critique of identity politics and theory is 'only thinkable via a complete debunking of any concepts of selfhood, agency and autonomy?'⁶ Benhabib's question is especially relevant, as it challenges postmodernism with the suggestion that the critique of subjectivity does not require its simple repudiation. The critical theorists associated with the Frankfurt School (the philosophical tradition out of which Benhabib comes) recognized that concepts of subjectivity as the commanding self are little more than clichés designed to console a humanity for whom the experience of authentic subjectivity and individuality has been little more than illusory."⁷ Max Horkheimer and **Theodor Adorno**, building on the philosophy of **Hegel** and **Marx**, were fully aware of the social nature of individuals, writing that there is no such thing as 'the pure individual in his ineffable singularity'.⁸ At the same time, their critique of abstract subjectivity did not lead them to reject the individual or rational agency altogether. Their reinterpretation of psychoanalytic insights resulted in a view of subjectivity as thoroughly objective, and that what is often misunderstood as 'human nature' is the sedimentation of social, cultural and historical experience within the human psyche. **Adorno's** remark that the psychology of individuals 'points back . . . to social moments'" means that analysis of subjectivity inevitably devolves into objectivity, until it reveals 'the social and historical events that preformed and deformed the subject'. In other words, 'Before the individual can exist, before it can become an individual,

it must recognize to what extent it does not yet exist. It must shed the illusion of the individual before becoming one."³⁵

For critical theory, the notion of the absolute individual not only inhibits the potential of real individuals of coming into being, it also reinforces and preserves the social status quo whose interests do not coincide with possibilities for self-actualization. In the view of Horkheimer and Adorno, Western capitalist societies' reverence for ideological 'individualism' conceals a callous disregard for real individuals, whose interests are not in line with those of the prevailing social and economic order: 'the human being is capable of realizing himself as an individual only within a just and humane society.'" In the absence of the very possibility for the emergence of authentic individuality under current conditions, the notion of the transcendental subject assumes the political function of a compensating illusion that disguises the degradation of real human beings: 'The more individuals are really degraded to functions of the social totality as it becomes more systematized, the more will man [sic] pure and simple, man as a principle with the attributes of creativity and absolute domination, be consoled by exaltation of his mind.'"

Such insights into the contradiction between abstract and concrete subjectivity is part of a critique of society which acknowledges that social transformation can only come about through the intentional, self-conscious actions of human agents. Without such individuals, 'evolution toward the humane [becomes] increasingly difficult'.³⁶ In the view of critical theory, human beings, while both agents of society and derivative of it, are not identical with it, leaving open the possibility for 'resistance that is always the core of true individuality'."

One of critical theory's most valuable insights concerning the individual lies in its recognition of the concrete relationship between the individual and society, and that changes in the social realm, such as the intensification and proliferation of structures of domination, effect changes within human beings as well. At the same time, their consistent refusal of total identity between subject and object on the theoretical level allowed them to maintain the non-identity of individuals and society, thus leaving open possibilities for social transformation which are in turn predicated upon the capacity of individuals for critique and resistance. At the same time, critical theory saw that the hope for 'true individuality', with its capacity for critique and resistance, was fast disappearing with the intensified encroachment of capitalism into all areas of human existence, or what Habermas would call 'lifeworlds'. The brutalizing conditions necessary to the preservation and expansion of capitalism have perhaps already 'deconstructed' the subject more efficiently than was ever dreamed possible by postmodernist theories.

The question of the crisis of subjectivity and the dissolution of the individual is particularly urgent for feminist theory. The critical task of

feminism is to expose and account for the dynamics of power and its effects throughout the society down to the most mundane practices of everyday life, with the purpose of constructing a 'wide-ranging critique'" of domination in all its diverse and different manifestations. This requires nothing less than a critical social theory that is conscious of, and continually interrogates, the materiality of its own positions and discourse, which is strikingly absent from most postmodernist discussions, and marks one of its greatest failures.

The degree to which postmodernist theories sever themselves from material reality and concrete experience is strikingly illustrated in the field of contemporary theology, which has proved no less immune to postmodernist applications than other disciplines. I will conclude this essay by turning to one of Christian theology's best known postmodernist exponents, Mark C. Taylor, whose *Erring: A Postmodern a/theology*, offers one of the clearest examples of the more problematic implications of postmodernist thought for both feminist theory and the struggles of contemporary women against the oppressive patriarchal structures of the Christian churches and the theological systems that justify them. Some problems in Taylor's approach apply to postmodernist thought in general, and its appropriation by feminism in particular. In many respects, Taylor is quite typical in the way he applies postmodernist critiques to a specific discipline, and this is the point of referring to his work. Like many other postmodernist writers, he too uses deconstructionist techniques in order to integrate fairly standard postmodernist themes into his discussions of Christian theology, which leads him, predictably, to jettison the subject and celebrate the loss of self. He writes:

... I explore the possibility that the dissolution of the individual self gives rise to anonymous subjectivity, in which care-less sacrifice takes the place of anxious mastery and unreserved spending supplants consuming domination. The expropriation of personality presupposes the appropriation of death. This loss of self is not, however, simply nihilistic. The disappearance of the subject is at the same time the emergence of the trace. The trace concretely embodies the ceaseless interplay of desire and delight.³⁹

Taylor's 'delight' in the disappearance of the subject leads him to embrace the rather traditional religious values of 'self-mortification', 'sacrifice of the self', 'dismemberment' and 'homelessness', which he presents as valid existential options leading to more authentic experiences of the divine. What is missing in his thought is a conscious awareness of the materiality of his own discourse, along with its consequent political implications. There is an unsettling sense of unreality that increases with each deconstructive move, becoming most apparent in his treatment of the homeless person, and, later, 'woman'. As for the homeless person, he writes:

Free from every secure dwelling, the unsettled, undomesticated wanderer is always unsettling and uncanny. Having forsaken the straight and narrow and given up all thought of return, the wanderer appears to be a vagrant, a renegade, a pervert – an outcast who is an

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irredeemable outlaw. The outlaw is forever liminal, marginal: he is curiously ambivalent, shifty, and slippery. Insofar as the outlaw is not only a heretic who transgresses but also a subversive who breaks the (power of the) law, erring points to the ways of grace."

Taylor returns to the image of the homeless wanderer at various points in the book, but at no point does it become anything more than an abstract fragment, disconnected from reality. The image loses all poetry if one recalls the actual existence of destitute, discarded human beings whose numbers are vastly increasing as a result of the inhuman and cruel effects of a global capitalism that generates impoverishment and misery for the majority of the world's population. The idealized image of the homeless wanderer presented here has the political effect of rendering the concrete, suffering homeless person invisible in a romantic image which not only leaves the material conditions that create poverty and homelessness unquestioned, but implicitly accepts them. Without a real homeless human being, and the conditions that produce her or him, there would be no one to idealize. As everyone knows, the existence of the homeless and the outcast as such is the direct result of injustice. These are issues that postmodernism appears incapable of, or uninterested in confronting. This is perhaps the inevitable result of a theory that having dispensed with all concepts of transcendence, including transcendence of specific social conditions, contents itself with the 'delight in the superficiality of appearances'.⁴¹

There are equally disquieting implications for feminism and the question of women's liberation in Taylor's unthinking celebration of the inherent affinities between 'woman' and 'superficiality'. His rather brief treatment of 'woman' is as unreal as is his treatment of the homeless, as he whimsically weaves together quotations from Nietzsche and Derrida that link 'woman' with the 'untruth of truth', the 'superficiality of experience'. Taylor's comments on the superficial nature of 'woman' leads him into further acts of intellectual free association, where he somewhat enigmatically considers the occupation of tailors, since they too are 'after all . . . profoundly interested in surfaces and completely preoccupied with appearances'." For Taylor, 'Appearance and nothing more' is the concern of woman, 'for she suspects (but only suspects, since she is never certain about anything) what man refuses to admit: there is nothing other than appearance'." A feminist reading of such texts must inquire into their social and historical contexts, raising questions about the ways in which such attitudes continue to legitimate the violence, sexual abuse, discrimination, degradation and inequality that have long marked the specific history of the domination of women in many societies. Are these phenomena merely appearances? What are the political consequences for women in societies whose cultural practices and institutional structures presuppose that women are 'naturally' associated with superficiality rather than depth, suspicion rather than reason, and untruth rather than truth? The unreflective manner in which Taylor quotes Nietzsche and Derrida on

women has the political effect of endorsing some long-standing theological prejudices toward women, the harmful effects of which they still suffer. Such assumptions about women are neither new to Christian theology nor to the philosophical traditions of the West, and it is surprising that Taylor can in fact repeat them without critical comment. But perhaps it doesn't matter if women are, after all, mere positions in a language game.

Not only feminism, but any social theory with conscious emancipatory goals needs to seriously consider the regressive implications of postmodernism. As argued here, one of the most serious issues in need of critical scrutiny is postmodernism's dismissal of subjectivity and the Enlightenment values associated with it. As for feminism, the example of Taylor illustrates that the repudiation of subjectivity connected with affirmations of self-sacrifice that reduce human agency to the status of a 'trace' threatens to ultimately relocate women within the old, debilitating associations that have traditionally undermined their full humanity."

To tell women, for whom the issue of subjectivity and autonomy has always been historically and socially problematic, to give up the struggle since the whole concept is by now *passé*, is to abandon hope not only in the future liberation of women, but in the possibility of reclaiming and reconstructing the best Enlightenment traditions inherited by modernity that hold the ideals of justice, freedom and human happiness as valid for all human beings. There is some truth to postmodernist charges that these ideals have become distorted and mutilated, resulting in the deformation of reason into mastery and instrumentality, while relegating justice to the private preserve of privileged groups. Nonetheless, the formation of a negative critique that accounts for the twisted processes that inform all areas of modernity remains the greatest service that a feminist critical theory can render modernity, let alone itself. To reduce feminist theory and praxis to a 'localized strategy of subversion in a postmodern era'" not only trivializes feminism, it threatens to divest it of its critical and emancipator power.

NOTES

1. Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983, p. xii.
2. Russell A. Berman, 'Troping to Pretoria: The Rise and Fall of Deconstruction'. *Telos* No. 85. Fall 1990, p. 5.
3. Sabina Lovibond, 'Feminism and Postmodernism'. *New Left Review*, No. 178. November - December 1989, p. 5.
4. Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays on Politics, History and Morals*. trans. Ted Humphrey, Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983, p. 41. For a critique of this essay that contains several postmodern concerns vis-a-vis the Enlightenment, see Michel Foucault, 'What Is Enlightenment?', in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow, New York: Pantheon Books, 1984.
5. Sabina Lovibond, 'Feminism and Postmodernism', p. 11.
6. Here I have in mind the essay by Jürgen Habermas, with which I am largely in agreement: 'Modernity - An Incomplete Project'. in Hal Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic*.

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7. Jane Flax. in *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1990. p. 32.
8. While generally sympathetic to postmodernist accounts of subjectivity. Flax is not altogether uncritical: 'the postmodernist narratives about subjectivity are inadequate'. because they do not incorporate to the 'specificity of women's experiences or desires'. (p. 210) While there is some truth to this. Flax's critique does not address the deeper problems attached to the postmodernist caricature of a unitary Master Self that remains impervious to change and revision throughout all forms of Enlightenment discourse. In fact the nature of 'subjectivity'. 'human essence'. and 'epistemology' have always been contested in modern philosophy, from Descartes to the present.
9. Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, Inc., 1990, p. 14.
10. The term 'identitary', or 'identitarian' is used by Theodor Adorno in one of his most important. yet highly compressed essays. 'Subject and Object', in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, eds., New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1982. p. 505.
11. Judith Butler. 'Gender Trouble. Feminist Theory. and Psychoanalytic Discourse', in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, Linda J. Nicholson (ed.), New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall. 1990, p. 327.
12. Ibid., p. 33.
13. *Gender Trouble*, p. 141: 140.
14. Judith Butler, *op. cit.*, p. 336.
15. Ibid., p. 338.
16. Judith Butler, 'Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of "Postmodernism"', *Praxis International*. Volume 11, No. 2, July 1991, p. 160. In this article Butler defends herself from the charge that her critique of the subject is identical with calling for the annihilation of the subject. However, the negativity of her critique of the subject is such that I remain unconvinced by her disclaimer.
17. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming, New York: The Seabury Press, 1972. p. 35; 248.
18. Jean-François Lyotard. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1984.
19. Marx elaborates his concept of labour as objectification in the 'Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844', in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Volume 3, New York: International Publishers, 1975. The distinction I have in mind between 'objectification' and 'reification' follows Herbert Marcuse's interpretation of Marx's concept of alienated and unalienated labour. According to Marx, objectification is a social activity that occurs within labour as a free activity and the universal self-realization of human beings. Objectification is not necessarily tied to domination. Within the alienated conditions of capitalism, objectifying activity unfolds into reifying activity, in that the products of human labour, along with their social relationships. have little to do with humanity's real needs and creative capacities. becoming estranged to the point that they are experienced as having a 'life of their own' that is often hostile to humanity. It is essential that the distinction between the two concepts is maintained; in many critiques of Marx, including those from feminist perspectives both postmodernist and not. objectification is employed when the sense of the text more accurately implies reification. See for example. Seyla Benhabib's and Drucilla Cornell's 'Introduction: Beyond the Politics of Gender', in *Feminism as Critique*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1988, p. 2, and Linda Nicholson in the same volume, p. 18. For Marcuse's interpretation of Marx which offers one of the best clarifications of the distinction between objectification and reification, see 'The Foundation of Historical Materialism'. in *Studies in Critical Philosophy*. trans. Joris De Bree. London: NLB, 1972.
20. Thomas McCarthy, 'Introduction', Jurgen-Habermas. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. trans. Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge: The MIT Press. 1990, p. x.
21. Rita Felski. 'Feminism. Postmodernism, and the Critique of Modernity'. *Cultural Critique*. Number 13. Fall 1989, p. 53.
22. Judith Butler. *op. cit.* p. 160.

23. Scyla Benhabib. 'Feminism and Postmodernism: An Uneasy Alliance'. *Praxis International*, Volume 11, No. 2, July 1991, p. 139.
24. Nancy Fraser. 'False Antithesis: A Response to Seyla Benhabib and Judith Butler'. *Praxis International*, *op. cit.*, p. 170.
25. Nancy Fraser, *op. cit.*, p. 171.
26. Judith Butler, *op. cit.*, p. 158. I agree that 'exclusion' is a necessary part of self-conscious subjectivity, because it involves choice. People choose, for example, to embrace democracy by excluding fascism. or choose peace by excluding war as a desirable means for resolving conflicts. Indeed. 'I am' implies that 'I am not' something or someone else, and so on. Such 'exclusionary' acts however do not negate or even necessarily impede the establishment of intersubjective relationships and mutual respect between human beings who understand themselves as subjects.
27. Jiirgen Habermas. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 310.
28. Nancy Hartsock, 'Rethinking Modernism: Minority vs. Majority Theories'. *Cultural Critique*, Number 7, Fall 1987, p. 196.
29. Scyla Benhabib. 'Feminism and Postmodernism'. *op. cit.*, p. 140.
30. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Aspects of Sociology*, trans. John Viertel, Boston: Beacon Press, 1972, p. 48.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
32. Theodor W. Adorno, 'Sociology and Psychology', *New Left Review*, Number 46. November - December 1976, p. 73.
33. Russell Jacoby, *Social Amnesia: A Critique of Conformist Psychology from Adler to Laing*. Boston: Beacon Press. 1975. p. 79; 81.
34. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Aspects of Sociology*, trans. John Viertel, Boston: Beacon Press, 1972, p. 46.
35. Theodor W. Adorno, 'Subject and Object', p. 500.
36. Max Horkheimer. *Eclipse of Reason*. New York: Continuum, 1974, p. 156.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 161.
38. Rita Felski, *op. cit.*, p. 56.
39. Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern Altheology*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 1984. p. 15.
40. Mark C. Taylor, *Erring*, p. 150.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 15- 16.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 171 - 172: 180.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 171 - 172.
44. For a fuller discussion of the ways in which the intellectual traditions of the West have failed to recognize the full humanity of women, see my 'The Politics of Empowerment: Ethical Paradigms in a Feminist Critique of Critical Social Theory', in *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics*, November. 1991, pp. 173 - 192.
45. Rita Felski, *op. cit.*, p. 56.