*Review of International Studies (2000), 26, 155–177* 

# Universalism and difference in discourses of race

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A few weeks after the riot that shook Los Angeles in May 1992, I gave a lecture on racism in America to a group of students at a north London college. The audience was largely young and black. In the discussion that followed, there was a lively debate over my view that the fragmentation of American society into competing ethnic groups—African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, Korean-Americans, and so on—was a fatal blow to the struggle for black rights. Almost the entire audience disagreed. 'African-Americans', one student explained, 'are different. Our problems are different, our experiences are different, our history is different and our culture is different. We have to gain respect ourselves before we can unite with other people.'

Here was summed up the core ideas that underpin much of current radical thinking on race: first, that social groups define themselves by their history and identity; second, that the particular history and identity of each group sets them apart from other social groups; third, that it is important to recognize this plurality of differences as a positive aspect of society today; and finally, that the struggle for racial equality takes the form of a struggle for group identity.

The 'assertion of difference' has become, for many radicals, the principal dynamic in society today. 'The emergence of new subjects, new genders, new ethnicities, new regions, new communities', claims sociologist Stuart Hall, has given hitherto invisible groups 'the means to speak for themselves for the first time'.[2] Radicals such as Hall have welcomed the contemporary flowering of ethnic differences as an expression, not of social discord, but of a new form of democracy through which sections of society previously silenced have been given voice. In Britain for example, the 'new ethnicities', Hall writes, posit a 'non-coercive and a more diverse conception of ethnicity, to set against the embattled, hegemonic conception of "Englishness" which … stabilises so much of the dominant political and cultural discourses'.[3]

During the eighties, the so-called 'politics of difference' emerged to provide an intellectual and philosophical rationale for the kind of arguments expressed by my north London students. The advocates of the politics of difference argue that we are living in a form of society radically different from that of half a century ago—a post-industrial or, more fashionably, postmodern society. Though postmodernism is an ambiguous term and few have tried to define it with any great clarity, for most of

[1] This essay is adapted from Kenan Malik, *The Meaning of Race: Race, History and Culture in Western Society* (London: Macmillan, 1996).

[2] Stuart Hall, 'The Local and the Global', in Anthony D. King (ed.), *Culture, Globalization and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1991), p. 34.

[3] Stuart Hall, 'New Ethnicities', in James Donald and Ali Rattansi (eds.), *'Race', Culture and Difference* (London: Sage Open University, 1992), p. 258.

its theorists the postmodern society is characterized by its very heterogeneity and diversity.

For postmodernists, the Enlightenment project of pursuing a rational, scientific understanding of the natural and social world, and of creating a universal outlook from fragmented experience, has failed. They wish instead to celebrate plurality and fragmentation. Social fragmentation, they argue, is a way of giving voice to those who have been previously excluded from the political arena. The advocates of plurality argue that the assertion of difference helps undermine the grip of the dominant groups over political and social discourse. Traditional politics, they say, serves to silence the voices of the weak and the oppressed, to consign their histories and experiences to the margins and to subsume all experience to the dominant outlook. Because British history is written by those who want to create a singular national identity it denies the experiences and histories of, for example, black people who are not part of that singular identity. By 'decentring' discourse and giving hitherto marginalized groups centre-stage, it is possible to create a more democratic form of social dialogue.

I want to argue here that this pursuit of difference, far from creating a more democratic form of social dialogue, is deeply problematic. The idea of difference has always been central, not to the anti-racist agenda, but to that of racial thought. The politics of difference is profoundly anti-humanist, and provides no resources for the emancipation of the powerless or the oppressed. Indeed, on the contrary, it is an acceptance of powerlessness and marginality, recognition of political failure and defeat.

## West and the Rest

'The world begins to be decolonised', Stuart Hall writes, at 'that moment when the unspoken discovered that they had a history which they could speak' and that they had 'languages other than the languages of the master'.[4] The central argument in contemporary theories of difference is the idea that Enlightenment discourse, by establishing universal norms and by equating such norms with European societies and cultures, has ensured the silence of non-European peoples and cultures. According to critics like Edward Said,[5] Western science and philosophy have established a form of knowledge whereby non-Western societies and cultures are represented solely in terms of the categories of Western thought, and in which Western society acts as a standard against which all other societies are judged. This inevitably leads to the silencing of other voices. At the same time the differences between Western and non-Western cultures are rationalized through non-Western peoples being defined as the 'Others', distinguished solely through their antagonism to the dominant image of the 'self', and against whose peculiarities the self-image of the West is created. The result has been the acquisition of an aura of superiority for Western cultures and an imposition of a sense of inferiority upon non-Western ones.

[4] Stuart Hall, 'The Local and the Global', in King (ed.), *Culture, Globalization and the World-System*, p. 35.
[5] Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), p. 58.

From the Renaissance onwards, Stuart Hall explains, Europe began to define itself in relation to a new idea—'the existence of many new "worlds" profoundly different from itself'.[6] This gave rise to the discourse of the Other, which 'represents what are in fact very differentiated (the different European cultures) as homogeneous (the West)'. Further 'it asserts that these different cultures are united by one thing: the fact that they are all different from the Rest'. At the same time the 'Other' (or the 'Rest' in Hall's terminology) 'though different among themselves, are represented as the same in the sense that they are all different from the West'.[7]

The sense of 'otherness' that Western discourse imposes on non-Western peoples and cultures is seen as the source of the modern ideas of race. 'The figure of the "Other"', writes Hall, was 'constructed as the absolute opposite, the negation of everything the West stood for'.[8] Through the representation of an absolute difference between the West and its Others, the idea of difference took on a racial form. '[R]ace emerged with and has served to define modernity by insinuating itself in various fashions into modernity's prevailing conceptions of moral personhood and subjectivity', David Goldberg believes. 'By working itself into the threads of liberalism's cloths just as that cloth was being woven, race and the various exclusions it licensed became naturalised in the Eurocentric visions of itself and its self-defined others, in its sense of Reason and rational direction.'[9]

Since the framework of 'the West and its Others' is so central to contemporary theories of the meaning of race, I want to examine in this essay some of its assumptions. The concept of the Other was developed in the phenomenological tradition, particularly by Edmund Husserl, as a constitutive factor in the subject's self-image. The Other was conceived as the perceiving, conscious, meaning-conferring other person who helps, or forces, the conscious subject to define its own world picture and its view of its place in it. Through the work of writers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault, the concept of the Other entered post-structuralist discourse.[10]

In post-structuralist discourse the Other is a social object, the difference against which the Self is measured. In Michel Foucault's seminal work, *Folie et Deraison*, lepers were the Others of medieval society, a prime source of contamination, whose exclusion from everyday life helped provide society with a sense of its normality. As leprosy became less common, so it was less able to play its previous symbolic role.

[6] Stuart Hall, 'The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power', in Stuart Hall and Bram Gieben (eds.), *Formations of Modernity: Understanding Modern Societies* (Cambridge: Polity Press/Open University, 1992), p. 289.
[7] Ibid., p. 280.
[8] Ibid., p. 314.
[9] D.T. Goldberg, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 10.
[10] Claude Lévi Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, vol.1, trans by Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972 [orig. pub. 1963]); Claude Lévi Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, vol.2, trans. by Monique, London (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978 [1971]); Claude Lévi Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1966 [1962]); Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (London: Methuen 1957); Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection* (London: Tavistock, 1977); Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973 [1967]); Jacques Derrida, *Of Gramatology* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1976 [1967]); Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978 [1967]); Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation* (London: Tavistock, 1967); Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Tavistock, 1970); Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Tavistock, 1972).

Instead, argues Foucault, a new Other was born: those who were non-productive—the criminal, the homeless and, especially, the mad. 'A new leper is born', writes Foucault, 'who takes the place of the first.'[11]

The Other, then, is that which lies outside a particular culture or society's epistemological boundaries. Not only is everything beyond the boundary treated as the Other, but society requires an Other without which there can be no sense of Self. A single category that can encapsulate the idea of an object of study, an object of exclusion and an object through the perception of whose difference self-identity can be affirmed has proved very attractive in the study of race. Most contemporary studies define racial difference in terms of the Other.

The distinction between the West and its Other is, for many contemporary theorists, implicit in the categories of Enlightenment universalism. Stuart Hall has pointed out how the establishment of the Other was fundamental to the development of Enlightenment thought:

> This 'West and the Rest' discourse greatly influenced Enlightenment thinking . . . In Enlightenment discourse, the West was the model, the prototype and the measure of social progress. It was western progress, civilisation, rationality and development that were celebrated. And yet . . . without the Rest (or its own internal 'others') the West would not have been able to recognise and represent itself as the summit of human history. The figure of 'the Other', banished to the edge of the conceptual world and constructed as the absolute opposite, the negation, of everything which the West stood for, reappeared at the very centre of the discourse of civilisation, refinement, modernity and development in the West. 'The Other' was the 'dark' side—forgotten, repressed and denied; the reverse image of enlightenment and modernity.[12]

According to such critics, through the discourse of universalism the characteristics of the West and its Others were eternalized and the differences established as absolute. Thus Peter Hulme observes that Western understanding of non-Western cultures creates a distinction between 'self' and 'other' by 'establishing characteristics as eternal verities immune from the irrelevances of the historical moment: "ferocious", "hostile" "truculent and vindictive"—these are present as innate characteristics irrespective of circumstances'.[13]

Many of these ideas are central to my book *The Meaning of Race*.[14] Here I argued that the discourse of race helped recast social differences as natural ones, eternalizing what were historically contingent features. I argued, too, that in certain circumstances the notion of the 'other' has helped establish a sense of self-identity. Despite this I want to argue that the framework of 'the West and its Others' is unhelpful in understanding the concept of race. The category of the Other is ahistorical and takes little account of the specificities of time and place in the creation of the discourse of race. Instead it steamrollers historical, social and geographical differences into a single discourse of 'the West and its Others'.

[11] Michel Foucault, *Folie et deraison: Histoire de la folie à lâge classique*, 2nd edn. (Paris: Galimard, 1972), p. 17; an abridged English version can be found in Madness and Civilisation, trans. Richard Howard (London: Tavistock, 1967).

[12] Hall, 'The West and the Rest', in King (ed.), *Culture, Globalization, and the World System*, pp. 312–14.

[13] Peter Hume, *Colonial Encounters: European and the Native Caribbean, 1492–1797* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 49.

[14] Kenan Malik, *The Meaning of Race: Race, History and Culture in Western Society* (London: Macmillan, 1996).

In *Culture and Imperialism* Edward Said posits the existence of 'a fundamental ontological distinction between the West and the rest of the world' whose boundary we may consider 'absolute':

> Throughout the exchange between Europeans and their 'others' that began systematically half a millennium ago, the one idea that has scarcely varied is that there is an 'us' and a 'them', each quite settled, clear, unassailably self-evident. As I discuss it in *Orientalism*, the division goes back to Greek thought about barbarians, but, whoever originated this kind of 'identity' thought, by the nineteenth century it had become the hallmark of imperialist cultures as well as those cultures trying to resist the encroachments of Europe.[15]

Having established a transhistorical, ontological distinction that collapses the subtleties of two millennia of history, Said subsequently reads history backwards, conceiving of the past in terms specific to the present so that all encounters between Europeans and their Others, whatever their form, comprise part of 'the distinction between the West and the rest of the world'. For instance, the acquisition of Ireland by England's Henry II in the twelfth century is deemed to be an imperialist conquest and the English nobility's attitudes towards the Irish is assumed to be racial in form:

> The high age of imperialism is said to have begun in the late 1870s, but in English-speaking realms it began well over seven hundred years before . . . Ireland was ceded by the Pope to Henry II of England in the 1150s; he himself came to Ireland in 1171. From that time on an amazingly persistent cultural attitude existed towards Ireland as a place whose inhabitants were a barbarian and degenerate race.[16]

Said does not tell us what it is about the Pope's award of Ireland to Henry II that is of the same moment as the European powers' scramble for Africa from the 1870s onwards. Nor does he explain in what way twelfth-century perceptions of the Irish show a continuity with nineteenth-century perceptions of Africans. That continuity is simply assumed. Such assumptions are rarely valid. Human consciousness is not static or innate but is constantly recreated through changing social and historical circumstances. Without investigating social phenomena in their specificity, we fall into the trap of projecting specifically contemporary values and judgements on to past epochs.

In Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* the narrator Ishmael observes sourly that 'a purse is but a rag unless you have something in it'. The outward appearance of something tells us little. Only through understanding an object or phenomenon in its context can we appreciate its content or meaning. This is particularly so with social phenomena, such as 'race'. 'A Negro is a Negro', wrote Marx. 'He only becomes a slave in certain circumstances'.[17] Possessing a black skin does not mean that one is a slave, nor indeed that one is an object of racism. However, we have a tendency to assume this because we mistakenly assume that the contemporary signification of blackness has always been so.

Take, for instance, the contemporary reading of Shakespeare's *Othello*. Today the play is generally taken to be an example of the racist outlook of the Elizabethan period.[18] Yet as C. L. R. James has pointed out, this interpretation is simply the

[15] Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 28.
[16] Ibid., p. 266.
[17] K. Marx and F. Engels, *Selected Works* (London: Lawrence & Whishart, 1968), p. 79.
[18] See, for example, Ruth Cowing, 'Blacks in Renaissance Drama and the Role of Shakespeare's Othello', in David Dabydeen (ed.), *The Black Presence in English Literature* (Manchester University Press, 1985).

product of our own 'race-ridden consciousness'. For Elizabethan audiences, what was important was not Othello's 'race' but the fact that he was a stranger:

> [Y]ou could strike out every single reference to his black skin and the play would be essentially the same. Othello's trouble is that he is an outsider. He is not a Venetian. He is a military bureaucrat, a technician hired to fight for Venice, a foreign country. The senate has no consciousness whatever of his colour. That is a startling fact but true. They haven't to make allowances for it. It simply has no place in their minds.[19]

The meaning of a black skin has not always been the same. Nor have the concepts of self and of difference. In the past people perceived of themselves and of others in very different fashion, indeed in ways that would strike us as irrational and incomprehensible. Given the complexity of the development of the discourse of race, it is simply not possible to understand it within a single framework of the 'West and its Others'.

There might appear to be a contradiction in this critique of the framework of the 'West and its Others'. On the one hand I am claiming that contemporary theorists of difference regard the idea of the Other as a product of Enlightenment universalism—in other words, as a specifically modern development. On the other hand, I am also arguing that theirs is an ahistoric understanding of the relationship between Self and Other in that they view the dichotomy as an epistemological constant. There is indeed a contradiction here, but it arises out of the very use of the idea of the Other. Post-structuralist and postmodernist discourse tend to regard the Other as both a product of post-Enlightenment philosophy and as a constant in human perception. The conflation of these two ideas in fact plays a major part in the confusion about the relationship between Enlightenment discourse and the discourse of race.

We can understand better both the ahistoricity of the concept of the Other, and the contradictions it embodies, by looking in some depth at a text that was key to developing the framework of the 'West and its Others'—Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Published in 1978, the book became very influential in its discussion of the way in which Western understanding of the Orient—by which Said meant the Middle East—imposed upon it a reality created in the West. The confusions and contradictions in *Orientalism* reflect the broader problems with post-structuralist theories of difference.

## *Orientalism* and Historicism

In *Orientalism* Said argues that Western historians, philologists and philosophers have fabricated a complex set of representations about the Orient which for the West have effectively become the Orient. Said suggests that the creation of the Orient in literary, historical and scholarly accounts established a discourse through which the West could assert political and military control over the Orient:

> My contention is that, without examining Orientalism as a discourse, one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically,

[19] C. L. R. James, *Spheres of Existence: Selected Writings* (London: Allison & Busby, 1980), p. 141.

scientifically and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period. Moreover, so authoritative a position did Orientalism have that I believe that no one writing, thinking, or acting on the Orient could do so without taking account of the limitations on thought and action imposed by Orientalism. In brief, because of Orientalism, the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought and action . . . [T]his book . . . also tries to show that European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self.[20]

For Said, then, Orientalism constitutes a body of thought which both limits how those in the West are able to think about the Orient and allows the West to establish physical power over it. The discourse of Orientalism establishes a dualism between the West and the Orient which strengthens Western cultures and imprisons those of the Orient. This dualism shapes the reality of the Orient for the peoples of both the West and the Orient itself.

Despite such major claims there is, however, a total lack of precision in Said's work as to what he means by 'Orientalism' and what are the historic and epistemic boundaries that delimit it as a discourse. Said himself observes in his Introduction that 'by Orientalism I mean several things'. But these 'several things' are often so contradictory, and sometimes mutually exclusive, that the term 'Orientalism' is rendered meaningless.

Central to Said's argument would seem to be the idea that Orientalism is a post-Enlightenment discourse, the product of the Enlightenment's universalizing categories and one which allowed the West to establish colonial power over the Orient:

Taking the late eighteenth century as a very roughly defined starting point Orientalism can be discussed and analysed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient.[21]

But Said also argues that 'the demarcation between the Orient and the West. . . already seems bold by the time of the *Iliad*.' In Aeschylus's *The Persians* and Euripides's *The Bacchae*, 'Asia speaks through and by virtue of the European imagination, which is depicted as victorious over Asia, that hostile "other" world beyond the seas'. The two plays, writes Said, distil the distinctions between Europe and the Orient which 'will remain essential motifs of European imaginative geography'.[22] Orientalism now no longer seems to be the specific product of Enlightenment categories but originates at the very dawn of what Said conceives of as European civilization. Within the earliest of Athenian plays appear the concepts that were to be articulated later by the Enlightenment *philosophes*. This allows Said to suggest that Orientalism 'can accommodate Aeschylus, say, and Victor Hugo, Dante and Karl Marx'.[23]

Any concept of a discourse that can accommodate four writers as historically, politically and philosophically diverse as Aeschylus, Hugo, Dante and Marx can but be profoundly ahistoric. The specificities of Aeschylus's understanding of the

[20] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Concepts of the Orient* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985 [1978], p. 3.
[21] Ibid., p. 3.
[22] Ibid., pp. 56–7.
[23] Ibid., p. 3.

barbarian, Dante's view of Islam and Marx's analysis of India disappear beneath the swamp of an all-encompassing 'Orientalism'. And if the concept of the non-Western world as the 'Other' derives from the universalizing impulse of the Enlightenment, yet is premised on 'a line . . . drawn between two continents' by Ancient Greek playwrights and philosophers, in what way is Enlightenment discourse specific to the Enlightenment? Said seems here to posit a view of 'Western thought' essentially untouched since its creation.

The ahistoricism of *Orientalism* leads Said to mimic the very discursive structures against which he polemicizes. Said creates a 'Western tradition' which runs in an unbroken line from the Ancient Greeks through the Renaissance, the Enlightenment to modernism. It is a tradition which defines a coherent Western identity through a specific set of beliefs and values which remain in their essence unchanged through two millennia of European and Western history. This of course is the myth of 'Western civilisation' propagated by many an advocate of Western superiority, from Gobineau to Goebbels and beyond.

In reality there is no such continuous tradition. The idea that modern Western culture has its roots in Greek learning is, as Martin Bernal has shown, the product of post-Enlightenment Romantic thought.[24] Nineteenth-century racial discourse expunged from history the roots of Greek learning in Afro-Asiatic cultures and the Enlightenment's debt to Arab learning, and fabricated instead the myth of an organic 'Western' tradition from ancient Greece to modern Europe.

Said not only accepts the reality of such a tradition, but he also erases, as Aijaz Ahmad observes, the fractures, conflicts and divisions within European societies and treats Europe as a homogenous maker of history:

> It is rather remarkable how constantly and comfortably Said speaks . . . of *a* Europe, or the West, as a self-identical, fixed being which has always had an essence and a project, an imagination and a will; and of the 'Orient' as its object—textually, militarily, and so on. He speaks of the West, or Europe, as the one that produces that knowledge, the East as the object of that knowledge. In other words, he seems to posit stable subject-object identities, as well as ontological and epistemological distinctions between the two. In what sense, then, is Said himself not an Orientalist—or at least as Sadek el-Azm puts it, an 'Orientalist-in-reverse'? Said quite justifiably accuses the 'Orientalist' of essentialising the Orient, but his own essentialising of the 'West' is equally remarkable. In the process Said of course gives us the same 'Europe'—unified, self-identical, transhistorical, textual—which is always rehearsed for us in the sort of literary criticism which traces its own pedigree from Aristotle to T. S. Eliot.[25]

For Said a European, by virtue of being European, must necessarily be racist. '[E]very European', he writes, 'in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric.'[26] Every European? Surely even Count Gobineau would have been somewhat more circumspect about making such sweeping statements. As Ahmad observes, 'These ways of dismissing entire civilisations as diseased formations are unfortunately far too familiar to us, who live on the other side of the colonial divide, from the history of imperialism itself'.[27]

[24] Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilisation* (London: Free Association Books, 1987).
[25] Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes*, *Nations*, *Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992), p. 183.
[26] Said, *Orientalism*, p. 204.
[27] Ahmad, *In Theory*, p. 182.

Elsewhere, Said himself has argued cogently against such ahistoric attitudes:

> If you know in advance that the African or Iranian or Chinese or Jewish or German experience is fundamentally integral, coherent, separate, and therefore comprehensible only to Africans, Iranians, Chinese, Jews or Germans you first of all posit as essential something which, I believe, is both historically created and the result of interpretation—namely the existence of Africanness, Jewishness, of Germanness, or for that matter Orientalism or Occidentalism.[28]

Yet such cautionary reminders of the dangers of an unhistorical approach are all too often lost amidst the rush to establish that the categories of Western thought are in and of themselves imbricated with racial thought. A few chapters on from his warning against thinking of cultures as 'fundamentally integral, coherent, separate', Said argues that there exists a 'fundamental ontological distinction between the West and the rest of the world' and that 'we may consider' 'the geographical and cultural boundaries between the West and its non-Western peripheries' as 'absolute'.[29]

## Discourse, power and knowledge

The filiation between the discourse of difference and that of race that is suggested by the ahistoricism of both is strengthened by the idealism which permeates contemporary radical thinking about race. Rather than being rooted in the real world, discourse often appears, as Salman Rushdie writes of the migrant imagination in *Shame*, to have 'floated up from history, from memory, from Time'. We can see this quite clearly in Said's work, in which the relationship between the discourse of Orientalism and the reality of the West's domination of the Orient is often obscure.

At first sight it might seem strange to accuse Said of ignoring the social and material realities which gave rise to the discourse of Orientalism. After all, one of the significant features of *Orientalism* is its insistence that literary and scholarly criticism must take into account the context of imperialism which has shaped their objects of study. Yet such are the contradictions within Said's work that one sometimes wishes he himself would take heed of his strictures on the need for contextual reading.

On the one hand Said holds that Orientalism is a representation, a fabrication by Western writers and travellers of an Orient that has no real existence. On the other hand he argues that knowledge contained within the discourse of Orientalism played a key part in allowing Europe to subjugate the non-Western world. But if the discourse of Orientalism was effective in allowing Western politicians and generals to take actual control over the Orient, then it must have been more than simply a 'representation'. As Robert Young has asked, 'How can Said argue that the "Orient" is just a representation, if he also wants to claim that "Orientalism" provided the necessary knowledge for actual colonial conquest?'[30]

Said attempts to circumvent this problem by arguing that the texts of Orientalism 'can create not only knowledge but the reality they appear to describe'.[31] What does

[28] Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 35.
[29] Ibid., p. 129.
[30] Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 129.
[31] Said, *Orientalism*, p. 94.

Said mean by this? He could be suggesting that the reality of the Orient is contained within the texts of Orientalism. If so, this would seem to be a highly textualized understanding of reality, especially coming from an author who has been critical of Orientalism precisely for its textuality. If indeed the texts contained the reality, there would be no need for contextual reading, for the context would lie in the texts themselves.

Alternatively Said could mean that the texts of Orientalism impose on the Orient its reality. When Orientalists conceive of the Orient in a particular fashion, the Orient succumbs to that vision. David Goldberg clearly reads Said in this way:

> Naming the racial Other, for all intents and purposes, is the Other. There is, as Said makes clear in the case of the Oriental, no Other behind or beyond the invention of the Other in the Other's name. These practices of naming and knowledge construction deny all autonomy to those so named and imagined, extending power, control, authority and domination over them. To extend Said's analysis of the 'Oriental' to the case of race in general, social science of the Other establishes the limits of knowledge about the Other, for the Other is just what the racialised social science knows.[32]

Goldberg transforms European colonialists into the witchdoctors of modernity who, through the invocation of 'names', extend 'power, control, authority and domination' over their subject peoples. A very potent magic indeed. In Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*, one of the central characters, Saladin, finds himself incarcerated in a detention centre for illegal immigrants. Saladin discovers that his fellow inmates have been transformed into beasts—water buffaloes, snakes, manticores. He himself has become a hairy goat. How do they do it, Saladin asks a fellow prisoner. 'They describe us', comes the reply, 'that's all. They have the power of description and we succumb to the pictures they construct.' Similarly Said and Goldberg seem to be suggesting that the only role allotted to the 'Other' is to succumb to the picture constructed by the Western 'self'. It is a picture of the relationship between the West and its Other in which the Other is transformed into simply a passive victim.

Elsewhere Said has claimed that 'Representation itself [keeps] the subordinate subordinate, the inferior inferior'.[33] But in what way is this an understanding of the Orient different from that contained in the discourse of Orientalism itself, an understanding of the Orient as a passive, submissive Other moulded entirely by the history-making West? Said and Goldberg complain that the universalizing discourse of the West silences the voices of the Other. Yet it is Said and Goldberg themselves who silence the Other by conceiving of it as a compliant, inert object constituted solely by Western knowledge. The West produces its image of the Orient as the Other, and the Orient meekly accepts the image that is constructed.

Whichever way we might interpret them, Said's comments also raise, as Ahmad notes, the question of the very relationship between Orientalism and colonialism:

> In a revealing use of the word 'delivered', Said remarks at one point that Orientalism delivered the Orient to colonialism, so that colonialism begins to appear as a product of Orientalism itself indeed, as the realisation of the project already inherent in Europe's perennial project of inferiorising the Orient first in discourse and then in colonisation.[34]

[32] Goldberg, *Racist Culture*, p. 150.
[33] Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 95
[34] Ahmad, *In Theory*, p. 181.

For Said, Orientalism seems to be not the product of social developments or material forces but their creator. Just as the West is ontologically incapable of understanding the non-Western world except as its Other, so the West is ontologically driven to impose its power over the rest of the globe. Said's argument that 'psychologically, Orientalism is a form of paranoia',[35] an argument that he repeats frequently, suggests that he views Orientalism as the compulsion of a diseased European psyche. The drive to colonization arises out of a psychological need in the Western mind, a need that is already present at the time of the Greeks with their view of the barbarian Other, and which becomes manifest through post-Enlightenment colonial power. Having detached the discourse of race from real social movement, Said provides us with a theory of race and imperialism which sounds like nothing so much as the Romantic vision of a people's destiny unfolding through history, except that where the Romantics saw this as the positive affirmation of a people's heritage, Said regards it as the destructive consequence of a deranged mind.

There is yet another problem that arises from Said's idealism. 'The real issue' he claims, 'is whether there can be a true representation of anything, or whether any or all representations, because they are representations, are embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions and political ambience of the representer'. Said plumps for the second definition and argues that 'a representation is *eo ipso* implicated, intertwined, embedded, interwoven with a great many other things beside "truth", which is itself a representation'. Representations cannot be 'truthful', and 'truth' is but a representation, constituted 'by some common history, tradition, universe of discourse'.[36] Having established that Orientalists' 'objective discoveries . . . are and always have been conditioned by the fact that its truths, like any truths delivered by language, are embodied in language', Said then quotes Nietzsche to the effect that language is but 'a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms and anthropomorphisms' and that 'truths are but illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are'.[37]

But if true representations are not possible, and truth itself is but a representation, then in what way can we criticize Orientalism? After all, one representation is as good as another and there is no objective means by which to challenge the picture that Orientalists provide us of the Orient. The relativism of Said's outlook (a relativism with which, as we shall see later, he is not entirely comfortable) denies the possibility of challenging the very discourse he despises.

The problem in comprehending the relationship between the representation and the real arises from the concept of 'discourse' which Said derives from Michel Foucault. I use the term 'discourse' in a relatively loose sense, meaning a coherent body of knowledge which shapes and limits the ways of understanding a particular topic. Central to Foucault's concept of a discourse, however, is the idea that social facts can never be conceived of as being 'true' or 'false'. The very language we use to describe facts imposes truth or falsity upon those facts. Hence it is the discourse itself that creates the truth about a particular topic and competing discourses create competing truths. Truth lies not in the relationship between discourse and social

[35] Said, *Orientalism*, p. 72.
[36] Ibid., pp. 272, 273.
[37] Ibid., p. 203.

reality but in the relationship between discourse and power. It is the relationship between discourse and power which decides which one of the many truths is accepted as *the* truth. For Foucault 'power produces knowledge' and 'power and knowledge directly imply one another' because 'there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute . . . power relations'.[38]

For Foucault, a discourse is a way of constituting power, and is at the same time verified by that power. The knowledge which a discourse produces constitutes a kind of power, exercised over those who are 'known'. When that knowledge is exercised in practice, those who are known in a particular way will be subject to it. Those who produce the discourse also have the power to make it true, to enforce its validity:

> Truth isn't outside power . . . [I]t induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth; that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish between 'true' and 'false' statements; the means by which each is sanctioned; and the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.[39]

But what does Foucault mean by 'power'? He is very vague about this. Power, for Foucault, cannot be conceived of in class or social terms. It is not the property of an individual or a class, nor does it emanate from an identifiable source or institution, such as the state. Power is simply omnipresent. Its threads are everywhere and it is only through power that 'reality' is constituted. Given the omnipresence of power, and its role in constituting reality, Foucault is forced to conceive of power relations in arbitrary terms. Power struggles do not emanate from social or historical movement, but simply pit all against all: 'There aren't immediately given subjects of the struggle, one the proletariat the other the bourgeoisie. Who fights against whom? We all fight each other. And there is always within each of us something that fights something else.'[40] I shall return to the consequences of Foucault's understanding of power later. What is important now is to grasp how belief in the arbitrary nature of both power and truth leads to an extreme relativism. If power is simply the constituting element in all social systems, how can we choose between one society and another? And if a discourse makes its own truth, whose validity is given by the strength of an arbitrary power, how are we to distinguish between different representations or discourses? We can neither relate ideas and representations to real social movements, nor can we pass value judgements on different sets of ideas.

The logic of the Foucauldian argument would lead us to suppose that it is the very act of attempting to establish an objective truth that is the problem. And this is indeed the argument that the more extreme proponents of a relativistic outlook use against Enlightenment discourse. The phenomenologist Emmanual Levinas objected to the very idea of knowledge in the traditional Western sense because in the process of understanding, he argued, Western philosophy undermines and devalues whatever societies, cultures or modes of living it comes across: 'Western philosophy coincides with the disclosure of the other where the other, in manifesting itself as a being,

[38] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* (Brighton: Harvester, 1980), p. 27.
[39] Ibid., p. 131.
[40] Ibid., pp. 207–8.

loses its alterity. From its infancy philosophy has been struck with a horror of the other that remains other.'[41]

What Levinas means is that Western thought cannot allow objects of study to remain outside of its epistemological boundaries or to be defined in their own terms. For Levinas conventional knowledge, conceived of as the relationship between subject and object, always involves appropriating one to the other. This he calls 'the imperialism of the same', drawing a parallel between the physical subjugation of the Third World and the intellectual subordination of its ideas, history and values. Just as Western politicians and generals annex foreign lands, so the West's intellectuals and philosophers appropriate all other knowledge. Robert Young similarly argues that Western universalism 'articulates a philosophical structure which uncannily simulates the project of nineteenth-century imperialism; the construction of knowledges which all operate through forms of expropriation and incorporation of the other mimics at a conceptual level the geographic and economic absorption of the non-European world by the West.'[42]

Since all knowledge and understanding requires the appropriation of the object by the subject, implicit in every act of understanding, says Levinas, is an act of violence. The only solution to this problem for Levinas, and for other theoreticians of difference, such as Robert Young and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, is to abjure entirely knowledge in the conventional sense. Instead of 'grasping' the object, says Levinas, we must 'respect' it; in the place of assimilation there should be 'infinite separation'.

At this point difference becomes resolved into *indifference*, an unwillingness to engage with what any one else has to say. It is an outlook described much more succinctly and lucidly than by any postmodern professor by the TV character Archie Bunker in the American sitcom *All in the Family*. In one particular episode, Edith tells Archie to lace his bowling shoes 'over' rather than 'under'. 'What's the difference?' demands Archie. When Edith tries to explain, Archie cuts her short: 'I didn't say—"What's the difference—explain it to me". I said "What's the difference—who the hell cares?".'

In the indifference of postmodernism, Christopher Miller perceptively observes, the politics of difference mirror the arguments of racial thinking. 'The impulse to leave the other alone', he writes, 'rejoins the impulse to obliterate the other on the ground that they have in common: the inability to describe something outside the self, to see in Clifford Geertz's words "ourselves among others, as a local example of the forms human life has locally taken".'[43] In other words, the advocates of racial thinking and the theorists of difference seem equally indifferent to our common humanity. While one posits the notion of a 'Britishness' or 'Frenchness' or 'Americanness' accessible only to those privileged by race or history, the other renounces any possibility of access across the divide of cultural or ethnic difference. Said himself is well-aware of the dangers of such an outlook. He reminds us that the pluralist approach of privileging every voice, far from ensuring a more democratic society, would simply create a modern-day Tower of Babel: '[I]f everyone were to

[41] Emmanual Levinas, 'The Trace of the Other', in Mark C. Taylor (ed.), *Deconstructing in Context* (Chicogo University Press, 1986), p. 346.
[42] Young, *White Mythologies*, p. 3.
[43] Christopher Miller, *Theories of Africans: Francophone Literature and Anthropology in Africa* (University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 10.

insist on the radical purity or priority of one's own voice, all we would have would be the awful din of unending strife, and a bloody political mess'.[44] Social dialogue requires, not that all voices are equal, but a willingness to engage in critical debate and to accept that some views are more valid than others. If all voices are to be heard and all views are equally valid, we may have cacophony but there can be no dialogue. Unfortunately, Said's more reasoned approach has got submerged, both in his work and that of other post-structuralist writers, beneath the inexorable logic of the anti-universalist argument.

## Humanism, colonialism and the Holocaust

Associated with the anti-universalist stance of post-structuralist theories has been an unremitting hostility to a humanist approach. Humanism is a philosophy which takes human experiences as the starting point for humankind's knowledge of itself and its relation to nature. This anthropocentric outlook underpinned the scientific and philosophical revolution unleashed by the Renaissance and the Enlightenment.

At the heart of humanism are two key beliefs. First, humanists hold that human beings, while an inherent part of nature and subject to its laws, nevertheless have an exceptional status in nature because of their unique ability, arising out of human sociability, to overcome the constraints placed upon them by nature. Second, humanists believe in the unity of humankind, holding that all humans possess something in common, a something which is often described as a common 'human nature'.

The humanist outlook has expressed itself in a variety of political forms, from liberalism to Marxism. Liberal humanists tend to view human nature as a static, eternal quality given by nature. David Hume, for instance, argued that 'there is a great uniformity among the acts of men, in all nations and ages, and that human nature remains the same in its principles and operations'.[45]

Marx, on the other hand, saw the human essence as a social or historical construction. In his 'Theses on Feuerbach', for example, Marx criticized the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach for 'abstract[ing] from the historical process' and assuming that the human essence was an internal dumb generality which naturally unites the many individuals'. But, argued Marx, 'the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.'[46] In other words, 'historical humanism', as Georg Lukács called it, sees 'man' not as naturally given but 'as a product of himself and of his own activity in history'.[47]

Whether liberal or Marxist, underlying all humanistic strands is a belief in human emancipation—the idea that humankind can rationally transform society through the agency of its own efforts. Indeed, no emancipatory philosophy is possible without a humanist perspective, for any anti-humanistic outlook is forced to look outside

[44] Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 22.
[45] D. Hume, *Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford University Press, 1994; [1748]).
[46] Karl Marx, 'Theses on Feuerbach', in Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*, p. 29.
[47] Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin, 1962), pp. 28–9.

humanity for the agency of salvation. Conversely, no humanist outlook is possible without an accompanying belief in human rationality and capacity for social progress.

Anti-humanistic strands developed from the Enlightenment onwards, largely in opposition to the idea of rational human emancipation. Just as there have been a number of different strands of humanism, so there have been a number of different strands of anti-humanism, ranging from the conservatism of Burke, the Catholic reaction of de Maistre to the nihilism of Nietzsche and the Nazism of Martin Heidegger. All rejected Enlightenment rationalism and the idea of social progress because they despaired of the capacity of humankind for such rational progress. Anti-humanism rejected ideas of equality and human unity, celebrating instead difference and divergence and exalting the particular and the authentic over the universal.

Anti-humanism developed therefore as a central component of élite theories and hence of racial theories. In the postwar era, however, anti-humanism came to represent a very different tradition—the liberal, indeed radical, anti-colonialist and anti-racist outlook. In the hands of such critics of Western society as Frantz Fanon, Jean-Paul Sartre, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Louis Althusser, among others, anti-humanism became a central thread of structuralist and post-structuralist theories, and a key weapon in the interrogation of racist and imperialist discourses. 'Humanism', Sartre wrote in his famous preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, 'is nothing but an ideology of lies, a perfect justification for pillage; its honeyed words, its affectations of sensibility were only alibis for our aggression'.[48]

How did a philosophical outlook which originated within conservative anti-emancipatory politics, and which was a key component of racial theory, become a central motif of radical anti-racist, anti-imperialist doctrines? And how did philosophers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger, whose work had previously been seen as paving the way for twentieth-century racist and fascist ideologies, become icons of anti-racist discourse? Understanding this puzzle will take us a long way towards explaining the relationship between theories of race and the contemporary discourse of difference.

There were two main strands to postwar radical anti-humanism. One developed out of anti-colonial struggles, the other through Western (and in particular French) academic philosophy and was subsequently elaborated by the 'new social movements' such as feminism and environmentalism which emerged in the late sixties and seventies.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Martinique-born Algerian nationalist Frantz Fanon gave voice to the rage of colonial peoples against their inhuman treatment at the hands of the imperialist powers. The humanist idea of 'Man', wrote Fanon, which lay at the heart of the Western post-Enlightenment tradition, was achieved through the dehumanizing of the non-Western Other:

> That same Europe where they were never done talking of Man, and where they never stopped proclaiming that they were only anxious for the welfare of Man: today we know what sufferings humanity has paid for every one of their triumphs of the mind.[49]

[48] Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Preface', in Frantz Franon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967 [1961]), p. 21.
[49] F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 251.

Europeans only became human, suggested Fanon, by denying humanity to their colonial Other. As Sartre put it, 'Humanism is the counterpart of racism: it is a practice of exclusion'.[50] According to Sartre, 'There is nothing more consistent than a racist humanism since the European has only been able to become a man through creating slaves and monsters'.[51] To maintain a belief in humanism while treating non-European peoples as animals, Europeans declared that non-Europeans were in fact sub-human. Herein lies the source of racial theory in humanism. At the same time, argued Fanon, humanists salved their consciences, by inviting the sub-human colonial Other to become human by imitating 'European Man':

> Western bourgeois racial prejudice as regards the nigger and the Arab is a racism of contempt; it is a racism which minimises what it hates. Bourgeois ideology, however, which is the proclamation of an essential equality between men, manages to appear logical in its own eyes by inviting the subhuman to become human, to take as their prototype Western humanity as incarcerated in the Western bourgeoisie .[52]

The category 'human' was empty of meaning, such critics asserted, because it was ahistoric. The invocation of a common human nature hid the fact that human nature is socially and historically constructed. When humanists assert the universality of human nature, what they are really talking about are the particular human values expressed in European society. '[T]hose universal features which define the human', argues Robert Young, 'mask over the assimilation of human itself with European values.' The category of the human, he believes, 'however exalted in its conception' is 'too often invoked only in order to put the male before the female, or to classify other "races" as sub-human, and therefore not subject to the ethical prescriptions applicable to humanity at large'.[53] Third World critics, however, did not reject humanism in its entirety. Fanon, for instance, recognized that the contradiction lay not so much in humanism itself as in the disjuncture between the ideology of humanism and the practice of colonialism:

> All the elements of a solution to the great problems of humanity have, at different times, existed in European thought. But Europeans have not carried out in practice the mission which fell to them, which consisted of bringing their whole weight to bear violently upon these elements, of modifying their arrangement and their nature, of changing them and, finally, of bringing the problem of mankind to an infinitely higher plane.[54]

Fanon called therefore for a new humanism stripped of its racist, Eurocentric aspects: 'Let us decide not to imitate Europe; let us combine our muscles and our brains in a new direction. Let us try to create the whole man, whom Europe has been incapable of bringing to triumphant birth'.[55]

For Fanon, then, the humanist idea of 'the whole man' was key to emancipation. Despite the critique of Western humanism as a camouflage for the dehumanization of non-Western peoples, humanism remained a central component of the ideology of Third World liberation struggles of the postwar era, virtually all of which drew

[50] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, vol.1: *Theory of Practical Ensembles*, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith (London: New Left Books, 1976), p. 752.
[51] Sartre, 'Preface', in Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 22.
[52] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 131.
[53] Young, *White Mythologies*, pp. 122, 123.
[54] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 253.
[55] Ibid., p. 252.

on the emancipatory logic of universalism. Indeed Western radicals were often shocked by the extent to which anti-colonial struggles adopted what the radicals conceived of as tainted ideas. The concepts of universalism and unilinear evolutionism, Lévi-Strauss observed, found 'unexpected support from peoples who desire nothing more than to share in the benefits of industrialization; peoples who prefer to look on themselves as temporarily backward rather than permanently different'.[56] Elswhere he noted ruefully that the doctrine of cultural relativism 'was challenged by the very people for whose moral benefit the anthropologists had established it in the first place'.[57]

The willingness of Third World radicals to maintain at least a residual support for a humanistic outlook stemmed from their continued engagement in the project of liberation. Postwar radicals in the West, however, increasingly rejected humanism, not simply in its guise as a cover for racism and colonialism, but in its entirety. For postwar European intellectuals the most pressing problem was not that of establishing the ideological foundations of liberation struggles but rather of coming to terms with the demise of such struggles in Western democracies. Western intellectuals had, on the one hand, to excavate the social and intellectual roots of the Nazi experience, an experience which more than any other weighed upon the European intellectual consciousness in the immediate postwar period, and on the other, to explain why the possibilities of revolutionary change, which had seemed so promising in the early part of the century, appeared to have been extinguished. For many the explanation lay in some deep-seated malaise in European culture.

Postwar radicals asked themselves why it was that Germany, a nation with deep philosophical roots in the Enlightenment project and a strong and vibrant working-class movement, should succumb so swiftly and so completely to Nazism. The answer seemed to be that it was the logic of Enlightenment rationalism itself and the nature of democratic politics that had given rise to such barbarism. As Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, members of the 'Frankfurt School' of radical German scholars, put it in their seminal work, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 'Enlightenment is totalitarian'.[58] In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno and Horkheimer developed the two motifs—a critique of Enlightenment rationality and social progress, on the one hand, and of mass society, on the other—which were to become immensely influential in shaping postwar discourse.

The idea that the Holocaust—and indeed all Western barbarism—found its roots in Enlightenment rationalism and humanism became a central tenet of postwar radicalism, as Lévi-Strauss expressed in an interview in *Le Monde*:

> All the tragedies we have lived through, first with colonialism, then with fascism, finally the concentration camps, all this has taken shape not in opposition to or in contradiction with so-called humanism in the form in which we have been practising it for several centuries, but I would say almost as its natural continuation.[59]

According to Lévi-Strauss, the Enlightenment ambition of mastering nature, of setting humanity above nature, inevitably had destructive consequences for human-

[56] Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* vol.2, p. 53.
[57] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The View from Afar*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel and Phoebe Hoss (Harmondworth: Penguin, 1987 [1983]), p. 28.
[58] Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 1979 [1944]), p. 6.
[59] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Le Monde* 21–22 Jan. 1979; cited in Todorov, *On Human Diversity*, p. 67.

ity itself. A humanity which could enslave nature was quite capable of enslaving fellow human beings.

The idea that technological and social progress could be the cause of barbarism has led many critics to find evidence not simply of humanism but of the whole project of 'modernity' behind the Holocaust. Zygmunt Bauman has suggested that the Final Solution was the 'product' not 'failure' of modernity and that 'it was the rational world of modern civilisation that made the Holocaust thinkable':

> The truth is that every ingredient of the Holocaust—all those many things that rendered it possible—was normal . . . in the sense of being fully in keeping with everything we know about our civilisation, its guiding spirit, its priorities, its immanent vision of the world—and of the proper ways to pursue human happiness together with a perfect society.[60]

Bauman's hint that 'civilisation' itself may have been responsible for the barbarism of the Final Solution is made explicit by Richard Rubinstein who (in a phrase approvingly quoted by Bauman) argues that the Holocaust 'bears witness to the *advance of civilisation*':

> The world of death camps and the society it engenders reveals the progressively intensifying night side of Judeo-Christian civilisation. Civilisation means slavery, wars, exploitation, and death camps. It also means medical hygiene, elevated religious ideas, beautiful art, and exquisite music. It is an error to imagine that civilisation and savage cruelties are antitheses . . . Both creation and destruction are inseparable parts of what we call civilisation.[61]

Here again in the debate on the origins of the Holocaust, as in the discussion about the Other, we can see the conflation of arguments about the post-Enlightenment discourse with those about a supposed tradition that has existed from the beginnings of the Western (or Judeo-Christian) history. But what can it mean to suggest that barbarism is an inseparable part of civilization? It is, on the one hand, logically meaningless, since the two concepts are defined in opposition to each other. On the other hand to suggest that 'the advance of civilisation' inevitably leads to 'slavery, wars, exploitation, and death camps' can only mean that barbarism is an eradicable part of human nature. But is this not to posit a concept of human nature that is as ahistoric as that supposedly held by humanists? Condemning civilization as forever imbricated with inhumanity is certainly an argument that sits uneasily with a critique of humanism which claims that an ahistoric notion of 'Man' has been used to deny humanity to the West's Others.

The argument that humanism and rationalism (or 'modernity') are the causes of the Holocaust implies, in the words of Tzvetan Todorov, 'not only that the speaker is disregarding or repressing the ideological origins of fascism in nineteenth century *antihumanism* . . . but also that the speaker is wilfully cultivating a logical paradox, since he is complacently deducing the thesis of the *inequality* of man on the basis of human *equality*'.[62]

The second motif in the Frankfurt School analysis of fascism which came to dominate postwar thought was the critique of mass society. The concept of mass society began to win acceptance among sociologists in the 1950s. For the sociologists

[60] Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), pp 6, 13, 8.
[61] Richard L. Rubenstein, *The Cunning of History*(London: Harper Row, 1978), pp. 91, 95.
[62] T. Todorov, *On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism and Exoticism in French Thought*, trans. C. Porter (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 68.

of the mass society, technological progress and mass democracy had combined to debase society, creating a mass of people with little intellectual depth, spiritual involvement or cultural profundity. The creation of such a mass society had taken humanity to the abyss of barbarism. Behind the rise of Nazism lay the willingness of the unthinking masses to follow herd-like behind demagogic leaders such as Adolf Hitler. This idea was first expressed in the Frankfurt School's analysis of the 'authoritarian personality'—a personality type characterized by extreme obedience and unquestioning respect for authority and usually accompanied by rigidity, conventionality, prejudice, and intolerance of weakness or ambiguity.[63] According to the authors of *The Authoritarian Personality*, the potential of fascism lay in the presence of such a personality type within the mass of the people. Given that democratic societies, such as the USA, were also mass societies, the sociologists of the Frankfurt School believed that the potential existed for the rise of fascism there too.

The critique of Enlightenment rationality and the critique of mass society became fused into the 'totalitarian' theory of fascism. Popularized by Hannah Arendt in her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the theory suggested that fascism was a species of totalitarianism, similar to the Soviet Union, Communist China or (a comparison that later totalitarian theorists would make) the Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran and Saddam Hussein's Iraq. The components of a totalitarian state were a herd-like mass, a compelling totalizing ideology that subsumed all under its cold logic and a machine-like society that effaced all individuality in the name of a higher rationality. For Arendt totalitarianism represented the 'madness of the mob', the 'refuse of all classes', falling under the leadership of *déclassé* intellectuals. The members of the mob sought to merge into something larger than themselves, to give up their individualism to belong to the mass.[64] The critique of totalitarianism—and of totality—was to become a defining feature of post-structuralist discourse.

The irony in this is that the critique of totalitarianism is in substance a reworking of the nineteenth-century critique of Enlightenment rationalism and of mass society pursued by philosophers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger, whose work flowed from the hostility of the intelligentsia to equality and mass democracy. Arendt was a student of Heidegger's and her theory of totalitarianism carries over the main themes of Heidegger's thought in its anti-mass character, its incipient anti-rationalism and in particular its hostility to the Enlightenment as the embodiment of both.

Heidegger had been an active member of the Nazi Party until 1943. After the war he attempted to rehabilitate his reputation and in the document *Rectoral Addresses—Facts and Thoughts* he marshalled the arguments which he hoped would distance himself from the Third Reich. The key piece of evidence for the defence was the assertion that Nazism was simply another manifestation of the spirit of modernity. According to Heidegger there existed a 'universal will to power within history, now understood to embrace the planet' and that 'everything stands in this historical reality, no matter whether it is called communism, fascism or world democracy'.[65] It

[63] Theodor Adorno, Else Frenke-Brunswik, Daniel J. Levinson and R. Nevitt Sanford, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Norton, 1950).

[64] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich, 1973), p. 309.

[65] Cited in Thomas Rockmore, *On Heidegger's Nazism and Philosophy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 93–4.

is a telling measure of the degree of confusion in postwar theory that liberal and Nazi explanations of the Holocaust can barely be prised apart. As James Heartfield observes, 'Heidegger's thought, having tried to articulate—or spiritualise—national socialism, went on to a more remarkable achievement. Through Hannah Arendt and the totalitarian thesis, Heidegger's ideas shaped the interpretation and critique of fascism after its defeat.'[66]

Indeed, it did more than that. The anti-humanism of Heidegger, and his fellow thinkers, became a central theme of post-structuralist and postmodernist discourse, of colonial discourse analysis and of the theories of difference and cultural pluralism. As Heartfield remarks, 'how perverse that the rejection of . . . barbarism should preserve the very prejudices that gave rise to it'.

Underlying the commonality of themes in racial and post-structuralist theory is their attempt to come to terms with the same problem—the disjuncture between a belief in equality and progress, and a society that can seem to deliver neither. Read the whole of the passage in which Sartre rails against the hypocrisy of Western humanism and this becomes clear:

> Liberty, equality, fraternity, love, honour, patriotism and what have you. All this did not prevent us from making anti-racial speeches about dirty niggers, dirty Jews and dirty Arabs. High-minded people, liberal or just softhearted, protest that they were shocked by such inconsistency; but they were either mistaken or dishonest, for with us there is nothing more consistent than a racist humanism since the European has only been able to become a man through creating slaves and monsters.[67]

Nineteenth-century thinkers who held fast to Enlightenment principles—whether liberal or revolutionary—argued that the disjuncture could be closed by social transformation. By the end of the century, however, liberals had by and large come to despair of the possibility of any such transformation and were drifting over to the long-held conservative belief that inequalities were both inevitable and necessary. By the midpoint of the twentieth century, the experience of Nazism and the defeat of working-class movements had led radicals to similar pessimistic conclusions. As Stuart Hughes observes in his wonderfully lucid study of postwar intellectual thought, there was within the radical intelligentsia a widespread

> disappointment in the course of recent history, in the strategy of the political parties that laid claim to the inheritance of Marx, and, most particularly, in the proletariat itself. The class which Engels had celebrated as the 'heirs of classical philosophy' had failed to perform in the style expected of it.[68]

Postwar developments entrenched such views. The experience of the failure of the student revolts of May 1968, the collapse of both Stalinist and social democratic parties in the eighties and the demise of Third World liberation movements all added to the belief that social transformation was a chimera.

The very goals of 'modernity' seemed unattainable. As Bauman has put it, 'Postmodernity is modernity coming to terms with its own impossibility: a self-monitoring modernity, one that consciously discards what it was once unconsciously doing'.[69] For postwar theorists the gap between belief and reality could be closed

[66] James Heartfield, 'The Heidegger Affair' (unpublished paper).
[67] Sartre, 'Preface' in Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, p. 22.
[68] Hughes, *The Sea Change*, pp. 135–6.
[69] Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 272.

not by transforming the reality but by relinquishing their beliefs. Despairing of social change, post-structuralist and postmodernist thinkers asserted instead that equality and humanity had no meaning, and that difference and diversity should be our goal.

Despair about social transformation also led postwar theorists to see the barbarism of the twentieth century not as a product of specific social relations, but unspecifically as the consequence of 'modernity'. The claim that the categories of modernity necessarily give rise to a racial division of humanity conflates two different meanings of 'modernity'. On the one hand there is modernity in the sense of an intellectual or philosophical outlook which holds that it is possible to apprehend the world through reason and science—what has come to be called the 'Enlightenment project'—and the technological advance that such an outlook has engendered. On the other hand modernity has also come to mean the particular society in which these ideas found expression—in other words, capitalism.

By conflating the social relations of capitalism with the intellectual and technological progress of 'modernity', the product of the former can be laid at the door of the latter. The specific problems created by capitalist social relations became dehistoricized. In post-structuralist discourse racial theory, colonialism or the Holocaust are not investigated in their specificity, as products of distinctive tendencies within capitalist society, but are all lumped together as the general consequence of 'modernity'. In this way the positive aspects of capitalist society—its invocation of reason, its technological advancements, its ideological commitment to equality and universalism—are denigrated while its negative aspects—the inability to overcome social divisions, the propensity to treat large sections of humanity as 'inferior' or 'subhuman', the contrast between technological advance and moral turpitude, the tendencies towards barbarism—are seen as inevitable or natural.

## From the 'Right to be Equal' to the 'Right to be Different'

The terrain of anti-racist struggle today is no longer that of social equality but cultural diversity. Indeed, the very meaning of social equality has come into question: for many the concept of equality in the old sense is a form of discredited universalism which does not take into account the differences within society. Equality has come to be redefined from 'the right to be the same' to mean 'the right to be different'.

In the sixties and seventies, the struggle for equal rights meant campaigns against immigration laws or against segregation through which different 'races' were treated differently; today, it means campaigns for separate schools, demands to use different languages, the insistence on maintaining particular cultural practices. The black American critic bell hooks observes that in the past, 'civil rights reform reinforced the idea that black liberation should be defined by the degree to which black people gained equal access to material opportunities and privileges available to whites—jobs, housing, schooling, etc.' This strategy could never bring about liberation, argues hooks, because such 'ideas of "freedom" were informed by efforts to imitate the behaviour, lifestyles, and most importantly the values and consciousness of white

colonisers'.[70] In the Alice in Wonderland world of postmodern discourse, the struggle for equality is likened to the racist practices of the 'white colonisers' while the rejection of equal rights is seen as the hallmark of social advancement. 'Equality' has come to mean oppression, 'difference' liberation.

The shift from campaigning for the 'right to be equal' to proclaiming the 'right to be different' is predicated on the antihumanist, anti-essentialist tendencies in post-structuralist discourse. But these tendencies themselves are a product of the disillusionment with social change which has become an increasingly prominent feature of contemporary politics. Campaigning for equality requires one to believe that it is possible to effect social change, to transform society through humanity's collective efforts. Conversely proclaiming difference requires us to accept society as it is, to accept as given the divisions and inequalities that characterize our social world. In this sense the philosophy of difference is a rationalization of the demise and defeat of social movements over the past decades which has led radicals to renounce the very idea of social struggle. The ideas of difference seek to accommodate to this new political era.

For all their desire to be different, what postmodern pluralists really want is their particular history, their particular culture, their particular story to be acknowledged. Pluralism is about accepting the common framework of society but arguing about what we want to be included in it.

Unable to transform society, postmodern critics accommodate to, and occasionally even celebrate, oppression. bell hooks writes nostalgically of the segregated South of her childhood as a 'marginal space where black people (though contained) exercised power, where we were truly caring and supportive to one another':

> I had come from an agrarian world where folks were content to get by on little, where Baba, mama's mother, made soap, dug fishing worms, set traps for rabbits, made butter and wine, sewed quilts and wrung the necks of chickens… The sweet communion we felt (that strong sense of solidarity shrouding and protecting my growing up years was something I thought all black people had known) was rooted in love, relational love, the care we had towards one another.[71]

hooks might have added that this was also a world where poverty was endemic, starvation common and lynching an ever-present threat. hooks goes on to contrast the romanticized black community of her childhood with the 'corrosive' nature of sixties black militancy:

> Looking back, it is easy to see that the nationalism of the sixties and seventies was very different from the racial solidarity born of shared circumstance and not theories of black power. Not that an articulation of black power was not important; it was. Only it did not deliver the goods; it was too informed by corrosive power relations, too mythic, to take the place of that concrete relational love that bonded black folks together in communities of hope and struggle.[72]

For hooks, struggle itself becomes the problem. The aspiration to power is necessarily 'corrosive' in contrast to the 'concrete relational love' that characterized black communities in the past. In the face of social movements that failed to 'deliver

[70] bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (London: Turnabout, 1991), p. 15.
[71] hooks, *Yearning*, p. 35.
[72] Ibid., p. 36.

the goods', post-structuralist and postmodernist thinkers are forced to romanticize oppression, decry equality and accept difference and marginality. bell hooks makes this clear when she derives the politics of difference from the defeat of the sixties' black liberation movement:

> In the wake of the black power movement, after so many rebels were slaughtered and lost, many of these voices were silenced by a repressive state; others became inarticulate. It has become necessary to find new avenues to transmit the messages of black liberation struggle, new ways to talk about racism and other voices of displaced, marginalised, exploited, and oppressed black people.[73]

The philosophy of difference is the politics of defeat, born out of defeat. It is the product of disillusionment with the possibilities of social change and the acceptance of the inevitability of an unequal, fragmented world. Unable to pursue the goal of equality, postmodernists have simply refashioned its meaning and embraced difference. The consequence has been the celebration of marginality, of parochialism and indeed of oppression. Transcending such an outlook requires not simply intellectual conviction but political aspiration.

[73] Ibid., p. 25.