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Awareness of the ecological crisis has undeniably increased during the past three or four decades. Nevertheless, despite some local and regional improvements, the global crisis has worsened over this period. This paradoxical situation of pervasive awareness of environmental problems and predominantly cosmetic, ineffectual responses to them is attributable, at least in part, to the social and cultural conditions associated with postmodernity.

This study is a theoretical investigation of the social and cultural context of the ecological crisis. It involves an exploration of three interrelated narratives that have become dominant in postmodernity—the end of history myth, neoliberalism, and the rhetoric of economic globalization—and demonstrates how each contributes to ongoing social and environmental degradation. This study also shows how these postmodern narratives inform the prevailing assumption that the primary purpose of education and the proper function of schools (especially the public schools) is to promote economic competitiveness in the new global economy. But if the new global economy is accelerating the pace of environmental destruction, and if much of the instruction that goes on in schools in the United States seeks to develop in students the skills needed to compete more effectively in this new economy, then it is not entirely hyperbolic to suggest that academic success in school amounts to ecological failure.

The daily practices of schools reflect and reinforce the dominant values of the larger culture; hence, formal education, as it is currently configured, will likely do little to

ameliorate the ecological crisis. Given the strict, top-down organization and management of public schools, it is unreasonable to expect schools to initiate substantive changes supportive of ecological sustainability. This will require major changes in education policy.

A SNOWBALL IN HELL? ECOLOGICAL EDUCATION  
IN A POSTMODERN AGE

by

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## PREFACE

I have never really considered myself an environmentalist. I'm not outdoorsy. I don't hike or ride a bike. I don't raft or kayak. I don't hunt or fish. I haven't been camping since I was a child. In fact, I spend most of my time indoors. I use fertilizers and herbicides on my lawn. I don't always buy organic food and I am not a vegetarian. Furthermore, I have always been somewhat put off by the didacticism of much of mainstream environmentalism.

So why write about ecology and the environment, the reader might ask. The short answer is that I write about ecology and environmental problems because they are important. I will probably live to see major detrimental effects of global environmental change. My two sons definitely will. And of course the reach of these problems extends well beyond me and my family. The ecological crisis affects everyone and one need not be a prototypical environmentalist to be concerned about it.

I first became aware of the seriousness of the ecological crisis when I was an undergraduate majoring in biology in the early 1990s. There was a resurgence of interest in the environment at that time following a lull during the 1980s—rather like the current upswing after the quiescence of the late nineties through the first half of this decade. Environmental concerns were often addressed in the courses I took back then, but in a very sterile, detached, and objective manner. The focus was on environmental *science*: the physics of global warming, the ecology of habitat destruction, the physiological effects of pollution. The social and cultural dimensions of environmental problems were either ignored or dealt with in a very cursory manner.

Though limited and one-sided, my exposure to the notion that human activities are negatively altering the ecology of the entire planet in perhaps irreversible ways was among only a handful of ideas I encountered in college that seemed to be of much importance. What I found most disturbing was not the prospect of a global environmental disaster (it seemed a long way off at the time—less so now) but the gap between my ability to intellectually understand what was physically occurring and my inability to understand, on an existential level, how this potential disaster might be averted. Technological solutions seemed sketchy at best and I could not see how the environmentally destructive values of the culture might be changed. I am still unsure and I am skeptical of anyone who claims to have the answer.

As a science teacher, I continue to struggle with this disparity between a shallow, but authoritative scientific understanding of the physical causes and effects of the ecological crisis and a deeper, if inchoate understanding of the human attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that have brought us to this point. I am very adept at explaining the material details of the greenhouse effect, why biodiversity is important, how commercial agriculture damages soils, and so on, but I still find it a challenge to marry the objective information with a profound moral concern over the diminishment of the earth's ability to sustain life.

However, this study is not primarily concerned with existential issues faced by individual teachers—important as these are. It includes little that would be of much practical significance in classrooms; no specific curricular recommendations are put

forward. This work is concerned with education in a very broad sense, and in having such a wide focus, many finer details must inevitably be forfeited.

My effort here constitutes an appeal to policy makers in education to consider the values that underlie the organization and aims of schools and how these contribute to the ecological crisis. The one conclusion I arrive at is that classroom teachers are not in a very good position to effect change all by themselves. Any hope of achieving an ecologically sustainable society will require both bottom-up and top-down measures, but this work primarily addresses the latter need for leadership in changing the direction of education policy.

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## CHAPTER I

### THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT OF THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

The word *crisis* often strikes me as a little melodramatic, but unfortunately it is no exaggeration to say that we are in the midst of an ecological crisis. In other words, the ecological crisis is not a metaphor; it is a complex of at least twelve broad categories of environmental problems (Diamond, 2005). Eight of these are difficulties that human societies have always faced but, until very recently, only on a local or regional scale: deforestation and habitat loss; erosion, salinization, and loss of fertility of soils; problems with managing supplies of fresh water; overhunting and overfishing; the impacts of exotic species on native species; human population growth, and increased per capita impact of human populations. Four are new: human induced climate change, the accumulation of toxic chemicals in the environment, reliance on dwindling sources of energy, and the potential for complete utilization of the Earth's photosynthetic capacity by human beings (Diamond, 2005, p. 7). Within the next several decades each of these twelve threats will reach a globally critical level and will begin to undermine all societies, including those of the First World. But according to Jared Diamond (2005),

Much more likely than a doomsday scenario involving human extinction or an apocalyptic collapse of industrial civilization would be 'just' a future of significantly lower living standards, chronically higher risks, and the undermining of what we now consider some of our key values. Such a collapse could assume various forms, such as the worldwide spread of diseases or else of wars, triggered ultimately by scarcity of environmental resources (p. 7).

Talk of a global ecological crisis is therefore neither overstatement nor alarmism. Among the world's scientists, there is currently virtually no disagreement on the escalating threat. And this has been the case for quite some time now. The following warning issued by the Union of Concerned Scientists (a group of more than 1,600 scientists, including 102 Nobel laureates from 70 countries) concisely demonstrates the consensus that had emerged by 1992 on both the significance of the threat and the urgent need to address it:

Human beings and the natural world are on a collision course. Human activities inflict harsh and often irreversible damage on the environment and on critical resources. If not checked, many of our current practices put at serious risk the future that we wish for human society and the plant and animal kingdoms, and may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know. Fundamental changes are urgent if we are to avoid the collision our present course will bring about (cited in Meadows et al., 2004, p. 15).

If there were a corresponding consensus among economists, business leaders, politicians, educators, other professionals, and the American public in general, I would feel much better about our prospects. However, there does not appear to be widespread agreement (in the United States, anyway) that the environmental problems we face are especially grave—at least not so grave that they necessitate *fundamental* changes to social, political, and economic structures. Continuing with business as usual draws us ever closer to the collision the UCS warned of fifteen years ago. As the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (established in 2000 by the World Resources Institute, the United Nations Environment Programme, the United Nations Development Programme, and the World Bank) admonished in late 2005: “At the heart of this assessment is a stark

warning. Human activity is putting such strain on the natural functions of Earth that the ability of the planet's ecosystems to sustain future generations can no longer be taken for granted."

### *Environmental Awareness*

As environmental educator Chet Bowers noted in 1995, "Awareness within the dominant culture of human interdependence with natural systems is a relatively recent phenomenon" (p. 10). However, the failure to heed the aforementioned warnings cannot simply be attributed to a lack of awareness. Environmental awareness in the United States has almost certainly increased over the past several decades as a result of the growing environmental movement. It would be rather arbitrary to try to identify exactly when this movement (or movements) began, but the period between the publication dates of Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) and Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) marks a plausible range. Leopold's affirmation of the non-instrumental value of nature and Carson's research on the environmental effects of pesticide use both drew broad attention to humanity's interdependence with the biotic and abiotic systems of the natural world. Certainly by 1970 the movement was underway in earnest. In that year environmentalism was officially recognized and institutionalized: the first Earth Day was observed, the Environmental Protection Agency was established, and the first Clean Air Act was passed.

But if awareness of an impending ecological crisis has been on the rise for so long, why are things getting worse? Why are rates of consumption and pollution

increasing? Why has the increase in environmental awareness not translated into a deeper understanding of the need for elemental fundamental social, political, and economic change?

One possible explanation for this apparent incongruity is the inherent difficulty in internalizing the concept of a *global* environmental crisis. Such an idea seems absolutely overwhelming. Furthermore, the prognosis is hardly rosy, no matter how optimistic one tries to be. Avoidance of an unpleasant reality is therefore a possibility. It could also be argued that we have already passed the point of no return on our collective march to extinction. No one can say for certain that we have not, so we may as well live it up while we can. After all, this seems a perfectly rational response to what would appear—from a rational perspective—an insoluble problem. Besides, as other countries industrialize, especially China and India, it seems less and less important what we Americans do. We could become a model of sustainability, but if much of the rest of the world continues to move along the path we helped to establish, this would matter little in the long run.

But I would argue that we are obliged to try to mitigate the effects of global environmental change even as we have no guarantee that such a cause is not destined to fail. And let me be clear that when I use the word, “we” I have in mind formally educated, middle class Americans (myself included) who consume a disproportionate amount of the world’s resources and are therefore putting a disproportionate strain on the earth’s ability to sustain life. The per capita difference is about 32 times that of someone living in an “underdeveloped” country—and we each generate 32 times as much waste (Diamond, 2005).

My use of the first person plural pronoun is not an attempt to speak on behalf of others or to silence other voices; it is both a confession and an apology. I am not without environmental sin and neither are most other middle class Americans. But if the reader wishes to place himself/herself outside of this bracketed “we”, he/she is of course free to do so. Furthermore, it is important to note that the American middle class is not a monolithic entity. Class is a very complex category—and because of the ongoing disruption and transmutation of traditional class groupings this is ever more the case. An oversimplified definition can conceal important differences among the members of a particular group. But this begs the question: what defines the middle class of American society? I will not try to offer a detailed answer to this question here, but I will loosely define the American middle class in terms of two common features: the possession of considerable disposable income and some degree of desire to spend a portion of that income on status-oriented goods and services. Middle class Americans, by and large, embrace an ethic of consumerism. This is, admittedly, an overgeneralization, but it can be an instructive one.

I am concerned with the American middle class because though we may not have the power and influence of the superrich, we are, by world standards, people of great wealth and privilege. We are therefore disproportionately responsible for what is happening globally. Hence, we have a great responsibility to effect the changes needed to meet the crisis and great ability to do so. To that end, we must first confront how our own beliefs and practices have contributed to the ecological crisis because hope (realistic or not) for a livable future may be riding on the transformation, or at least a reprioritization,

of American middle class values. This of course includes the values that are transmitted in schools. Bowers (1995) puts it this way:

Our concern here is the with the middle class culture which now exerts such a dominant influence in American society, and with how the belief system of this group, which underlies so many environmentally disruptive practices, is perpetuated in the public schools and universities. Pronouncements on the necessity of other cultural groups' changing their environmentally destructive practices may help inflate our moral sense of superiority and bolster our self-image as ecologically responsible citizens. But as largely ritual behavior this diverts attention from the part of the problem that we can actually do something about. Directing our energies to bringing our society's dominant culture into closer balance with the long-term sustaining capacities of our environment is justified because we, along with the other Western industrialized, consumer-oriented societies, are major contributors to the problem. The technologies that support our lifestyles deplete nonrenewable resources and contribute to multiple forms of pollution on a scale vastly disproportionate to our percentage of the world population (p. 15).

This is no small task. Over the last several decades, the tendency among the American middle class has been to avoid the deeper issues raised by environmental problems. We have tended to deny the seriousness and urgency of environmental problems like global warming. We have assumed and continue to assume that experts will come up with technological fixes. (Incidentally, such blind faith in the potential for a technological fix reveals the denial of the deep roots of the problem; it is a bit like suggesting that the best way to overcome a drug addiction is to find better drugs.) Furthermore, we fantasize that we can escape the consequences by moving into a gated community, or to the country—or even to another planet. (It is, after all, a popular theme in science fiction films.) We are thus complicit. Many of us it seems have exhibited a willingness to be deceived about certain things and we seem to be especially suggestible

when it comes to dismissals of the findings of environmental research. We want to believe that environmental researchers are making exaggerated claims—and that we do not *really* need to change how we live.

For a while longer, we will be able to afford our denial. It is currently the world's poor who are bearing the brunt of environmental devastation, but the rest of us will not retain our relative immunity forever. Wealth and the prophylactic measures it can buy (a home with air filtration and water purification systems located in a nice neighborhood far away from landfills, medical waste incinerators, and smokestacks, for example) provide a considerable buffer against most consequences of environmental degradation. But ultimately there will be no where left to hide. I think, on some level, most of us are aware of this. But what does it mean to be “aware”?

Awareness can have different meanings in different contexts. When I say that environmental awareness has increased since around 1970, I am referring to a kind of casual cognizance. I do not mean the sort of holistic mindfulness one might achieve through prayer or meditation or even the kind of considered reflection that derives from critical, rational inquiry. It is these types of deeper, more substantial awareness that are in short supply even as stories on environmental issues abound in the media. This is not to suggest, however, that most media coverage has been competent and thorough, but most people have heard of global warming, ozone depletion, habitat destruction, loss of biodiversity, various types of pollution and so on. And even the reliable and accurate information on the state of the environment is interspersed among a much greater

majority of images and messages conveyed by television shows, films, and especially advertising, which promote materialistic, ecologically unsustainable lifestyles.

Still, the ecological crisis has managed to penetrate the popular imagination to such a degree that it has become a familiar narrative theme, especially in film. Over the past few decades there have been several popular films which portray the effects of corporate callousness and the profit motive on environmental quality and human health—for example, *The China Syndrome* (1979), *A Civil Action* (1998), and *Erin Brockovich* (2000). Other films during this same period have specifically addressed human-caused environmental change, e.g. the post-eco-apocalypse film *Silent Running* (1972), the Disneyesque save-the-rainforest animated film *FernGully* (1992), and the recent global warming film *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004). Moreover, Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) is playing in theaters at the time of this writing.

All of this recent exposure of various aspects of the ecological crisis in the popular media (feature films, television news, books, print and electronic media, etc.) does seem to indicate that popular awareness of the crisis must be on the rise. But there is a difference between simply being informed or somewhat knowledgeable about a problem, and being moved to do something in response to that knowledge. Not all forms of awareness lead to change.

According to a recent Harris Poll®, 74 percent of adults in the United States agree that “environmental standards cannot be too high and continuing improvements must be made regardless of cost” (2005). I would like to believe that the respondents to this poll were sincere—and perhaps they were. However, a recent survey of registered voters

conducted on behalf of the Nicholas Institute for Environmental Policy Solutions at Duke University (2005) found that while 79 percent of respondents favored “stronger national standards to protect our land, air and water”, only 22 percent of voters claimed that environmental issues are a major factor in determining whom they voted for in federal, state, or local elections. Moreover, voters ranked the environment dead last in importance among nine issues tested.

Support for environmental protection and conservation, then, is widespread but it may be mostly ostensive. It seems that many of us will pay lip service to modest environmental reform, but when confronted with a choice between preserving or restoring environmental quality and what we perceive to be more immediate concerns like the economy (a false dilemma, over the long term), few of us will choose the former over the latter.

### *Environmental Education*

It is often assumed that given accurate information, people will make rational decisions in their own best interest. Much of contemporary environmental education assumes this basic attitude. The evidence, it is thought, will speak for itself. It follows from this assumption that more scientific studies on current and potential impacts of global environmental change are necessary to more convincingly demonstrate the urgent need for action. However, I do not believe that a dearth of credible information on current environmental problems and reliable predictions of future ones is one of our most significant obstacles. Most of the lay public are aware of this information (though some

may still be skeptical of it) and the dissemination of more details is unlikely to effect any substantial changes in their response.

Traditional education, then, does not appear to hold much promise as an antidote to our apathy and denial even when it includes the environment as an object of formal study. Environmental education has been an official part of the curriculum in schools for many years now. In my home state of North Carolina, for example, “understanding environmental quality” is an explicit goal of the standard course of study for science education in grades 6-12 and all of the state’s recommended sequences of science courses at the high school level (grades 9-12) include a course in environmental science (NCDPI, 2004).

Colleges and universities have embraced environmental education too. All of the schools that I have been affiliated with either as a student or faculty/staff member offer an undergraduate minor in environmental studies, a major in environmental science, or both. North Carolina’s flagship campus has an entire department devoted to environmental sciences. It offers six degrees (a bachelor’s, four master’s, and the Ph.D.) in eight focus areas: environmental sciences, environmental management and policy, environmental health sciences, environmental engineering, environmental modeling, environmental risk assessment, environmental assessment and control, and industrial hygiene.

I find it very troubling that in spite of this amplification of environment awareness and its institutionalization in our schools so few substantive changes have occurred (and these are under continual assault from a host of political/economic interests.) This

anticlimax may in large measure be due to the fact that most formal and informal attempts at environmental education unintentionally reinforce the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that created this mess in the first place: anthropocentrism, positivism, individualism, egoistic ethics, consumerism, objectification and desacralization of nature, and blind faith in benign or at least neutral technology (Evernden, 1993). Environmental issues are usually approached from a perspective that emphasizes rational, scientific management techniques and sympathizes with an ideology of unlimited economic growth. This of course overlooks two obvious deficits: first, we human beings are not smart enough to manage or engineer at the *planetary* level (Orr, 1992), and secondly, to paraphrase Kenneth Boulding, to believe in the possibility of infinite growth on a finite planet, one must either be “a madman or an economist!” (cited in Rasmussen, 1996, p. 169). (Incidentally, Kenneth Boulding is an economist—but not a madman.)

Yet many environmentalists believe the language of scientific and economic rationality is the language they must use if they are to have any chance of gaining an audience, one that will take them and their concerns seriously. As Neil Evernden (1993) has argued, only scientific, quantitative inquiry is taken seriously in the public arena. Spiritual connection, emotional concern, and “irrational” commitments (for example, to other species or future generations of human beings) have little place in the discussion.

I should emphasize that I am not suggesting that science should have no place in addressing environmental problems. Although modern science bears a large portion of the blame for the environmental crisis, it is the world’s scientists who have illuminated its proximate causes and have been among the most vocal supporters of and participants in

various environmental movements. But relying exclusively on scientific or technical rationality tends to undermine the deeper motivations that lead environmentalists, scientists and non-scientists alike, to be concerned with environmental issues in the first place (Evernden, 1993). Sober and rational scientific inquiry is necessary but ultimately uninspiring.

### *A Postmodern Problem?*

The situation I have described up to this point is this: 1) an overwhelming amount of information on the environmental crisis has been made available to the public over the last several decades; 2) most Americans are aware of this information; 3) though some of us have made relatively minor changes in our own lives to address a few specific environmental issues, few of us seem to support sweeping social, political, and economic changes in order to stave off a global catastrophe. How can one account for this paradoxical situation of pervasive awareness of environmental problems and predominantly cosmetic, ineffectual responses to them? Why this impenetrability? Or, perhaps more accurately, why this nearly total permeability?

A few possible answers come to mind. First, perhaps the environmental movement has become a victim of its small successes. In other words, local improvements to environmental quality tend to mask global problems, especially the more insidious ones like global warming. Air quality in Los Angeles, for example, is much better now than it was thirty years ago (Easterbrook, 2002). Furthermore, some rivers and lakes here in the United States are cleaner than they were a few decades ago;

air quality in many other cities has improved; some areas (especially in the northeastern United States) have been reforested; a number of toxic substances have been banned; and many toxic sites have been cleaned up (Easterbrook, 2002). But despite these local improvements of the last several decades, the *global* environmental crisis has deepened over the same period and it continues to worsen. We now face problems no one had even heard of in the early days of the environmental movement, global warming being the most notable and the most serious.

Secondly, well-financed campaigns of disinformation coming from various corporate-sponsored think tanks and institutes have created the illusion of a general controversy regarding the threats posed by global environmental change. There are squabbles among scientists over particular aspects of certain problems, certainly, but the aforementioned UCS statement is an accurate representation of the scientific community's broad and long-standing consensus on the extent, severity, and urgency of the environmental crisis. But it is understandable that people might find it difficult to know whom to believe. We learn in school to put our trust in authorities and experts, but not to think critically about what constitutes expertise or legitimate authority (McCarthy, 2003).

Third, the rootlessness—or homelessness, one might say—of the American middle class may also be an obstacle. We move around a lot, partly in response to an increasingly volatile labor market. The effect of this peripatetic way of life is that we tend to develop little attachment to particular places. We have no investment in the future viability of the place in which we find ourselves; we can always pick up and go

somewhere else. Of course, attachment to a place does not necessarily prevent one from engaging in environmentally destructive practices (White, 1996)—though intuitively it seems that a sense of belonging to a place would, more likely than not, inhibit them. In any event, it is difficult to notice a longitudinal environmental decline in an area if one is only there for a few years. Then again, slow, cumulative changes are difficult to notice even when one does remain in the same locale for decades. Jared Diamond refers to this as “landscape amnesia”: ‘forgetting what the landscape looked like fifty years ago because the change from year to year has been so gradual” (2005, p. 425).

Fourth, change is assumed to be progressive; we dogmatically expect improvement with time (Bowers, 1995). As the aforementioned Nicholas Institute survey found, a major reason for voters’ general support of the environment and their inconsistent voting is that 57 percent of voters believe that “a lot” or “some” progress has already been made and that environmental problems are not as bad as they once were (Nicholas Institute, 2005). The negative impacts of this assumption are therefore reinforced by local environmental improvements.

Finally, perhaps most people are simply too busy, too weary, and too distracted to devote much attention to anything beyond the more pressing everyday tasks, like getting the kids ready for school in the morning, not being late for work again, getting the laundry and the grocery shopping done, and so on. Many of us are leading frenetic lives and the pace only seems to be increasing.

But how can we be so easily distracted from what ought to command our full attention? Perhaps the aforementioned hypotheses (by no means an exhaustive list) are

subsumed by another: they are particular manifestations of the social and cultural conditions associated with postmodernity. Perhaps, as Australian environmental philosopher Arran Gare (1995) claims, a deeper investigation into postmodern society and culture could shed a little more light on the disjunction between environmental awareness and action. But to pursue this line of thought, it will first be necessary to explore what is meant by the term “postmodern.”

*What is Postmodernism/Postmodernity?*

Gare (1995) cites the following definition of postmodernism: “This word has no meaning. Use it as often as possible” (p. 4). He quips, “With a few notable exceptions, cultural theorists have been following this advice” (1995, p. 4). “Postmodernism,” then, is a very versatile term, to put it charitably. Its usage varies widely within and among various contexts: art, architecture, film, philosophy, literature, social theory. The problem therefore is not so much that the word has no meaning, but that it has too many meanings. As such, it is difficult to use it with any precision and accuracy. “Postmodernity” (or “the postmodern condition”) is equally slippery and often used synonymously with postmodernism.

It may therefore be helpful to distinguish between two usages of the term “postmodern.” The first refers to the social and cultural conditions of the current historical era: the characteristic behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs of people living in postmodern consumer societies. The second refers to “intentional movements in arts, culture, philosophy, and politics that use various strategies to subvert what is seen as

dominant in modernism or modernity” (Irvine, 2003). To avoid unnecessary confusion, I will use the term “postmodernity” to refer to current social and cultural conditions (postmodern culture) and “postmodernism” to refer to postmodern theory: the reactions and responses of academics and intellectuals not only to modernity but to postmodernity as well.

My purpose in introducing such an admittedly spurious distinction is to indicate that there are at least these two levels which might be considered. But my major focus in what follows will be on the question of postmodern culture (which I tentatively identify as consumerist) as a historical condition. Of course, this sort of exploration cannot occur in the absence of a theory. However, I will not be presenting anything like a thorough synopsis, survey, or critique of the various theories of the postmodern. I would only point out that postmodern theories may include celebrations or lamentations of postmodern culture, or a little of both—that is, if they are even concerned with postmodern culture at all (Gare, 1995).

To return to the original question, how does the adjective “postmodern” modify the noun “culture” in the current historical era? What does it mean to say that something is *post-modern*? Probably the most straightforward historical definition would be a literal melding of the prefix, *post-* and the root, *modern*: *post-modern* means that which comes after modernity. But this raises further questions: does this mean that modernity has come to an end? If so, was the modern project completed or did we simply give up on it? In either case, can one demarcate a distinct end of the modern and a beginning of the

postmodern? There are no obvious answers to these questions and this indicates that something has changed of late in our thinking about history.

Postmodernist criticism of history as a directional and intrinsically meaningful sequence of events gives expression to this change by problematizing such attempts at marking historical transitions, e.g. from modernity to postmodernity, and offering once-and-for-all interpretations of such changes. For many postmodern theorists, there is no such thing as History with a capital H, only transitory constellations of power which give way to others. Changes may be more or less predictable (usually less), but ultimately there is no point to them, i.e. there is no historical *telos* apart from human projection. As Derridean scholar, John Caputo (2001) puts it: “Philosophers have largely rejected the idea that there is some overarching meta-narrative, some vast ‘story’ of what is going on in ‘Western’ history” (p. 65). History, Caputo says, is a tapestry of numberless smaller narratives, many of which are obliterated by the modern grand narrative of a Universal History. Capital-H History, we have recently discovered, has mostly functioned as a cover for imperialism.

But a distinction should be made here between postmodern theory’s challenge to historicism and the stereotypical undergraduate’s claim that history does not matter. Caputo’s point is that history is not guided by some preternatural force; the course of human events is not determined from without by the Hegelian notion of Spirit, for example. There may be a connection between this theoretical challenge and the popular tendency to recoil from the historical, but it is not a direct or causal connection. History does not matter to the postmodern consumer, a college sophomore for example, because

an understanding of history does nothing to increase one's ability to consume (Bauman, 1995), nor does a lack of familiarity with history diminish one's capacity to consume—unless of course one is a consumer of history: a collector, a Civil War re-enactor, a History Channel viewer. In any event, as Fredric Jameson (1991) claims, “It is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place” (p. ix). This problem of historical understanding, then, is a distinctly postmodern phenomenon. In this sense, the grand narratives of modernity—which are, by definition, historical (often historicist) narratives—are now under suspicion. Theorists find them faulty in various ways; consumers find them useless.

But while the idea of a universal, directional History with a capital H may have recently lost credibility, the impulse to connect past, present, and future in some kind of coherent narrative remains. So I am afraid I have no choice but to risk a rough and very brief sketch of the postmodern historical context. However, I echo John Caputo's tongue-in-cheek caveat: “I solemnly warn the reader to be extremely uneasy about such easy periodization for, hero that I am, I accept no responsibility for it” (2001, p. 38).

### *The Postmodern Era*

One gets the sense from the various theories of the postmodern that what might loosely be called the postmodern era—the period of at least the last four decades or so—is a terminal patient. It is a moribund age of the end of this, the death of that, and the crisis of the other (or, rather, the Other). Nietzsche, forerunner and prophet of

postmodernity, declared God dead well over a century ago. More recently, there have been pronouncements on the end of history (Fukuyama, 1992), the end of ideology (Bell, 1960), the end of man (Foucault, 1970), the end of philosophy (Heidegger, 1973); the death of the author (Barthes, 1977), the death of the subject (Jameson, 1991); the crisis of legitimacy (Habermas, 1975), and the crisis of representation (Jameson, 1991). The postmodern age has also witnessed both the death of nature (Merchant, 1980) and the end of nature (McKibben, 1990) and the environmental or ecological *crisis* has been part of the lexicon for quite some time now.

The earliest usage of the term, “postmodern” appears to have been in 1870, when it was used to describe a style of painting that was allegedly more modern than French impressionism (Dickens & Fontana, 1994, p. 1). It was further used in a sociohistorical sense to describe a new age of Western civilization from the end of World War I to the 1960s (Dickens & Fontana, 1994, p. 1). But there appears to be a general consensus that postmodernity proper (if there could be such a thing) began in the late 1960s. According to religion scholar, Don Cupitt (1998),

Opinions may differ about just when it was that the Modern age suddenly confronted its own deepest assumptions and found itself compelled to recognize that it didn't actually believe in them anymore, but perhaps the best candidate is the year 1968, a turbulent time in Prague, Paris, and Chicago. Since then we have increasingly thought of ourselves as living in a “postmodern” period—a term that we use not by way of signifying that we have successfully completed the transition to a new understanding of the human condition, but rather by way of admitting that as yet we *haven't*. We have a name for what is gone, but not for what is coming (p. 1).

In addition to cautiously identifying the *annus mirabilis* of the birth of the postmodern, this statement captures the feeling of postmodernity. We have not completed the transition to a new understanding and many of us have become deeply skeptical that such a new understanding is in the offing. In the rise-and-fall cycle of historical development (as this was understood in modernity), it seems that we postmoderns have begun our descent, but we have little idea of where we will land and flagging interest in the question. The term “postmodern” is then, as Cupitt claims, a name for what is gone: the robust self-confidence and purposefulness of modernity. “Postmodern” is a placeholder for a space and time that resists being named and having its story told.

“Postmodernism” at its best, amounts to an attempt to theorize what is going on in the postmodern period and to offer some insight into why this is happening. More specifically, postmodernism is an attempt to articulate why totalizing, historical narratives are now difficult if not impossible to construct and whether or not this is a salutary development.

### *Postmodernity and the Environment*

As previously mentioned, Arran Gare (1995) claims that the causes of the environmental crisis and the impotence of the environmental movement as a whole cannot be understood in isolation from a theory of postmodernity. Such a theory, he says, ought to involve an exploration of the connections between the global environmental crisis, postmodern culture, and the globalization of capitalism. Following Gare’s lead, the idea that will be explored in the remainder of this chapter is that the paltry gains of the

environmental movement may be best explained as part of a larger postmodern phenomenon, that somehow the characteristics of postmodern culture can illuminate the sources of resistance to the internalization of both the seriousness of the crisis and the exigency of demand to meet it.

But how is postmodern culture implicated in this? According to Gare (1995), postmodern culture is characterized by “the lack in people of a sense of personal history, the dissolution of time into disconnected intervals, and the incredulity toward grand narratives” (p. 33). Furthermore, he states,

The associated severance of culture from a quest for an orientation for action and an orientation to live by associated with the consumer orientation of postmodernity accounts for the characteristic depthlessness of the postmodern sensibility, the celebration of surfaces, the rejection of the distinctions between essence and appearance, between true and false consciousness, between authentic and inauthentic and between the signifier and the signified (Gare, 1995, p. 33).

Clearly, he is unsympathetic with many aspects of postmodernity. These are common grievances and, in some respects, I agree with Gare’s assessment. However, my point here is not to blame (or praise) certain individuals or groups for manifesting these traits, but to examine the crux of Gare’s argument, which is conveyed in the following, rather compact, paragraph:

It is arguable that the postmodern condition, associated as it is with a loss of faith in modernity, progress and enlightenment rationality, reflects people’s awareness that it is just these cultural forms which are propelling humanity to self-destruction ... But the fragmentation of experience, disorientation and loss of overarching perspectives and grand narratives associated with postmodernity are threats to the efforts of environmentalists who are struggling to develop and proselytize a global perspective on environmental destruction (1995, pp. 1-2).

Here, Gare illuminates an important (but dispiriting) paradox: a deeper understanding of the causes of the environmental crisis may actually tend to thwart the development of strategies to meet the crisis and the resolve to carry them out. In other words, a rejection of the goals of modernity (based on the recognition that they are “propelling humanity to self-destruction”) may also undercut the possibility of developing a general critique of the deep causes of the ecological crisis and a comprehensive plan of action to counter it.

Considered reflection on the ecological crisis leads to the conclusion that the roots run very deep. We have been steadily moving in the direction of a global crisis since at least the advent of modernity. But skepticism toward the “the overarching perspectives and grand narratives” of the modern period has created a sort of sociocultural vertigo. We may, on some level, realize that there is no quick fix for environmental problems. But has this emerging realization of modernity’s potentially fatal flaws left us too enervated and jaded to do very much about them? For even if we admit the need for alternatives, we are not sure where such alternatives may be found or how they might be constructed.

This situation is only exacerbated by prophecies of disaster (no matter how scientifically sound), thereby contradicting a fundamental assumption of many mainstream environmentalists, namely that in framing the ecological crisis in terms of genuine and gravely serious crisis (which, of course, it is) human beings will be prompted to come together and work collectively to avert an ecological catastrophe. After all, the survival of the human species (and countless others) depends on it. However, the word “crisis” has been trivialized to such a degree in postmodernity that it has become difficult

to distinguish a genuine crisis from the latest media melodrama. As historian and social critic Christopher Lasch (1984) explained over twenty years ago,

This propaganda of disaster has a cumulative effect almost exactly opposite to the effect ostensibly intended. The infiltration of everyday life by the rhetoric of crisis and survival emasculates the idea of crisis and leaves us indifferent to appeals founded on the claim that some sort of emergency demands our attention. Nothing makes our attention wander so quickly as talk of another crisis. When public crises pile up unresolved, we lose interest in the possibility that anything can be done about them (p. 64).

So there is little point in being overly dramatic in a media-saturated culture that has to a great degree become inured to talk of crises. There are too many sensational stories competing for that most precious of postmodern commodities: people's attention. This is the age of ADD (attention deficit disorder), which is perhaps more revealing as a description of postmodern culture in general than as a name for a particular psychological pathology. As sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1995) notes, the postmodern cultural context is one of information overflow, "in which public attention is the scarcest of resource and in which Descartes' cogito has been rephrased as 'I am noticed, therefore I exist', (and for practical purposes unpacked as 'I shout, therefore I exist')" (p. 157). It seems everyone is shouting these days. Some of their claims seem very serious but it is impossible to give due attention to all of them. The effect of this, as Lasch correctly points out, is the opposite of what is intended; that which is meant to wake people up only puts them to sleep.

But the problems that postmodernity poses to the achievement of ecological sustainability run deeper than hypersaturation and overstimulation. Gare alleges above

that one of the more salient features of postmodernity is the loss of faith in modernity's grand narrative of progress. It is the nascent understanding that modernity's pursuit of progress has led us to the brink of environmental catastrophe, he says, that is, in part, generating the fragmentation and disorientation of the postmodern period. This may be true of those who read the sorts of abstruse works that address the postmodern condition and speculate as to its causes, but I am not so sure that the larger public feels the same way. They may agree that fragmentation and disorientation are accurate descriptors of the era, and that incredulity toward certain grand narratives may play a role (it might be suggested that things would improve if church attendance increased, for example) but I am not so sure that most Americans no longer believe in progress of any kind. Faith in the progressive nature of modern civilization seems a hard habit to break. And this may be a more intractable and dangerous problem than postmodern disillusionment.

But whether the realization that the ecological crisis is attributable to modern notions of progress is widespread or not, such a realization does present a very discouraging antinomy with regard to the environmental crisis: the very acknowledgement of the root causes of the environmental crisis (certain major and irremediable flaws of modernity) may inhibit our ability to recognize or admit the self-destructive tendencies of postmodern consumer society. In other words, learning about the crisis could be as much a deterrent to action as ignorance of it. For if we are as aware of the ecological crisis as I have claimed (though in a very casual, noncommittal way), our continued evasion of the issue may be defensive. Maybe it is not a question of what we do not know but of what we do not *want* to know. After all, avoidance, denial, and

rationalization are only possible in response to something that one is, at least to some degree, aware of. Jared Diamond offers this scenario:

Consider a narrow river valley below a high dam, such that if the dam burst, the resulting flood of water would drown people for a considerable distance downstream. When attitude pollsters ask people downstream of the dam how concerned they are about the dam's bursting, it's not surprising that fear of a dam burst is lowest far downstream, and increases among residents increasingly close to the dam. Surprisingly, though, after you get to just a few miles below the dam, where fear of the dam's breaking is found to be the highest, the concern then falls off to zero as you approach closer to the dam! That is, the people living immediately under the dam, the ones most certain to be drowned if the dam burst, profess unconcern. That's because of psychological denial: the only way of preserving one's sanity while looking up every day at the dam is to deny the possibility that it could burst. Although psychological denial is well-established in individual psychology, it seems likely to apply to group psychology as well (2005, p. 436).

To borrow a line from the film *American Beauty* (1999), we should never underestimate the power of denial. Mainstream environmentalists and efforts at ecological education must therefore move beyond the idea that the initiated, or an avant-garde of ecological consciousness, can educate the masses through the dissemination of gloomy statistics and grim predictions. Paradoxically, the more real and immediate the crisis becomes, the easier it becomes to ignore it.

### *Progress and Postmodernity*

One of Arran Gare's primary concerns in *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis* (1995) is the postmodern sully of modern notions of progress:

What are the defining features of the present age? The most widely accepted characterization of the postmodern condition is that offered by Lyotard. It is the "incredulity towards metanarratives"; that is the incredulity toward any

metadiscourse which makes appeal to some grand narrative, such as the emancipation of the rational, the liberation of the exploited, or the creation of wealth, which can legitimate all particular claims to knowledge. What does this mean? The loss of credibility of grand narratives is essentially a loss of belief in progress (p. 4).

Modernity's grandest narrative, the story of progress, is an interesting abstraction. Progress implies continual refinement. It must be, by definition, ever changing. Yet how do we know if changes are progressive? They must be evaluated in terms of some unrealized ideal. In other words, progress, to be an ideal process, needs an ideal endpoint. It therefore becomes incoherent without some governing utopian vision.

Gare (1995) argues that what is now needed is the cultivation of a new utopian vision through the construction of an ecological grand narrative: an overarching, global perspective of the global crisis. But how is this possible in a society that has allegedly grown very weary of such narratives and largely unresponsive to them? The admonition to "think globally, act locally" seems to fall on deaf ears because it is just this ability to think on the global scale which is now in decline. Hence, local actions are frenzied and uncoordinated.

But Lyotard says, immediately following the passage cited by Gare above, "This incredulity [toward grand narratives] is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences; but that progress presupposes it" (1984, p. xxiv). What he means by this is that modernity's grand narrative of progress was itself based on a challenge to those grand narratives that preceded it. We were to be liberated from them. In the name of progress, everything was subject to being revised or discarded in favor of something new and improved. Progress thus made a question of everything—eventually, even its own claims

to being progressive. Much like logical positivism, it has been hoist by its own petard. Postmodernity, to some degree, marks the point at which the modern conception of progress could no longer bear its own weight. Postmodernity is post-progressive. This may sound blasphemous to modern ears but of course there are good reasons for disbelief in modern conceptions of progress.

In the modern era, progress was envisioned to bring peace and prosperity to all. Instead it has led to the unparalleled violence and poverty of the last century, and perhaps, irreversible damage to the biosphere. Environmental educator, David Orr (1992) writes,

Ours is the age of paradox. The modern obsession to control nature through science and technology is resulting in a less predictable and less bountiful natural world. Material progress was supposed to have created a more peaceful world. Instead, the twentieth century has been a time of unprecedented bloodshed in which two hundred million have died. Our economic growth has multiplied wants, not satisfactions. Amidst a staggering quantity of artifacts—what economists call abundance—there is growing poverty of the most desperate sort (p. 102).

So as it turns out, the modern pursuit of progress has not been entirely progressive. This is becoming increasingly undeniable. Here in the United States, constitutional guarantees of civil liberties, including due process, equal protection of the laws, and freedom from discrimination remain empty promises for far too many people. And while the modern project of taming and controlling nature has dramatically improved the material standard of living of many people worldwide, the environmental costs have been quite high and the economic benefits have not been distributed equitably. The modern period has culminated in an international system in which the richest twenty percent of the world's

population controls more than eighty percent of world gross product and uses nearly sixty percent of world commercial energy (Meadows et al., 2004). Even in the United States, the wealthiest nation on earth, nearly one out of every five children lives in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). This is hardly liberty and justice for all.

The acknowledgement of the failures of progress leads to difficult questions: is it possible to be critical of the modern proclivity toward domination and wanton destruction while still affirming modernity's emancipatory goals? Or, does the environmental crisis reveal an inherent and insoluble contradiction within modernity, a fundamental contradiction between its obsession with control and its goal of increasing human freedom and well being?

After all, the environmental crisis does not appear to be an aberration or an isolated event. It has grown out of the modern ethos of progress. As Orr mentions, it is traceable to one of modernity's core principles: the use of science and technology to dominate the natural world. In this sense the ecological crisis is deeply and historically entangled with class struggle, sexism, racism, heterosexism, colonialism, imperialism, militarism, and poverty. These are all manifestations of what ecofeminist Karen Warren (1990) has identified as modernity's *logic of domination*. And while the logic of domination may not be an exclusively modern phenomenon (patriarchy and sexism, for example, predate modernity by thousands of years), aided by science and technology, its environmental impacts have grown almost exponentially over the last century. Progress has therefore not lived up to its billing. It is becoming ever more untenable to suggest that this is due to the fact that not enough progress has been made. On the contrary, it is "the

triumph of Western civilization [that] has revealed the hollowness of its promises” (Gare, 1995, p. 5).

Consequently, the long-presumed universality of European culture, politics, and economics (which was always the implicit definition of progress) is now in question—and not just among non-Europeans. Zygmunt Bauman identifies two doubts in particular that are eroding confidence in the superiority of the West and its suitability as a model for the rest of the world:

The first is the suspicion, stubbornly refusing to be dispelled, that Auschwitz and the Gulag ... were legitimate products, rather than aberrations, of the typically modern practice of ‘ordering by decree’; that the other face of ‘universalization’ is divisiveness, oppression and a leap toward domination, while the allegedly ‘universal’ foundations all too often serve as masks of intolerance to otherness and licenses for the smothering of the alterity of the Other; that, in other words, the price of the project of humanization is more inhumanity. The tentacles of this doubt reach deep – in fact to the very heart of the modern project. What is being questioned is whether the wedlock between the growth of rational control and the growth of social and personal autonomy, that crux of the modern strategy, was not ill-conceived from the start, and whether it can ever be consummated. (1995, p. 29).

In other words, the rampant genocide, poverty, and environmental damage of the last century can no longer be written off as a few broken eggs on the way to a really great omelet (a western omelet, naturally). One can no longer argue that the rational application of science and technology will not lead to the horror of violence and death on a massive scale. Genocide was a trademark of the twentieth century. And it continues in its usual and recognizable forms but also in a more insidious manifestation: *ecocide*, as the ecological crisis has been called (Gottlieb, 2003).

The second suspicion centers on the emerging realization that the affluence of the West is inevitably dependent upon the poverty of the rest of the world—in addition, of course, to structural inequalities within Western societies.

The signals are multiplying that far from being endemically universal, modern civilization is eminently unsuitable for universal application; that to remain buoyant in some places it must devastate and impoverish other localities—and that it may well run out of steam once it runs short of localities on which to dump the waste-products of order-building and chaos-conquering at home (Bauman, 1995, p. 30).

Western-style economic development imposed on the non-Western world does nothing to alleviate this situation. In fact, it tends to increase socioeconomic inequality rather than ameliorate it (Harvey, 2005). It also tends to replace simplicity and subsistence with market dependence, which then creates poverty where none existed before.

Furthermore, it is evident that it would be physically impossible to achieve global affluence on the scale of the middle classes of Western societies. The boosterism associated with this ostensive goal of economic globalization is based on a pipe dream. Even if the purely economic obstacles to such a world-wide surfeit of consumer goods could be removed, the resulting environmental damage would be catastrophic. Physicist and systems theorist, Fritjof Capra (2004) explains,

If all Third World countries were to reach the consumption level of the United States by the year 2060, the annual environmental damage from the resulting economic activities would be 220 times what it is today, which is not even remotely conceivable (p. 148).

This realization, perhaps more than anything else, has burst the bubble of progress. What we have long thought of as progress, if it continues for very much longer, will likely be our undoing. The ecological crisis, as Gare puts it, “reveals that all the suffering inflicted by Western civilization, both on its own members and on those civilizations and traditional societies it has subjugated, has been for nothing” (Gare, p. 6).

Despite this, the Western economic system and the political structures subordinate to it continue to serve as a template for globalization. China, India, and Southeast Asia in particular are embracing capitalism and are now competing ever more effectively with the old Western trading blocs (Harvey, 2005). But the winners in this global contest are not, as was the case in the modern period, nation-states. The winners are transnational corporations and their shareholders—people with no particular allegiance to particular places and local populations. In other words, though the impacts of the new economic order are global, the benefits are highly restricted. Only an elite minority is reaping the rewards (necessarily short-term) from the globalization of capitalism. Even in the core zones of the global economy, most workers have experienced stagnant or declining real wages in recent decades—that is if their jobs have not been relocated to “developing” nations (Harvey, 2005).

These events—the social, economic, and political upheavals of the last few decades and the accelerating pace of such changes—make the grand narratives of modernity seem increasingly obsolete. This is not entirely an unwelcome development. Were some of these older narratives to completely fade away, it would be good riddance to bad rubbish. For example, racial and ethnic hierarchies were implicit (often explicit) in

the modern narrative of progress: Europeans, it was assumed, would forever remain on top. However,

It is now likely that in this new global order, Westerners will no longer be the main beneficiaries of 'progress'. The future no longer belongs automatically to Caucasians, and the incredulity towards grand narratives can be partly understood as disorientation caused by this. It is the response of people of European descent to their powerlessness within the world-order created by European civilization. This disinclines them to even contemplate grand narratives, which, to have any plausibility, could only portray them as insignificant bystanders in the march of history (Gare, 1995, p. 8).

In response to globalization, Anglophones, "are being forced to recognize themselves as just another ethnic group" (Gare, 1995, p. 8). Yet many are refusing to do so, in spite of—also because of—the decline (in economic and political power) and cultural fragmentation of Western societies. This refusal partly explains the resurgence, or at least the intensification, of racist ideologies in the West, particularly among poor and working class whites (Gare, 1995, p. 13). Blind to the fact that their relative powerlessness is mostly attributable to policies set by the architects of the new global economy, far too many are taking out their frustrations on the usual suspects: racial and ethnic minority groups, especially recent immigrants. And the media, control of which is now concentrated in the hands of about half a dozen transnational conglomerates, do not seem especially reticent to deflect their anger in this direction.

Bauman identifies a related development that is proving difficult for many to accept, namely the realization that modernity's foundations were shaky (nonexistent, Bauman would say) from the start:

It is reasonable to suppose that the flattening out of the power differential between the West and the rest was among the principal reasons of the history-, progress-, project-oriented version of self-occultation running out of steam; of the crisis of modernity; of the advent of postmodernity; of the growing willingness to admit that not only is Being underpinned by Chaos and Absurdity rather than preordained Order and Meaning, but it is going to stay that way for the duration, and nothing we can do will change it (1995, p. 23).

The project of modernity was the banishment of absurdity and chaos. The world would be made a rational, predictable, and safe place through the Westernization of the whole world. This was modernity's cover story, its "version of self-occultation." But the world is not now unequivocally more rational (though it is perhaps more prone to rationalizing), more predictable or safer as a result of modernization. In many ways, just the opposite is true. It should therefore be ever more apparent that Western culture is, as Bauman (1995) says, unfit for universal application.

Yet this does not seem to be slowing the process of economic globalization (based on Western conceptions of economic growth and development) very much. There has been substantial opposition to economic globalization (which I in no way wish to discount), but why is there not more resistance, especially in the United States, to the spread of unsustainable economic policies and practices? Is it that privileged Westerners simply cannot let go of notions of racial and ethnic hierarchy and the belief that Western institutions and practices should be a model for the rest of the world despite all the evidence to the contrary? Or, are we unable to accept that the modern project of rational, technical control of natural processes and human events was doomed from the beginning, that in solving one problem, we often create two or three more? Or as Gare (1995) charges, do we remain largely helpless to resist the various forces of ecological

devastation because the incredulity toward grand narratives characteristic of postmodernity is preventing the construction of a general critique of globalization?

I would answer yes to all three of these questions; all three contribute to the continuation of environmentally destructive practices. But with regard to the last question, I would say that *something* is getting in the way of such a critique (and such critiques are needed), but I do not think the charge of a general incredulity toward metanarratives really captures it. (Incidentally, a general incredulity toward metanarratives is itself a kind of metanarrative, is it not? A quibble perhaps.) Postmodern individuals may have become somewhat incredulous of *modern* notions of progress, but I am not so sure that this automatically signals an incredulity toward *all* grand narratives. Perhaps the postmodern incredulity toward grand narratives has been overstated.

### *The End of Grand Narratives?*

Postmodern doubts about the ostensible purpose and moral worthiness of modernity do not necessarily constitute a radical break with modernity or the inchoate stirrings of something that will transcend modernity. But neither do they reflect the total breakdown of grand narratives. The grand narratives and utopian visions characteristic of modernity may now seem rather effete (at least among academics and intellectuals), but that does not mean that no grand narratives or utopian visions are now operative. From religious belief to rationales for economic globalization, grand narratives are still with us. Even a handful of Marxists are still living. And, to borrow from Twain, the reports of the

death of progress have been greatly exaggerated; it just continues to be redefined in ever less grandiose terms.

The apparent disbelief in grand narratives therefore may not signal the transition, even the beginning of a transition, to a properly *post-modern* period (whatever that might mean), but may instead reflect a cultural artifact of the process of modernization as it nears completion. Jameson (1991) contends that this is the best way to get a handle on the postmodern: postmodernity is what happens to the culture of the core economic zones, and ever more of the peripheries, as capitalism goes global.

The modern period, Jameson (1991) claims, was characterized by “uneven development” (p. 307); that is, until recently, modern, urban areas were nearby to rural, agrarian locales that had scarcely changed since the feudal period. There was a frame of reference with respect to the modern; there were points of comparison. The modern could be differentiated against a pre-modern background. Now the world is becoming more and more homogenized: modern and therefore capitalist. Increasingly, it all looks the same:

If postmodernism, as an enlarged third stage of classical capitalism, is a purer and more homogeneous expression of classical capitalism, from which many of the hitherto surviving enclaves of socioeconomic difference have been effaced (by way of their colonization and absorption by the commodity form), then it makes sense to suggest that the waning of our sense of history, and more particularly our resistance to globalizing or totalizing concepts like that of the mode of production itself, are a function of precisely that universalization of capitalism (Jameson, 1991, p. 405).

Globalizing or totalizing concepts do not seem particularly relevant in a world in which globalization and totalization are nearly complete. What is the point in talking or even thinking about “the system” when it has become so thoroughly systematized that it

appears impossible to achieve any distance, let alone a perspective outside the system, from which to theorize or criticize it?

This is perhaps the central difficulty facing postmodern theoretical discourse. As Jameson characterizes it,

There is a strange quasi-Sartrean irony—a ‘winner loses’ logic—which tends to surround any effort to describe a “system,” a totalizing dynamic, as these are detected in the movement of contemporary society. What happens is that the more powerful the vision of some increasingly total system or logic—the Foucault of the prisons book is the obvious example—the more powerless the reader comes to feel. Insofar as the theorist wins, therefore, by constructing an increasingly closed and terrifying machine, to that very degree he loses, since the critical capacity of his work is thereby paralyzed, and the impulses of negation and revolt, not to speak of those of social transformation, are increasingly perceived as vain and trivial in the face of the model itself. (1991, pp. 5-6)

It seems unproductive—and worse, from the perspective of the postmodern consumer, uncool—to waste one’s time on matters that are well beyond one’s control or even influence. The point is moot. As Bauman argues, “Contrary to Habermas, there is no ‘legitimation crisis’ in the postmodern state—it is just that postmodern conditions have made legitimation redundant” (1995, p. 155).

In other words, legitimacy is not “up for grabs” anymore. The matter has been settled. But what is often referred to as the postmodern incredulity towards grand narratives is not the cause of this; it is an effect. Credibility is no longer an issue in postmodernity because at least one “grand” narrative remains absolutely credible: the globalization of capital and its attendant postmodern culture of consumerism. As Gare admits, the new transnational organization of capitalism is now “bringing to fulfillment the grand narrative underlying capitalism” (1995, p. 10) and this overarching narrative is

disappearing into the background of an increasingly homogeneous McWorld, to borrow Benjamin Barber's (1996) apt neologism. It is in the air we breathe, as the saying goes.

This impulse toward a total economic system may superficially seem consistent with the modern project of universalization, but what makes this phenomenon manifestly postmodern is that it is not dressed up in the high-minded rhetoric of modernity. This is not to say that the changes associated with globalization are occurring without a public relations campaign. Money is still being spent on advertising; it is what is being sold that has changed. There are far fewer appeals to noble causes and high ideals. The future is now and the ostensible premise of economic globalization is simply to try to make the good life (defined by consumption of the mass-produced, disposable goods of the global market) available to everyone. This goal is to be accomplished through a process of social, cultural, and political homogenization driven by the spread of capitalism, which means that the earth's remaining sustainable cultures are increasingly succumbing to one that is inherently unsustainable. (Again, I do not mean to imply that there is not substantial resistance to this phenomenon, only that the overall impact of this resistance has, up to now, been rather minimal.)

According to Bauman, this shift from modernity's grand narrative of progress (the universalization of European culture) to postmodernity's grand narrative—more of a slogan, really—of economic growth and development, i.e. the globalization of consumer culture, marks a critical juncture:

Universal was to be the rule of reason – the order of things that would replace slavery to passions with the autonomy of rational beings, superstition and ignorance with truth, tribulations of the drifting plankton with self-made and

thoroughly monitored history-by-design. ‘Globality’, in contrast, means merely that everyone everywhere may feed on McDonald’s burgers and watch the latest made-for-TV docudrama (1995, p. 24).

Globalism, then, is modern universalism minus the teleology. Or, as Francis Fukuyama argues in *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), the *telos* of modernity is already realized. No substantial improvements should be anticipated; this is as good as it gets. The ecological crisis should herald the fatal potential of such historicist fatalism, but the message does not seem to be getting through.

Grand narratives have thus undergone a certain metamorphosis in postmodernity: they are not quite as “grand” as they once were. This has provoked an understandable reaction among those who are reluctant to let go of the traditionally progressive narratives, those who, as Bauman puts it, “blame reality for not rising to the standard of guided rationality they set as the horizon of progressive history” (1995, p. 25). In the modern era, progress heralded the coming of a utopian age, but one always deferred. Modern utopias were imaginative, offering a vision of better future worlds. Postmodern quasi-utopias make no such promises or predictions. They only offer the marketplace and what can be had therein. For many, this is simply not lofty or noble enough to warrant the name “utopia”:

The ‘sour grapes’ feeling reverberates in the often-voiced opinion that our present age is afflicted and enfeebled by the petering out of the ability of ‘forward thinking’, and in particular by the waning of utopias. One wonders, though, whether the diagnosis is correct; whether it is not a certain *kind* of utopia that is bewailed here, concealed in the overly generalized proposition. Postmodernity is modern enough to live by hope. It has lost little of modernity’s boisterous optimism (though philosophers are unlikely to partake of it; they find too few crumbs under the festive table—not much room has been left for *their* type of

skills and credentials in the specifically postmodern vision of ‘new and improved’ future). Postmodernity has its own utopias, though one may be excused for failing to recognize in them what one has been trained to seek and find in the utopias that spurred and whipped the modern impatience with the forever imperfect realities of the present (1995, p. 26).

Postmodern utopias promise a world in which present decisions carry no obligations or consequences forward in time. They exhibit little interest in the content of future, except that it remain free of determined content, i.e. the present should not impinge on future possibilities (Bauman, 1995). “The spontaneity of the world which postmodern utopias conjure up makes nonsense of all concern with the future except the concern with being free from concern with the future—and able to act, accordingly, in an unconcerned fashion “(Bauman, 1995, p. 27). The superficially liberating excess of consumer choice obviates all concern with the future. Conversely, postmodern utopianism makes nonsense of any concern with history. This is what freedom has come to mean in postmodernity.

Bauman offers two complementary examples of postmodern utopias: neoliberal faith in the “wondrous healing capacity of the free market” and “the infinite capacity of the ‘technological fix’” (1995, p. 26). With regard to the first, planning and design are regarded as the enemy of the spontaneous and natural social order created by the market. Postmodern utopias thus

envisage a world with rights, without duties, and above all without rulers and *gens d’armes*, except such as are needed to guarantee a secure promenade stroll and protect shopping bags against the muggers. They put their trust in the wisdom of absent reason. They militate against design and plan, against sacrifice in the name of future benefits, against the delay of gratification (Bauman, 1995, p. 27).

As for the second postmodern utopianism, technological advances promise that we will be able to bail ourselves out of any future jams with new and improved gadgetry. We therefore need not worry so much about the future impacts of our current practices and we certainly need not be restrained by such concerns.

In such a context, the idea of a global environmental crisis is effectively incomprehensible. But this is not simply attributable to an incredulity toward grand narratives. The more intractable problem is that the ecological crisis demands thinking and actions that are incompatible with the reigning, taken-for-granted narratives of postmodernity. In the next three chapters, I will explore three such interrelated postmodern narratives: the myth of the end of history, neoliberalism, and the rhetoric of economic globalization.

## CHAPTER II

### THE END OF HISTORY

The upshot of the previous chapter is that some grand narratives may be worse than no grand narratives at all. Hence, a distinction should be made between no longer believing that modernity's goals can be achieved (an incredulity toward modernity's grand narrative of progress) and the belief that modernity's ultimate destination has already been reached. The latter underpins the argument made by Francis Fukuyama in the *The end of history and the last man* (1992). It is a theoretical articulation of political and economic liberalism as the completion of modernity's utopian project.

Fukuyama's rehearsal of the myth of the end of history makes the claim that history is finished or closed. By this he means that all societies are moving, at different rates, toward democratic political institutions and capitalist economies. For Fukuyama this is a highly desirable and inevitable outcome, the culmination of an evolutionary historical process. But in proposing that historical development has reached its high-water mark, the implication is that history no longer matters and that progress is no longer possible. It is in this respect that Fukuyama's version of the end of history myth can be said to be a *postmodern* grand narrative. It has strongly modern characteristics too, of course. It is Hegelian—the right-wing version of Hegelianism, anyway—through and through. But however it may be characterized, this point of view is of particular significance with regard to the ecological crisis because it can be interpreted as an

exhortation to engage in cultural imperialism, to assimilate all otherness. Fukuyama's 1992 book was written on the heels of the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is tempting to dismiss Fukuyama's argument by charging that his judgment was clouded by a euphoria that was an understandable response to the end of the Cold War and the victory of economic and political liberalism over communism. Given Fukuyama's experience as member of the Policy Planning Staff of the U.S. Department of State in 1981-82 and again in 1989, it could reasonably be said that he had a vested interest in such an interpretation. And while I believe there is some truth to this, it has little to do with the truth or falsity of the empirical claims Fukuyama makes or the soundness of his moral judgment. It is also tempting to vilify Fukuyama as an apologist for what is undesirable and unjust about many existing liberal democracies, especially our own: the widening gap in wealth within and between regions, racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, violence militarism, colonialism, imperialism, and the list goes on. I do not presume to know Fukuyama's motivations, but it in what follows it will be evident that his argument lends itself to just such an interpretation.

### *The End of History?*

In claiming that history has come to an end, Fukuyama is not suggesting that "important events will no longer happen, or that newspapers reporting them will cease to be published" (Fukuyama, 1992, p. xii). In this sense, history will obviously continue. However, Fukuyama claims there can be "no further progress in the development of underlying principles and institutions, because all of the really big questions have been

settled” (1992, p. xii). With the fall of communism, democracy and markets now have no serious rivals and will never be seriously challenged again. That kind of historical development—major transformations of the social, political, and economic fabric of societies—is what has ended. There will be no more History with a capital H. Referring to the article he wrote for *The National Interest* in 1989, which was his first exposition on the subject, Fukuyama writes:

I argued that liberal democracy may constitute the ‘endpoint of mankind’s ideological evolution’ and the ‘final form of human government,’ and as such constituted the ‘end of history.’ That is, while earlier forms of government were characterized by grave defects and irrationalities that led to their eventual collapse, liberal democracy was arguably free from such fundamental internal contradictions. This is not to say that today’s stable democracies, like the United States, France, or Switzerland, were not without injustice or serious social problems. But these problems were ones of incomplete implementation of the twin principles of liberty and equality on which modern democracy is founded, rather than on flaws in the principles themselves. While some present-day countries might fail to achieve stable liberal democracy, and others might lapse back into other, more primitive forms of rule like theocracy or military dictatorship, the ideal of liberal democracy could not be improved upon (1992, p. xi).

So the end of history also appears to be the end of progress. Or, according to Fukuyama, we can only expect a certain modest variety of progress to occur within the framework of existing liberal political and economic structures:

We have trouble imagining a world that is radically better than our own, or a future that is not essentially democratic and capitalist. Within that framework, of course, many things could be improved: we could house the homeless, guarantee opportunities for minorities and women, improve competitiveness, and create new jobs. We can also imagine future worlds that are significantly worse than what we know now, in which national, racial, or religious intolerance makes a comeback, or in which we are

overwhelmed by war or environmental collapse. But we cannot picture to ourselves a world that is essentially different from the present one, and at the same time better (1992, p. 46).

We can imagine a future that is a little better or even a lot worse, but we cannot conceive of a future that is fundamentally different from the present—not even the possibility of such a future. This is the end of the historical line. Progress, in this view, is narrowly construed as the proliferation of consumer choices.

Fukuyama acknowledges that the experiences of the twentieth century provide legitimate grounds to be suspicious of the claim that there is such a thing as a directional, universal History, a “meaningful order to the broad sweep of human events” (Fukuyama, 1992, p. 4). Longer life spans, the expansion of civil liberties, and increasing material abundance (for some) have coincided with much darker manifestations of modernity such as religious and nationalist fanaticism, genocide, “the frivolity of consumerism” (Fukuyama, 1992, p. xxi), a dramatic increase in the gap between the world’s rich and poor, and the threats of nuclear war and environmental collapse, to name a few. But Fukuyama has good news: authoritarian regimes and central planning are in decline while popular elections and free enterprise are on the rise. How this is good news with regard to the problems that plague us at this historical juncture is not very clear. As Fukuyama himself admits, most of our current social problems remain unresolved at the end of history. So, if this is as good as it gets, I see no reason to be exultant. Fukuyama is not altogether pleased either, but for different reasons. I will return to this point.

Fukuyama derives his notion of a Universal History from Hegel via Alexandre Kojève. Paraphrasing Kojève, he describes the progressive unfolding of History as a dialectical process:

History proceeds through a continual process of conflict, wherein systems of thought as well as political systems collide and fall apart from their own internal contradictions. They are then replaced by less contradictory and therefore higher ones, which give rise to new and different contradictions – the so-called dialectic (Fukuyama, 1992, p. 60).

If this dialectical process has in fact found its completion in liberal democracy, then liberal democracy must be free of the sorts of internal contradictions that would spur further dialectical development.

Is this the case? Can Fukuyama be sure that the present triumph of political and economic liberalism really represents the end of history? Two requirements must be met to answer this question affirmatively: 1) history must proceed in a single, identifiable direction without the possibility of reversal, 2) “The present form of social and political organization [must be] *completely satisfying* to human beings in their most essential characteristics” (Fukuyama, 1992, p. 136).

With regard to the first point, Fukuyama believes that the progressive unfolding of modern, natural science imposes a uniform historical direction because all cultures that adopt modern science are homogenized in the process. Science not only “conquers” the natural world, but also the world’s diversity of cultures. Military technology obviously plays a role in universalizing modern, Western culture. Some cultures are modernized at gunpoint, either directly, by armed conflict, or indirectly, through defensive

modernization—something of a geopolitical realist’s version of keeping up with the Joneses. But the more subtle and effective conquest of other cultures is achieved economically; they are seduced by the glitter and glamour of capitalism:

This process guarantees an increasing homogenization of all human societies, regardless of their historical origins or cultural inheritances. All countries undergoing economic modernization must increasingly resemble one another: they must unify nationally on the basis of a centralized state, urbanize, replace traditional forms of social organization like tribe, sect, and family with economically rational ones based on function and efficiency, and provide for the universal education of their citizens. Such societies have become increasingly linked with one another through global markets and the spread of a universal consumer culture (Fukuyama, 1992, p. xv).

This interpretation of History’s movement rests on the assumption that capitalist modes of production—made possible through modern science—best satisfy human desire. Through the rational application of modern science, capitalism fills our lives with material things and makes us happy in ways that communism could not. But economic explanations of history, which focus on the service of reason in the satisfaction of human desire, are incomplete and unsatisfying Fukuyama argues, “because man is not simply an economic animal” (1992, p. xvi). Economic interpretations can therefore account for the ascendancy of capitalism but cannot explain the expansion of democracy. In other words, there is no *necessary* connection between capitalism and democracy (Fukuyama, 1992, p. 125). After all, capitalism flourishes in authoritarian regimes such as Singapore. In fact, capitalism appears to function more efficiently in authoritarian states (Harvey, 2005), thus revealing the inherent antagonism between democratic governance and capitalism’s obsession with economic growth.

As for the second requirement, Fukuyama does not definitively answer the question of whether capitalism and democracy in their present manifestations are completely satisfying to human beings “in their most essential characteristics” (1992, p. 136). He does, however, identify something other than desire and reason as the primary driver of history: the struggle for recognition. Borrowing from Kojéve, he writes:

What constitutes man’s identity as man, the most fundamental and uniquely human characteristic, is man’s ability to risk his own life. Thus, [man’s] encounter with other men leads to a violent struggle in which each contestant seeks to make the other ‘recognize’ him by risking his own life (Fukuyama, 1992, p. 147).

“Man” is free insofar as he is not completely determined by nature; he can contravene his natural instinct for self-preservation and he does this to gain “pure prestige” (Fukuyama, 1992, p. 143). Risking his life in this way is the source of his dignity, a dignity which he demands others recognize (Fukuyama, 1992, p. 150). Other men apparently will not recognize each other voluntarily, hence the *struggle* for recognition. But this is not necessarily a life-and-death struggle. One may submit to the other, thereby annulling his freedom (and therefore his humanity) through acknowledging his fear of death. The one to whom submission is made becomes master; the one who submits becomes the slave. It is this unequal relationship that begins the dialectic of history. It is the contradiction implied by this inequality that drives the historical process: neither the slave nor the master can be properly recognized. Furthermore, over time the relationship becomes inverted with the masters becoming dependent upon the slaves and the slaves achieving mastery over nature through work. “The problem of human history can be seen in a

certain sense, as the search for a way to satisfy the desire of *both* masters and slaves for recognition on a mutual and equal basis; history ends with the victory of the a social order that accomplishes this goal” (Fukuyama, 1992, p. 152).

Has the current social order accomplished this goal? To answer this question, we must first address the issue of why men desire recognition, which is not an ordinary desire, but “*a desire for a desire*” (Fukuyama, 1992, p. 165). It is a desire for pure prestige. Fukuyama identifies Plato’s concept of *thymos* as the psychological (though not spiritual – Fukuyama uses conspicuously secular language throughout the book) basis of Hegel’s notion of the desire for recognition (1992, p. 165). Plato divides the soul into three parts: desire, reason, and *thymos*, which is the part that assigns value to things, most importantly, to the self and other human beings. According to Fukuyama, “*thymos* is something like an innate sense of justice and as such is the psychological seat of all the noble virtues like selflessness, idealism, morality, self-sacrifice, courage, and honorability” (1992, p. 171). *Thymos* gives rise to one’s own sense of self worth, a humble self-respect, and may compel us to recognize the worth of other human beings. But *thymos* has a darker side as well. It can manifest as a wildly inflated sense of one’s own worth or the worth of one’s group. The desire to be recognized as superior to others based on vanity, an exaggerated estimation of one’s worth, Fukuyama terms *megalothymia*. This is the master’s version of *thymos*. Its opposite is *isothymia*: the desire to be recognized as the equal of others, which is the slave’s desire for recognition. “*Megalothymia* and *isothymia* together constitute the two manifestations of the desire for

recognition around which the historical transition to modernity can be understood” (Fukuyama, 1992, p. 182).

In modernity, *isothymia* became the dominant manifestation of *thymos*. For Fukuyama, this event defines the shift from the pre-modern to the modern period. As modernity progressed there came “the gradual victory of the desiring part of the soul, guided by reason, over the soul’s [*megalo*] *thymotic* part” (Fukuyama, 1992, p. 185). The liberal state as envisioned by Hobbes and Locke represents an attempt to substitute bloody battles for pure prestige stemming from *megalothymotic* assertiveness for “the prospect of a peaceful life of unlimited material acquisition” (Fukuyama, 1992, p. 186). The liberal state channels *megalothymia* “into safe, indeed, productive, outlets,” such as entrepreneurship (Fukuyama, 1992, p. 187). Careers and material possessions, conveniently linked together by capitalism, substitute for glory on the battlefield. In modern, Anglo cultures this redirection of *megalothymotic* energies has been largely successful. But *megalothymia* has declined in the process and this is the source of Fukuyama’s ambivalence about the end of history.

Two things have taken the place vacated by *megalothymia*: an increase in desire (the rise of consumer culture) and an “all-pervasive *isothymia*” (Fukuyama, 1992, p. 190). While these tend to suppress the more violent and dangerous manifestations of *megalothymia*, they cannot produce its more salubrious effects such as the noble virtues of courage and selflessness or great art and philosophy. Since Fukuyama is confident that political and economic liberalism are sufficient to meet human desire, the question of the end of history then is really a question of whether liberalism offers satisfactory outlets for

“man’s” *thymotic* strivings: if liberal democracy adequately accommodates the desire for recognition, which springs from *thymos*, then we are at the end of history. Does the *isothymia* promoted by liberal democracy fully satisfy the longing for recognition? If not, does this indicate the presence of a fundamental contradiction, which would in turn indicate that the present epoch is not the end of history? Fukuyama identifies two basic criticisms—one from the Left, the other from the Right—that make the claim that liberal democracy in its current manifestation is, in fact, fundamentally unsatisfying.

Criticism from the Left focuses on the inequalities promoted by capitalism. From this perspective, modern, liberal democracies are not *isothymotic* enough. Fukuyama argues that such inequalities stem from the rational division of labor within capitalist economies and “the ruthless workings of the markets themselves” (1992, p. 290). Fukuyama does not seem especially concerned about this. For him, sanitation workers do not command the same level of respect as neurosurgeons and that is just the way it goes. This inequality of recognition is unavoidable since it follows logically from “natural” inequalities among different people. If we want to continue with the level of production most of us have come to expect, this is the price that must be paid (by folks who do not hold endowed chairs at Johns Hopkins, of course). “The productivity of a modern economy cannot be achieved without the rational division of labor, and without creating winners and losers as capital shifts from one industry, region, or country to another” (Fukuyama, 1992, p. 290). Political liberalism, which cannot remedy every such inequality, should be concerned with striking the proper balance between the liberties of individuals and the promotion of *equality of opportunity* for everyone. There is no

“natural” point at which these come into balance, and the matter of trade-offs will therefore continue to be contested indefinitely even in the most perfect of liberal societies (Fukuyama, 1992, pp. 292-93). Therefore, Fukuyama does not consider the ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor a fundamental contradiction of liberalism.

Fukuyama argues that criticism of liberalism by the Right, however, represents a much more serious threat to the future of democracy. Granting unequal recognition to essentially equal people is a problem, but granting equal recognition to unequal people could be the sort of contradiction that could restart History. Fukuyama asks, “Does not the goal of universalizing recognition inevitably trivialize and de-value it” (1992, p. 301)? What would be the incentive to excel? Fukuyama advocates a resurgence of *megalothymia* as an antidote to our current malaise and he invokes the Nietzschean metaphor of the “last man,” the quintessential bourgeois, to make his case: “The liberal democratic state did not constitute a synthesis of the morality of the master and the morality of the slave, as Hegel had said. For Nietzsche, it represented an unconditional victory of the slave” (1992, p. 301). *Megalothymia*, the desire to be recognized as superior to others is also the source of excellence and creativity. But, according to Fukuyama, political liberalism in its current touchy-feely manifestation, while redirecting *megalothymia* toward less violent outlets, also suppresses or reduces *megalothymia*. Thus, Fukuyama argues, advocating blanket equality is antagonistic to achieving anything noble in life:

This [*megalothymotic*] desire is not merely the basis of conquest and imperialism, it is also the precondition for the creation of anything else worth having in life, whether great symphonies, paintings, novels, ethical

codes, or political systems. Nietzsche pointed out that any form of real excellence must initially arise out of discontent, a division of the self with all the suffering that entails: 'one must still have chaos in oneself to give birth to a dancing star.' Good health and self-satisfaction are *liabilities*" (Fukuyama, 1992, p. 304).

If we are defined by struggle, if our "specific dignity" (Fukuyama, 1992, p. 150) comes from struggle—against each other, against our own natures, in conquering the natural world—then we cease to be human when we cease to struggle.

The end of history, then, is an ambivalent ending—quasi-utopian at best—for the end of history would literally be the end of historical understanding: the absence of concern for both the past and the future. Quoting Kojève, Fukuyama writes, "what would disappear ... is not only philosophy or the search for discursive Wisdom, but also that Wisdom itself. For in these post-historical animals, there would no longer be any [discursive] understanding of the World and self" (1992, p. 311-12). This is a typical characterization of postmodern culture and its incredulity toward metanarratives.

For Fukuyama, then, the tendency of liberal societies toward bourgeois complacency, our accelerating metamorphosis into "last men," may be the one contradiction that liberalism has not resolved. Capitalism's offer of the rational satisfaction of desire through the acquisition and consumption of material goods promotes satiety and laziness in an affluent society and the *isothymotic* character of liberal democracy stifles "man's" fundamental longing to be recognized as superior to his fellows. Formerly, liberal societies were threatened from without by communism. But now, liberal societies are threatened from within by the steady erosion of *megalothymia*:

“liberal democracy needs *megalothymia* and will never survive on the basis of universal and equal recognition alone” (Fukuyama, 1992, p. 315).

*The Question of Democracy*

I am not opposed in principle to the spread of democracy, despite its practical and theoretical limitations. Moreover, I agree with Fukuyama that democracy may well be, in a sense, the “final form” of human government. By this I mean there may prove to be no better alternatives; democracy has its flaws but it is certainly preferable to a totalitarian dictatorship. But allowing that democracy could be our final political destination, the question of what institutional forms and practices ought to comprise the enactment of democracy remains. This is a question which receives insufficient attention in *The end of history and the last man* (1992).

Fukuyama makes a distinction between political liberalism and democracy. Political liberalism is “a rule of law that recognizes certain individual rights or freedoms from government control” (1992, p. 42), while democracy is “the right held universally by all citizens to have a share of political power, that is, the right of all citizens to vote and participate in politics” (1992, p. 43). He further states, “The right to participate in political power can be thought of as yet another liberal right—indeed, the most important one—and it is for this reason that liberalism has been closely associated historically with democracy” (1992, p. 43). This is a common, matter-of-fact interpretation of the meaning of democracy but it says little about the form(s) that political organization should take. We might ask: can democracy ever exist in a “final form”?

Drawing on the work of Jacques Derrida, both Simon Critchley (1999) and John Caputo (1997) argue that democracy is always, necessarily, a democracy to come. It remains a project that can never be completed and it is this recognition that democracy is structurally incomplete that opens up possibilities for the kinds of criticism that democratic political institutions require to remain faithful to the democratic ideal. Put more strongly, democracy does not exist:

One must not restrict oneself to conceiving of democracy as an existent political form (and, once again, not as an apologetics for Western liberal democracy). Rather one must begin to think of democracy as a task, or project, to be attempted. *Democracy does not exist*; that is to say, starting from today, and every day, there is a responsibility to invent democracy, to extend the democratic franchise to all areas of public and private life (Critchley, 1999, p. 240).

Democracy is an approach to political life in which the legitimacy of the institutions and practices of the *polis* are continually called into question (Critchley, 1999). As Caputo (1997) explains, a commitment to democracy demands vigilance with regard to the ways in which all existing democracies are undemocratic, especially our own. We should remain acutely aware, he says, that “the most unjust, the most undemocratic thought is that democracy is here, now, in Western Europe or the good old U.S.A., or in the New World Order” (Caputo, 1997, p. 175). The promise of democracy is just that: a promise. It is a vow that must be perpetually renewed. In other words, pointing out democracy’s real-world shortcomings, rather than extolling its ideal virtues, *is* democracy. Democracy is therefore structurally futural; *pace* Fukuyama, there can be no end to it. Hence, “The conservative ‘end of history’ myth provides not only a limited but a *limiting* vision of the future” (Carlson, 2002, p. 195). It shuts the door on the

possibility of doing things differently. This is as good as it gets and we remain stuck in the same old historical rut. Fukuyama's thesis, then, seems to betray the spirit of democracy. The danger here is that the present system may be regarded as impregnable and, at least in theory, beyond reproach.

### *Rights and Responsibilities*

This characterization of democracy as hinging on the question of justice is at odds with much of Fukuyama's exposition on the state of society and culture at the end of history. For even at the end of history, he claims, "Middle class societies will remain highly inegalitarian in certain respects, but the sources of inequality will increasingly be attributable to the natural inequality of talents, the economically necessary division of labor, and to culture" (1992, p. 291). What I find especially troubling about this claim, is that it seems to subordinate the political process to economic interests. In other words, despite Fukuyama's casual dismissal of those Left criticisms already mentioned, they will not just go away. But according to Fukuyama, there is little that can be done to ameliorate this situation.

There are today few critics of liberal societies who are willing to advocate the wholesale abandonment of liberal principles, either in the political or economic realm, in order to overcome existing economic inequality. The major arguments concern not the principles of liberal society, but the precise point at which the proper trade-off between liberty and equality should come (Fukuyama, 1992, p. 293).

Yet it is this "precise point" that is precisely the point.

I think Fukuyama is correct in his identification of the most significant tension within liberal democracies: that between individual liberty and social obligation. I agree with him that there is no systematic way to eliminate this tension. Democracy cannot get rid of it; indeed, democracy would become redundant if it could. It is the commitment to democracy, in principle at least, that creates the space for dialogue regarding how a just and reasonable balance can be struck between the allowance of substantial individual freedom from institutional interference on the one hand, and the constraint of individual possibilities in the interest of the public good on the other. And, as Dennis Carlson (2002) argues, Fukuyama is quite right about the importance of individual freedom from unnecessary and stifling social imposition:

The good society cannot be a society of uniformity, of everyone merely looking and acting alike, of everyone mouthing the same politically correct language. The good society must be creative and it must be a place where people feel they can develop their full potential, explore their possibilities, and think 'outside the box' (to use the lingo of the day). But they cannot be a privileged few whose motivation to excel is that they want to feel superior to others. Excellence is not 'naturally' tied to inequality. Indeed, it is only when all youth are treated as 'gifted and talented,' that excellence in its fullest sense can develop (p. 193).

Fukuyama does not see it this way. Modernity has all along been, he says, a tug-of-war between the struggle for individual freedom (*megalothymia*) and the struggle for equality (*isothymia*). (And if modernity was, as Fukuyama claims, the victory of the latter, then postmodernity appears to mark the return of the former, though in novel forms.)

Fukuyama claims that we have become a nation out of *thymotic* balance, so to speak, not because of the *megalothymotic*, self-aggrandizing pursuits of a privileged few

but because of *isothymia* run amok—spurious entitlements like affirmative action programs, for example. The only corrective, he says, is a resurgence of *megalothymia*. Following Nietzsche, he argues that our only proper course of action (*megalothymotic* striving) will not only fail to eliminate inequality but will seek to *increase* inequality. Human life, he says, “involves a curious paradox: it seems to require injustice, for the struggle against injustice is what calls forth what is highest in man” (Fukuyama, 1992, p. 311).

I think most people would agree with Fukuyama on the salutary effects of struggles against injustice. But the claim that the most salubrious struggles are *megalothymotic* in nature is much more controversial. One rather obvious problem with advocating the *megalothymotic* pursuit of recognition is that it will not necessarily produce the cherished liberal ideal of a “natural hierarchy” or meritocracy. Money tends to corrupt democratic politics and ours truly is, as the saying goes, the best government money can buy. As David Harvey (2005) observes,

Asymmetric power relations tend to increase rather than diminish over time unless the state steps in to counteract them. The neoliberal presumption of perfect information and a level playing field for competition appears as either innocently utopian or a deliberate obfuscation of processes that will lead to the concentration of wealth (p. 68).

Fukuyama reverses this claim: in order for the state to foster a resurgence of *megalothymia*, he says it must untie the hands of the strong and the naturally gifted so that they may reach their fullest potential unhindered by the demands of the weak:

Every place granted to a minority candidate for a job or a university education under an affirmative action program means one less place for others; every government dollar spent on national health insurance or welfare means that much less for the private economy; every attempt to protect workers from unemployment or firms from bankruptcy will mean less economic freedom. There is no fixed or natural point at which liberty and equality come into balance, nor any way of optimizing both simultaneously (Fukuyama, 1992, p. 293).

For Fukuyama, the appropriate balance point appears to be much closer to individual liberty than to social equality. Individual freedom is therefore presumed to be of primary importance and the rights of individuals (but certainly not all individuals—not even a majority of them) are to be preserved at virtually any social cost, including environmental degradation. Social responsibility, on the other hand, is perceived to oppose the right and lawful exercise of individual rights.

Fukuyama's claims about the supremacy of individual rights hinge on a rather spurious definition of human nature, namely that the desire to be recognized is "man's" primary longing. Hegel, he says,

understands man as a moral agent whose specific dignity is related to his inner freedom from physical or natural determination. It is this moral dimension, and the struggle to have it recognized, that is the motor driving the dialectical process of history (1992, p. 161).

But is the struggle for recognition (as an unconstrained, undetermined being) among competing individuals really a description of an immutable social reality? Or, might it also be said, with at least equal justification, that it is only a stable social context (a cooperative environment) that allows for the meaningful exercise of individual rights? Perhaps, then, it is not the excessive isothymia of the "last man" that is liberalism's final,

unresolved contradiction. Perhaps favoring the needs—or, more often, the wants—of powerful individuals over the needs of the larger social body as if there were no connection between the two is a more likely candidate.

When viewed from a perspective which includes the social context, such assertions of the primacy of the “natural” rights of individuals look suspiciously like justifications for selfishness. Individual rights could just as easily be said to be secondary. As David Harvey (2005) argues, rights are “derivative of and conditional upon citizenship” (p. 180), because rights, by definition, must be honored or enforced by someone or something. It therefore may be, in the broadest sense, logically inconsistent to speak of *individual* rights, for there can be no personal freedom or liberty outside of a social context. The needs of other human beings are not simply a drag on individual freedom. Whatever freedom we each have derives from living in company with others. Rights and responsibility emerge together within a social context; each depends on the other for its existence. For without an affirmation of individual rights, public spaces can become stifling and oppressive and governments can become tyrannical. But an overemphasis on the sanctity of individual rights can lead to the diminishment of the public sphere and the erosion of public life. In such a hyper-individualistic context, public spaces become areas of combat rather than community (or even civility): one tries to get from them as much as one can and then get out fast. Moreover, in such a context of suspicion, fear, and even paranoia, it becomes difficult to exercise some of our most important freedoms, like freedom of speech and freedom of association.

So as the social context is degraded, as the social fabric is unwoven, the space in which the individual exercises his/her “rights” disappears as well. Therefore, what is thwarting the meaningful exercise of individual rights in this historical period does not appear to be an excess of *isothymia*, but a fairly widespread agreement among many Americans that human beings do not carry much responsibility for one another. If *megalothymotic* self-assertion is good, if “greed is good” as Gordon Gekko, the main character in the film *Wall Street* (1987) proclaimed, then it is every man for himself (which of course does not bode well for women and children) and the world becomes a very lonely, fearful, and even more violent place.

Liberalism pushed to its individualistic extreme therefore has an atomizing effect on society. It undermines the very connections that hold a society together. This is a difficulty that Fukuyama (1992) recognizes but only superficially addresses in a short, penultimate chapter entitled, “Perfect Rights and Defective Duties”. He writes, “In the long run ... liberal principles have a corrosive effect on the values predating liberalism necessary to sustain strong communities, and thereby on a liberal society’s ability to be self-sustaining” (1992, p. 327). In other words, to be stable over long periods social groups require more than mere self interest and the enforcement legal contracts to guard against the self interest of others.

Perhaps the most unsettling and dystopian irony with regard to the end of history is Fukuyama’s insistence on necessity of a *megalothymic* response to liberalism’s tendency toward social disintegration. In attempting to base morality and ethics on a spurious formulation of human nature, Fukuyama seeks to reinstate, through

*megalothymotic* assertiveness, a “state of nature.” Yet this was the very thing the founders of modern liberal society were trying to avoid.

### *Anthropocentrism and the End of History*

The hypothesis put forward here is that the widespread acceptance of many of the liberal tenets expressed in Fukuyama’s notion of the end of history has weakened the social and political structures necessary to collectively meet the global ecological crisis. We saw a stark example of this with Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Though it is impossible to attribute a single storm to global warming, but climate researchers have predicted that more frequent and intense tropic storms will result from global climate change (IPCC, 2001). The hurricane seasons of the last ten to fifteen years, and the 2005 season in particular, are consistent with this anticipated trend (IPCC, 2001). In any event, the federal, state, and local responses to the largest natural disaster in the nation’s history are hardly cause for optimism with regard to our ability to deal collectively with the consequences of global environmental change.

What is particularly problematic, from an ecological standpoint, is the deep and uncritical anthropocentrism expressed in Fukuyama’s thought. The natural environment remains largely invisible except in its taken-for-granted role as source of raw material for the economy. Fukuyama advocates a climate of competitive individualism (*megalothymotic* striving) in which enough is never enough. He endorses a craving that can only be temporarily satisfied through “success” in the workplace and the consumer gratifications it affords.

For Fukuyama, there is assumed to be a natural hierarchy within the human species and between human beings and other organisms (with humans of course occupying the top position). “Man’s superior dignity,” Fukuyama says, “entitles him to the conquest of nature that is, to the manipulation and appropriation of nature for his own purposes, made possible through modern natural science” (Fukuyama, 1992, p. 297). This exploitative relation to nature follows naturally from his understanding of human nature and the rights that accord with it. Echoing Hegel, he writes,

Man’s very humanity consists in his ability to overcome or negate that animal nature. He is free not just in Hobbes’s formal sense of being physically unconstrained, but free in the metaphysical sense of being radically *un-*determined by nature. This includes his own nature, the natural environment around him and nature’s laws. He is, in short, capable of true *moral* choice, that is, choice between two courses of action not simply on the basis of the greater utility of one set of passions and instincts over another but, but because of an inherent freedom to make and adhere to his own rules. And man’s specific *dignity* lies not in a superior calculating ability that makes him a cleverer machine than the lower animals, but precisely in this capacity for free moral choice” (1992, p. 150).

While I am sympathetic with Fukuyama’s rejection of modern science’s depiction of human beings (along with other life forms) as governed solely by a mechanistic determinism and his desire to preserve the possibility and the obligation of moral choice, I think this is a false dilemma. Human beings are natural beings just like any other in that we are embodied, interdependent, and mortal. We are not uncaused causes, but that does not mean that we are incapable of moral choice. Because it is allegedly this capacity for free moral choice that constitutes “man’s superior dignity” and therefore entitles “man”

to the conquest of nature, Fukuyama seems threatened by any challenge to this notion of the superior dignity of human beings:

Modern natural science seems to demonstrate that there is no essential difference between man and nature, that man is simply a more organized and rational form of slime. But if there is no basis for saying that man has a superior dignity to nature, then the justification for man's domination over nature ends (Fukuyama, 1992, p. 297).

For Fukuyama, such an end would be an unqualified disaster, though others might argue that this would represent the beginning of the turn toward ecological sustainability. For as we are beginning to understand, we human beings never really had dominion over nature. An acknowledgement of the human-induced ecological crisis should disabuse us of any notions of human superiority. We are inescapably dependent on the natural world (of which we humans are a part) for our continued existence and we continue to ignore this immutable fact at our great peril.

The need to legitimate human beings' domination over nature is why an egoistic, rights-based ethics is so important for Fukuyama. However, these rights must be restricted and the primary basis of restriction centers on the capacity for free moral choice. Only human beings have this capacity; thus, other forms of life are not morally considerable. In other words, they have no rights.

Rights spring directly from an understanding of what man is, but if there is no agreement on the nature of man, then any attempt to define rights or prevent the creation of new and possibly spurious ones will be unavailing. As an example of how this could come about, consider the possibility of a future superuniversalization of rights, where the distinction between human and non-human is lost (Fukuyama, 1992, p. 296).

Without such a distinction, the party is over, so to speak, for modern capitalist economies are absolutely dependent upon the instrumental treatment of nature. Of course, nature does have instrumental value and it would be impossible to live without “using” the natural world. We all have to eat, but this is not the point. Rapacious exploitation of nature (including much of the world’s human population) is unnecessary, but this is what Fukuyama thinks impossible to forego. He asks,

Is it possible to imagine the emergence of a highly radicalized environmentalism that would seek to reject... the entire modern project of the conquest of nature, as well as the technological civilization that rests on it? The answer, for a variety of reasons, would appear to be no (1992, p. 84).

The reasons given are that we have become too attached to our postmodern consumer lifestyles. We cannot let go of “the expectations created by current economic growth” (Fukuyama, 1992, p. 85). The only potential solutions to the ecological crisis then must be consistent with the modern project of conquering nature. In other words, they must be technological rather than social, political, or moral: “The defense of the environment,” he says, “far from *requiring* a break with modern technology and the economic world created by it, may in the long run require that world as its precondition” (Fukuyama, 1992, p. 86). The assumption is that, if technology got us into this mess, technology will get us out of it.

The mainstream of the environmental movement recognizes that the most realistic solutions to environmental problems are likely to lie in the creation of alternative technologies, or technologies to actively protect the environment. A healthy environment is a luxury best afforded by those with wealth and economic dynamism; the worst environmental offenders, whether in the disposal of toxic wastes or deforestation of tropical rainforests, are developing countries that feel

their relative poverty does not give them any option but to exploit their own natural resources, or that do not have the social discipline to enforce environmental laws (Fukuyama, 1992, p. 86).

Fukuyama refuses to admit any connection (much less a causal one) between the “wealth and economic dynamism” of the developed world and the environmental devastation of “developing countries”. Moreover, there may be other alternatives to Fukuyama’s simple dichotomy of modern technology versus no modern technology. But Fukuyama sees attempts to “freeze technological development at its current level or to permit technological innovation only on a highly selective basis” (1992, p. 85) as futile. He offers two reasons. First,

freezing technology at the already high level of today’s advanced countries is not likely to be an adequate solution for an impending ecological crisis, and fails to answer the question of whether the global ecosystem can tolerate the Third World catching up (Fukuyama, 1992, p. 86).

Whether the global ecosystem can tolerate the Third World catching up economically is a very pertinent question and I agree that the answer is no. I also agree that we need more ecologically benign technology, but I would argue that much more than this is needed because newer and better technologies will not likely close the gap in wealth between regions. And this brings me to Fukuyama’s second reason:

The social and economic inequalities that exist today in developed societies are much less disruptive politically if there is a growing economic pie to share; they would become much more serious if the United States came to resemble a giant, stagnant East Germany (Fukuyama, 1992, pp. 85-86).

Economic growth is a necessary cover story, not so much to mask social inequality, but to promise the future possibility of broader participation in the economic bonanza. As soon as economic growth, as it is currently conceived, is no longer viable, then the issue of an equitable distribution of the existing economic pie becomes a much more pressing issue (Meadows et al, 2004). If the solutions are not simply technical in nature, then perhaps we will have to rethink what it means to live in a liberal society, what it means to have a democracy. We will, in short, have quite a lot of work to do. Most of us seem very reluctant to take on such a challenge—myself included.

### *Fukuyama at the Crossroads*

In the 1992 book, Fukuyama raises few objections to the totalizing and homogenizing effects of capitalism. He dismisses the histories and cultural beliefs and practices of non-European peoples (not to mention conscientious objectors within European societies) as blind alleys. Worse, Fukuyama's teleology makes it seem as if much of the world's population is just standing in the way of History's ultimate destination—holding up the wagon train of History, in both senses of “holding up”: robbing and delaying. (A wagon train is actually Fukuyama's closing metaphor, perhaps betraying nostalgia for what is gone at the end of history: the days of the frontier and the expanding empire.) It seems reasonable, from this perspective, to “help” the rest of the world along the path to our common final destination. As John Caputo points out, the various teleological belief systems, both religious and secular (like Fukuyama's), “have rarely lacked the nerve to seize the opportunity to give their destiny a little boost

wherever the occasion presented itself. That is when the blood begins to flow” (1997, p. 161). The Iraq War, in addition to the attempt to secure access to what is currently an indispensable natural resource, seems to be such an attempt to give destiny a little boost.

In his most recent book, *America at the crossroads: Democracy, power, and the neoconservative legacy* (2006), Fukuyama claims that an erroneous interpretation of his end of history argument—namely that liberalism, both political and economic, is the default condition of any group human beings regardless of historical, social, and cultural differences—may have contributed to the decision to launch the preemptive assault against Iraq. He says that it was probably assumed by the architects of the war that regime change could restore (or convert) a state to this default condition rather quickly, as had been the case in Central and Eastern Europe in the wake of the breakup of the Soviet Union. When an authoritarian government is toppled (from internal or external pressure), the transition to a Western-style political/economic system is assumed to follow quickly and painlessly. It is hardly necessary to mention, but this assumption has proven to be quite flawed.

I applaud Fukuyama’s denunciation of the doctrine of preemption and his dissociation (perhaps even apostasy) from the neoconservative agenda. But in doing so, rather than recant certain of his previous assertions, he now claims never to have made them. Many people, he says, interpreted *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) as arguing “that there is a universal hunger for liberty in all people that will inevitably lead them to liberal democracy, and that we are living in the midst of an accelerating, transnational movement in favor of liberal democracy” (2006, p. 54). This, he claims, is a

misreading of his argument. In fairness, Fukuyama's central thesis was that economic and political liberalism represent a point beyond which no further historical development is possible. He offered no timetable for the liberalization or Westernization of the entire world. Nor did he *explicitly* state that such a transition would be as seemingly simple a matter as it had been in the case of Central and Eastern Europe. However, the linchpin of the end of history argument is his claim that the struggle for recognition is the defining characteristic of human beings, a claim that he develops over six chapters of the 1992 book. In other words, the validity of the whole argument rests on the soundness of Fukuyama's characterization of a transhistorical, transcultural human nature. Central to this characterization is his claim that "man is not simply an economic animal" (1992, p. xvi) and that there is no necessary connection between liberal economics (capitalism) and liberal political systems (democracy). In 1992, he wrote,

The process of economic modernization may bring about certain large-scale social changes like the transformation of tribal and agricultural societies into urban, educated, middle-class ones that create the material conditions for democracy. *But this process does not explain democracy itself, for if we look more deeply into the process, we find that democracy is almost never chosen for economic reasons* [italics mine] (p. 134).

Yet in 2006, he claims,

*The End of History* is finally an argument about modernization. What is *initially* universal is not the desire for liberal democracy but rather the desire to live in a modern society, with its technology, high standards of living, health care, and access to the wider world. Economic modernization, when successful, tends to drive demands for political participation by creating a middle class with property to protect, higher levels of education, and greater concern for their recognition as individuals. *Liberal democracy is one of the by-products of this modernization,*

*something that becomes a universal aspiration only in the course of historical time* [italics mine] (2006, p. 54).

So out go the timeless truths of human nature and back in comes the contingency of history. Fukuyama seems now to suggest that historical conditions create the desire for democracy, not human nature. I suppose in the interest of fair play I should note that it has been almost fifteen years since he wrote the earlier book and he has the right to change his mind. Furthermore, he hedges his bets enough in the 1992 book to make these two statements seem a little less contradictory than they might at first appear. But there is still a very conspicuous diminution of the role of *thymos* in the political trajectory of historical development—and it was *thymos*, not economic modernization, which was the headliner of *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992). Therefore, it seems that Fukuyama has, in fact, substantially modified (if not renounced) a major element of his end-of-history thesis.

But there is, of course, a rather obvious explanation for his reluctance to admit this. What Fukuyama seems most reticent to admit is that the use of military force (not to mention secret prisons, torture, and domestic spying) follows quite logically from Fukuyama's advocacy of *megalothymotic* self-assertion. What could be more *megalothymotically* self-assertive than the attempt to orchestrate a regime change through military means in defiance of nearly all of one's allies?

However, Fukuyama has not lost faith in his thesis of the end of history. He is only critical of current attempts to hurry the process along, as Caputo puts it. He favors softer encouragement toward the universal endpoint of economic development (and,

subsequently, liberal democracy), what he calls a “realistic Wilsonianism” (2006, pp. 9-10): a multilateral, cooperative internationalism that does not seek to so violently meddle in the affairs of sovereign states:

The United States should promote both political and economic development, and it should care about what happens inside states around the world. We should do this by focusing primarily on good governance, political accountability, democracy, and strong institutions. But the primary instruments by which we do this are mostly within the realm of soft power: our ability to set an example, to train and educate, to support with advice and often money (2006, p. 185).

Still, the overriding goal is still that the rest of the world should follow the American liberal model, which is now more accurately described as a *neoliberal* model. For as Michael Apple (2001a) argues: “If we were to point to one specific defining political/economic paradigm of the age in which we live, it would be neoliberalism” (p. 17)—what Robert McChesney calls, “capitalism with the gloves off” (cited in Apple, 2001a, p. 18). Neoliberal theory and the process of neoliberalization, also known as economic globalization, will be the subject of the next chapter.

### CHAPTER III

#### NEOLIBERALISM

Though Francis Fukuyama did not use the word *neoliberal* to characterize his view of the economic/political landscape at the end of history, the 1992 book can reasonably be interpreted as an attempt to establish a philosophical basis and an ideological justification for neoliberalism, especially the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s. Implicit in Fukuyama's argument is the idea that these measures—extensive privatization of public sectors of the economy, deregulation of private enterprise, and strict monetarism (to damp inflation)—have empirically demonstrated the superiority of formal democracy and technologically-driven capitalism to all other political and economic systems.

Not only Fukuyama thinks so. Neoliberalism has increasingly gained acceptance during the past few decades as the “only alternative” (Harvey, 2005, p. 156), even among a large percentage of Americans whose material interests have been negatively impacted by neoliberal policies. It is this taken-for-granted character of neoliberalism coupled with its willful ignorance of the both the social and environmental context in which it is embedded that makes it especially dangerous. That it forms a substantial part of the ideological justification for the globalization of capitalism compounds the problem exponentially. Therefore, without a radical reorientation at the cultural level, without a critical engagement with such tacit assumptions of how the world is or ought to be, we

should only expect the pace of environmental and social devastation to accelerate. Without such an engagement, it is probable that attempts at solving environmental problems will continue either to have little effect or even worsen the ecological crisis by repeating the same errors that created it in the first place.

A critical understanding of neoliberalism is thus vital to meeting the ecological crisis. We must begin to explore alternatives to the neoliberal frame, for as geographer and social theorist, David Harvey (2005) argues,

If we are entering the danger zone of so transforming the global environment, particularly its climate, as to make the earth unfit for human habitation, then further embrace of the neoliberal ethic and of neoliberalizing practices will surely prove nothing short of deadly (p. 173).

*What is Neoliberalism?*

Neoliberalism is one of the more important ideological obstacles to achieving sustainability. In a nutshell, neoliberalism is the belief, now widely held, that the political process should be subordinate to economic interests. Harvey offers the following formal definition:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices (2005, p. 2).

At the root of this typically sunny attitude toward the “the wondrous healing capacity of the market” (Bauman, 1995, p. 26)—which is not at all Harvey’s attitude—is

the presumption of the centrality of private concerns and the marginality of public life. It is this core assumption that threatens to erode the democratic structures that will be necessary, if insufficient by themselves, to effectively deal with the ecological crisis. Common problems require collective solutions. Rampant individualism and privatization will only make matters worse.

But according to neoliberal theory, only markets, technology, and consumer choice will remedy social and political problems—that is, if they can be remedied at all. Neoliberalism has a distinctly postmodern flavor: it does not make utopian promises like the elimination of poverty or full employment. What it does promise is unlimited economic growth and all the attendant benefits available to those who are talented and ambitious enough to seize the economic opportunities that it creates. Neoliberalism, then, favors people with money to spend by purportedly creating the economic and political framework necessary to maximize consumer benefit:

Privatization and deregulation combined with competition, it is claimed, eliminate bureaucratic red tape, increase efficiency and productivity, improve quality, and reduce costs, both directly to the consumer through cheaper commodities and services and indirectly through reduction of the tax burden (Harvey, 2005, p.65)

Democracy in neoliberal theory is thus conceptualized in economic rather than political terms: we are a nation of consumers, not citizens. According to Michael Apple (2001b), “When private is good and public is bad in education and so much else in this society, the world is seen as basically a supermarket and democracy is seen as making choices in that market” (p. 725).

Government interference in markets is thus to be avoided, for while governments are regarded as bumbling behemoths, markets are thought to be nimble and efficient. Markets allow for a natural and spontaneous social order; planning, regulation, and other forms of market interference only stifle natural processes (Bauman, 1995). For this reason, neoliberals argue that nearly everything under the sun should be privatized and subjected to market forces, including public schools. Ideally, there should be no (or at least very little) public provision or subsidy of not only education but also healthcare, employment, retirement benefits, child care, elder care, transportation, or housing. According to Harvey,

A 'personal responsibility system' is substituted for social protections that were formerly an obligation of employers and the state. Individuals buy products in the markets that sell social protections instead. Individual security is therefore a matter of individual choice (2005, p. 168).

But of course, such a system only works for those who have the financial means to exercise such choices. Not everyone does. Moreover, the quality of social-protection commodities, healthcare insurance for example, is highly stratified according to price. One can only get what one can afford and the ability of ordinary citizens to purchase social protections continues to diminish as work is being restructured in response to neoliberal trends, especially economic globalization.

The long-standing, if implicit, social contract between capital and labor is dissolving. As a result, class composition is changing and so are traditional class identities and values. The structure of the middle class, for example, is being altered as small businesses have been displaced by much larger firms (except for certain niche

markets) and the days of putting in thirty or forty years with the same company and then leaving with a gold watch and a pension are long gone. The traditional working class and the unions through which it was formerly able to exercise significant political power are declining too. More and more well-paid, blue-collar jobs have been rendered obsolete by new technologies or displaced to poorer countries by owners/managers in search of cheaper labor, lower taxes, and fewer regulations. Furthermore, most of the new jobs that neoliberalization has created here in one of the core regions of the global economy are part-time, low-wage, and low-skill (Harvey, 2005), creating what Arran Gare (1995) terms a new, relatively powerless “service subclass” (p 17). This has been done to create a more “flexible” (read: interchangeable, replaceable, disposable) workforce. While this may confer some benefits to some workers, the general trend is toward more and more short-term contract work with little job security and few benefits. With these changes occurring in a time when government support for public services is declining, this radical restructuring of work is affecting more and more people ever more intensely:

It is precisely in such a context of diminished personal resources derived from the job market that the neoliberal determination to transfer all responsibility for well-being back to the individual has doubly deleterious effects. As the state withdraws from welfare provision and diminishes its role in arenas such as health care, public education, and social services, which were once so fundamental to embedded liberalism, it leaves larger and larger segments of the population exposed to impoverishment. The social safety net is reduced to a bare minimum in favour of a system that emphasizes personal responsibility. Personal failure is generally attributed to personal failings, and the victim is all too often blamed” (Harvey, 2005, p. 76).

It is easy to see how longer-term concerns like the ecological crisis are displaced in such an antagonistic and anxious social climate. It is difficult for many people to

justify the added expense of more eco-friendly consumer goods such as organic produce when there is such uncertainty about one's immediate future: finding and keeping a job (or, often, jobs), paying for childcare, putting kids through college, taking care of aging parents, saving for retirement, and so on. And as long as the prices of consumer products do not accurately reflect the costs of their production—as long as most social and environmental costs are “externalized”, i.e. paid for with public funds, if addressed at all—most consumers will continue to buy the cheapest goods available. For according to neoliberalism proper, there is to be no social safety net. Hence, many of us feel that if we do not personally have the financial wherewithal to take care of ourselves and our loved ones, we will not be able to look elsewhere for help. In this context, it is understandable that the effects of climate change and resource depletion are not immediate enough (yet) to warrant much consideration from most working people. We have so many other things to worry about.

Moreover, this belief that we are all on our own understandably engenders feelings of anxiety and fear—and, unfortunately, selfishness and greed in response to that anxiety and fear. There is a growing distrust of others, a feeling that someone else's gain must be my loss, and a resignation to the idea that this is simply how the world is.

Michael Lerner (2000) has referred to this kind of thinking as pathogenic: “Pathogenic beliefs encourage us to act on the premise that we can't count on others, that we are stuck in a society that cannot be changed” (p. 17). The inability to imagine alternatives to this view is what is perhaps most troubling about the dominance of neoliberalism. It has become the “common sense” approach to political economy in post-industrial societies.

## *Neoliberalism and Education*

It is important for educators to be cognizant of the impacts of the neoliberal agenda on educational practice. The escalating obsession with standards and accountability, objectivism and quantification, individualism and competition, and especially privatization and school choice has occurred in response to the alignment of school practices with neoliberal goals. Increasingly, schools are judged according to their effectiveness at training students to participate in a global economic system that is destroying the earth's capacity to sustain both human and non-human life. Much of the instruction that goes on in American public schools seeks to develop in students the skills needed to participate (at various levels, according to factors such as social class, race, gender, and geography) in the domination and exploitation of the natural world through the use of science and technology—as workers, but also, and perhaps more insidiously, as consumers. Therefore it is not entirely hyperbolic to suggest that academic success in school, for students, teachers, and administrators, amounts to ecological failure. As educators we therefore have a responsibility, at minimum, to resist the utilization of public schools as instruments of neoliberal policy, for neoliberals have long had their eye on public schools and their influence is increasing. As Henry Giroux (1999) has argued,

No longer content to argue for the application of business principles to the organization of schooling, the forces of corporate culture have adopted a more radical agenda for the public education. Central to this agenda is the attempt to transform public education from a public good, benefiting all students, to a private good designed to expand the profits of investors, educate students as consumers, and train young people for the low-paying jobs of the new global marketplace (p. 140).

Public schools are thus to be transformed from a civic institution providing a vital public service (or at least the potential to provide such service) to a commoditized source of private, pecuniary gain. According to Michael Apple (2001a), public education constitutes a market worth \$700 billion. As such, it is greedily regarded as “the next healthcare—that is, a sphere that can be mined for huge profits” (Apple, 2001a, p. 7).

Privatization schemes such as vouchers and school choice initiatives are the favored neoliberal mechanisms for dismantling the nation’s public schools and opening them up to private, for-profit entities. The point here is to extract as much of that \$700 billion as possible through the direct diversion of public funds into private hands: private school tuition paid for by taxes, private management companies hired to run public schools, and so on.

But a more subtle consequence of privatization is directly at odds with stated rationale of providing consumers (formerly known as students and their families) more and better education choices. As Michael Apple (2001a) notes, the economy that is created by the implementation of neoliberal policies creates fewer high-paying, high-skill jobs with healthcare and retirement benefits, not more. Privatization schemes seek to ensure that the children of wealthier and more privileged parents will have the best shot at competing successfully for the shrinking pool of decent jobs. The rest will be left to take their places in the growing service sector of the labor market. Therefore it is likely that extensive privatization of education will only exacerbate existing social stratification along lines of race and class (Apple, 2001a, p. 40).

There are now increasingly convincing arguments that while the supposed overt goal of voucher and choice plans is to give poor people the right to exit public schools, among the ultimate long-term effects may be the increase of “white flight” from public schools into private and religious schools and the creation of the conditions where affluent white parents may refuse to pay taxes to support public schools that are more and more suffering from the debilitating effects of the fiscal crisis of the state. The result is even more educational apartheid, not less” (Apple, 2001a, pp. 40-41).

Vouchers will not send substantial numbers of poor children of color to Andover, Exeter, and Groton—or even the local Montessori school. But they will provide some middle class families with enough financial help to afford private school tuition, thus depleting funds for public school even further.

Neoliberal rhetoric of consumer choice and technical rationality obscures such consequences by depoliticizing issues like school finance (and others such as curricular content and questions of who should be accountable to whom). Education is treated as a simple commodity, a differentiated set of products freely chosen by rational actors. Political issues in education are thus reframed as economic issues. This is the heart of the neoliberal strategy as it pertains to education.

Along with Giroux and Apple, many educators and theorists (e.g., Kozol, 1991; Molnar, 1996; Purpel, 1999; Shapiro 2003; Tanner, 2003) have objected to the commodification of education and the subordination of the functions of public schools to the interests of business and industry. But the prevailing view of the purpose of education assumes the primary function of schools to be the promotion of economic competitiveness. As President Clinton said to the American Council on Education in a 1994 speech to promote his *Goals 2000* legislation, one overriding question must be

asked of every education official: “Are the children learning what they need to learn to compete and win in the global economy.” The civic function of public education, the concern with fostering democratic engagement and promoting citizenship, is thus displaced by a concern with maintaining the economic dominance of the United States in the new global economy. Learning to live within ecological limits is not even on the radar, so to speak, of neoliberal education “reform.”

Further, if the fundamental tenets of neoliberalism are uncritically adopted as the basis of any acceptable approach to education, even well-intentioned attempts at progressive educational reform—the promotion of individual empowerment among members of marginalized groups within the existing social/political/economic context, for example—may unintentionally exacerbate the ecological crisis:

If the thinking that guides educational reform does not take account of how the cultural beliefs and practices passed on through schooling relate to the deepening ecological crisis, then these efforts may actually strengthen the cultural orientation that is undermining the sustaining capacities of natural systems upon which all life depends (Bowers, 1995, p. 1).

This is especially true of any environmentally-oriented pedagogy that poses the ecological crisis as a problem amenable to a rational, technical solution, or as one remediable through market mechanisms, especially small changes in consumer attitudes and behaviors—something like an expanded definition of rational self-interest. Critical thinking is indispensable, of course, but it can only take us so far. However, it can take us quite a distance down the wrong path; it already has. Technological innovations and more ecologically responsible business practices will undoubtedly be helpful as we try to make

the transition to living within ecological limits, but as David Orr (1992) reminds us: “Without political, social, and value changes, no technology will make us sustainable” (p. 146). The likelihood of such changes coming to fruition is greatly diminished by the redefinition of the ends of education in terms of the neoliberal agenda. But what exactly is the agenda?

### *Freedom and the Restoration/Creation of Class Power*

In a postmodern world allegedly lacking in overarching narratives, neoliberalism is the dominant story of our time, a “grand narrative” that mediates the multiple and personalized local narratives of postmodernity. It therefore may not be simply accidental that the timeline of neoliberal development coincides with the advent of postmodernity. According to Harvey, the dovetailing of the neoliberal agenda with the rise of postmodern culture was, in part, the result of opportunism on the part of economic elites who had seen their fortunes contract considerably due to “stagflation” in the 1970s.

By capturing ideals of individual freedom and turning them against the interventionist and regulatory practices of the state, capitalist class interests could hope to protect and even restore their position. Neoliberalism was well suited to this ideological task. But it had to be backed up by a political strategy that emphasized the liberty of consumer choice, not only with respect to particular products but also with respect to lifestyles, modes of expression, and a wide range of cultural practices. Neoliberalization required both politically and economically the construction of a neoliberal market-based populist culture of differentiated consumerism and individual libertarianism. As such it proved more than a little compatible with that cultural impulse called ‘postmodernism’ which had long been lurking in the wings but could now emerge full-blown as both a cultural and an intellectual dominant (2005, p. 42).

Freedom was redefined in consumerist terms and this set the stage for a certain variety of economic “growth.”

It may be instructive at this point to introduce a distinction between neoliberalism and neoliberalization. Neoliberalism is a theory; neoliberalization is a practice, or set of practices. Harvey claims that the relation between the two may be interpreted “either as a *utopian* project to realize a theoretical design for the reorganization of international capitalism or as a *political* project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites” (2005, p. 19). This, of course, is not a simple either-or proposition. One may hold both interpretations simultaneously. But Harvey sees the political project as dominant and he argues that utopian neoliberal theory has mainly functioned as a cover story for neoliberal practices meant to restore or create elite power:

The theoretical utopianism of neoliberal argument has, I conclude, primarily worked as a system of justification and legitimation for whatever needed to be done to achieve this goal. The evidence suggests, moreover, that when neoliberal principles clash with the need to restore or sustain elite power, then the principles are either abandoned or become so twisted as to be unrecognizable (2005, p. 19).

Here, Harvey points to contradictions between neoliberal theory and practice, but there are also important contradictions *within* neoliberal theory. For example, neoliberalism opposes state intervention in principle yet it requires state intervention in practice (the rule of law and the violent means to back it up) to enforce contracts and protect the rights of property owners. In other words, it demands both a weak and a strong state in the same breath. Governance by unaccountable, undemocratic institutions like the Federal Reserve or the International Monetary Fund thus creates the “paradox of

intense state interventions and government by elites and ‘experts’ in a world where the state is supposed not to be interventionist” (Harvey, 2005, p. 69). More than this, when the freedom neoliberalism ostensibly promotes comes into conflict with the goal of feathering the nests of elites, freedom suddenly loses its exalted status. “Faced with social movements that seek collective interventions, therefore, the neoliberal state is itself forced to intervene, sometimes repressively, thus denying the very freedoms it is supposed to uphold” (Harvey, 2005, p. 69).

Neoliberalism, then, in perfect postmodern fashion, is full of holes. Yet it has been largely successful up to now at disguising what Harvey alleges is its unstated goal: the restoration of elite power through economic globalization. Two paths to the goal of restoring or creating elite power are available: one is the creation of new wealth through economic growth and the other is the redistribution of existing wealth. Harvey asserts that while utopian neoliberalism trumpets the former (“a rising tide floats all boats”) the actual practice of neoliberalization favors the latter. In fact, with respect to generating global economic growth,

[Neoliberalization’s] actual record turns out to be nothing short of dismal. Aggregate global growth rates stood at 3.5 percent or so in the 1960s and even during the troubled 1970s fell only to 2.4 per cent. But the subsequent growth rates of 1.4 and 1.1 percent for the 1980s and 1990s (and a rate that barely touches 1 percent since 2000) indicate that neoliberalization has broadly failed to stimulate worldwide growth (Harvey, 2005, p. 154).

In other words, neoliberalization has not created much new wealth, but it has been very successful at redistributing existing wealth—upward. The major mechanism for this redistribution of wealth Harvey terms “accumulation by dispossession”, which basically

amounts to creating global conditions favorable to looting—a continuation of what Marx referred to as “primitive” or “original” practices during the rise of capitalism (2005, p. 154). Accumulation by dispossession follows on the heels of treating nearly everything as a rival, excludable commodity, including things that are clearly not commodities, like land and labor or education and healthcare.

Accumulation by dispossession is especially brutal among non-Western cultures that are undergoing neoliberal reforms in order to enter the global market. These reforms include the commodification and privatization of land, including the removal of indigenous and peasant populations by force—according to Harvey, approximately 70 million peasants have been displaced in recent decades in China and Mexico alone (2005, p. 159); the conversion of common, collective, and state property rights to private property, including denial of rights to the commons; the commodification of labor, which tends to supplant indigenous forms of production and consumption; neocolonial/neo-imperial appropriation of assets, especially natural resources; monetization of social economies of barter and exchange; taxation of land; the slave trade (especially the sex industry), and “usury, the national debt, and most devastating of all, the use of the credit system as a radical means of accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey, 2005, p. 159) And flying in the face of neoliberal purism, “The state, with its monopoly of violence and definitions of legality, plays a crucial role in both backing and promoting these processes” (Harvey, 2005, p. 159). Just as more pedestrian instances of looting often occur in the wake of some sort of crisis, a blackout for example, accumulation by dispossession requires the management and manipulation (sometimes the creation) of

crises, often financial or military, as the grounds for redistribution. One can no doubt think of recent examples.

In light of the abject failure of neoliberalization to deliver on its promise of growth and prosperity Harvey asks, “Why, then, are so many persuaded that neoliberalization through globalization is the ‘only alternative’ and that it has been so successful?” (2005, p. 156). One reason is that the figures on global growth rates he mentions are not widely known. And with the media reflecting the interests of the upper classes, the overall failure of neoliberal globalization to achieve its promise of high rates of growth is not likely to see much reporting. What does tend to get reported are the remarkable, yet temporary success stories like Japan, the Asian “tigers”, and West Germany in the 1980s, the U.S. and the U.K. in the 1990s, and now China and India. But perhaps most importantly,

Neoliberalization, the process rather than the theory, has been a huge success from the standpoint of the upper classes. It has either restored class power to ruling elites (as in the U.S. and to some extent in Britain) or created conditions for capitalist class formation (as in China, India, Russia, and elsewhere) (Harvey, 2005, p. 156).

Economic globalization (the imposition of neoliberal economic practices on a global scale) has thus further widened the gap between rich and poor both within the economies of the West and between the West and the rest of the world (Cavanaugh & Mander, 2004). As previously mentioned, the standard neoliberal interpretation of this increase in social stratification is that it is the unfortunate result of “natural” disparities between individuals and cultural groups. Through the manipulation of the media,

The myth could be propagated that states failed economically because they were not competitive (thereby creating a demand for even more neoliberal reforms). Increased social inequality within a territory was construed as necessary to encourage the entrepreneurial risk and innovation that conferred competitive power and stimulated growth. If conditions among the lower classes deteriorated, this was because they failed, usually for personal and cultural reasons, to enhance their own human capital (through dedication to education, the acquisition of a Protestant work ethic, submission to work discipline and flexibility, and the like). Particular problems arose, in short, because of a lack of competitive strength or because of personal, cultural, and political failings. In a Darwinian neoliberal world, the argument went, only the fittest should and do survive (Harvey, 2005, pp. 156-157).

Continuing with the evolutionary metaphor, poverty is considered objective proof of lack of fitness.

This idea that certain individuals or groups are simply unfit to compete successfully, the reader will recall, is a major component of Francis Fukuyama's end-of-history argument. His claim about the natural rights of "man" following logically from a universal definition of what constitutes the "nature of man" (1992, p. 296) seems to betray an effort to justify immense disparities in wealth both within and between nations. For chief among the natural rights of "man", it seems, is the right of powerful men (and women—Fukuyama seems to support equal-opportunity opportunism) to assert themselves unimpeded by the needs of other, less powerful people.

Fukuyama thus gives expression to a popular notion of freedom. Zygmunt Bauman (1995) says of this notion,

Freedom now, as always, tends to be defined in terms of the rights of the high and mighty. As always, it includes the right to decide monologically what is 'in the best interest' of the other and, obviously, whose interests are to be sacrificed for the sake of common welfare and *impartial* reason (p. 160).

Not coincidentally then, what is considered ‘in the best interest’ of others often neatly corresponds to what elites consider to be in their own best interest; hence, the paradoxical position that the best way to ensure the welfare of the state’s citizens is for the state not to concern itself with the welfare of its citizens. The invisible hand of the market will take care of them, but only to the degree that they have earned. The particular problems of others can thus be attributed to “personal, cultural, and political failings” (Harvey, 2005, p. 157).

As Bauman argues, this is the stuff of tax revolts:

More and more, we confront the community, common needs and common causes solely in the capacity of taxpayers; it is no more a question of our shared responsibility for, and collective insurance against, everyone’s mishap and misfortune—but a question of how much it will cost me to provide for those who cannot provide for themselves (1995, p. 271).

These are typical objections to direct measures designed to deal with environmental problems such as more stringent environmental regulations. How much is it going to cost me in terms of higher prices or higher taxes? What will I have to give up in terms of the standard of living I have come to expect? Will this affect my ability to accumulate wealth and to spend my money however I choose?

The outcome of this kind of thinking has been the deployment of

gradually ‘normalized’ legally allowed and culturally approved forms of violence in the service of individual self-assertion, now increasingly guided by the pursuit of flexibility and perpetual openness of options, by the wish to avoid ‘future-mortgaging’ commitments, by resentment of being bound by the needs of others and reluctance to accept inconvenience that carries no visible benefit to one’s own consumer gratification (Bauman, 1995, pp. 158-159).

This is a new kind of violence peculiar to postmodernity, one that is authorized, Bauman claims, by a new and specifically postmodern form of *adiaphorization*. *Adiaphorization* refers to “making certain actions, or certain objects of action, morally neutral or irrelevant—exempt from the category of phenomena suitable for moral evaluation” (Bauman, 1995, p. 149). This is an interesting neologism. *Diaphoresis* is the medical term for the act of perspiring. The prefix *a-* means, of course, “without” or “not.” *Adiaphorization* literally refers to the creation of *no-sweat* situations. In other words, through *adiaphorizing* processes, the existential agony of moral choice has been removed. This effect is achieved

By excluding some categories of people from the realm of moral subjects, or through covering up the link between partial action and the ultimate effect of coordinated moves, or through enthroning procedural discipline and personal loyalty in the role of the all-overriding criterion of moral performance (Bauman, 1995, p. 149).

The method of *adiaphorization* typical of the modern period was *the rule of nobody*: “the accomplishment of modern bureaucracy aided and abetted by modern technology” (Bauman, 1995, p. 149). In this context, the object of moral consideration is not one’s relationship to another human beings but one’s relationship to a set of ethical principles. “Everybody’s action must be totally *impersonal*; indeed, it should not be oriented to *persons* at all, but to the *rules*, which specify the procedure” (Bauman, 1995, p. 259). This continues to be a major mechanism whereby certain actions are excluded from moral scrutiny and “at least two developments have added power to the typically modern, yet by now traditional, methods of *adiaphorization*”: the ever-increasing

exposure to images of cruelty (the result being desensitization to the sight of human suffering) and the increasing distance, outlined in the next chapter in the context of the movements of capital, between actors and the effects of their actions (Bauman, 1995, p. 149). The result is that, even more now than before, responsibility “floats” in a large organization like a corporation or in an even larger body such as a society of consumers because

Each member contributing to the final effects performs, more often than not, actions that by themselves are quite innocuous, and would not – could not – cause the effects in question without the complementary actions of many other people. In a large-scale organization most members do not even see (or hear of) the ultimate, remote, and always oblique results that they helped to achieve. So they may go on feeling moral and decent persons (which they mostly are when hobnobbing with their near and dear) while helping to commit the most gruesome cruelties (Bauman, 1995, p. 261).

However, exempting one’s actions or inactions from moral scrutiny is no longer accomplished solely through the imprimatur of a state- or corporate-administered bureaucracy in which the right hand does not know what the left is doing, so to speak. In postmodernity, the abandonment of moral judgment is also justified by its tendency to diminish one’s fitness as a consumer. Consumer fitness is defined as the ability to experience pleasure: postmodern bodies “are, first and foremost, consuming bodies, and the measure of their proper condition is the capacity to consume what the consumer society has to offer” (Bauman, 1995, p. 116). The worry for the consumer is that he or she might be missing out on better and more exciting stimuli:

A fit body is a highly sensitive, finely tuned instrument of pleasure, any pleasure, whether sexual, gastronomical, or derived from mere physical exercise and

demonstration of fitness. It is not so much the performance of the body that counts, as the sensations the body receives in the course of the performance; those sensations must be deep and deeply gratifying – thrilling, ravishing, enrapturing, ecstatic (Bauman, 1995, p. 116).

For the postmodern consumer, the Other is therefore an object of aesthetic rather than moral evaluation. The Other is judged according to the sensations he or she may produce or the experience he or she offers. The postmodern consumer assumes no responsibility for the Other; the Other is either a source of entertainment or a nuisance—or simply irrelevant. This explains, in part, the psychological appeal of the “effacement of the traces of production,” a phrase which, according to Jameson (1991),

suggests the kind of guilt people are freed from if they are able not to remember the work that went into their toys and furnishings. Indeed, the point of having your own object world, and walls and muffled distance or relative silence all around you, is to forget about all those innumerable others for a while; you don’t want to have to think about Third World women every time you pull yourself up to your word processor, or all the other lower-class people with their lower-class lives when you decide to use or consume your other luxury products; it would be like having voices inside your head; indeed it ‘violates’ the intimate space of your privacy and your extended body (pp. 314-315).

Worrying about the conditions under which my consumer goods were produced interferes with my ability to enjoy them; it reduces my fitness as a consumer.

The freedom to consume unencumbered by questions of conscience is the sort of freedom that neoliberalism embraces and celebrates. Freedom thus defined in neoliberal terms is what Maxine Greene (1988) has called “negative freedom” (p. 22) and ever more it is available only to the upper echelons of the social class structure. Negative freedom is not merely the freedom from coercion and unnecessary interference by the state; it is the

denial of the social dimension of human being and the social requirements of being human. It is the freedom to be unconcerned with the plight of others, and, better still, unburdened by their plight. According to Karl Polanyi, this conception of freedom entails

the fullness of freedom for those whose income, leisure, and security need no enhancing, and a mere pittance of liberty for the people, who may in vain attempt to make use of their democratic rights to gain shelter from the power of the owners of property (cited in Harvey, 2005, p. 37).

A close examination, then, of the meaning that freedom has taken of late (namely, that in a neoliberal society one can have as much freedom as money can buy) reveals the antidemocratic core of Fukuyama's thesis in particular and neoliberalism in general, despite the professed allegiance of both to democratic ideals. With such huge disparities in wealth and income between the top and the bottom, the bottom simply cannot be trusted to exercise their democratic rights; they might try to use those rights to negotiate a better deal for themselves.

Observers of economic globalization often bewail the increasing level of social inequality, both within and between nations, but interpret it as an unfortunate yet necessary by-product of neoliberalization on a global scale. Globalization inevitably creates winners and losers; *c'est la vie*. However, Harvey rebukes them, especially Joseph Stiglitz (2002), for not even considering the possibility that this "might have been its *raison d'être* all along" (2005, p. 98). The overriding aim, Harvey claims, was to create or re-create just such a division between the haves and have-nots.

Harvey's explanation may seem a bit strained—downright conspiratorial perhaps. But there is no necessary incongruity between the coordinated efforts of small groups of

elites and the notion of power as a phenomenon that exceeds the intentions of even the well-heeled masters of the universe. In fact, this is precisely the point. Capitalist elites do not have the express goal of rendering the world uninhabitable, yet as a result of their disproportionate control over world events, this is the direction in which we are heading. Furthermore, the generation of broad-based consent for neoliberalization was certainly complex; it cannot simply be attributed to the hatchings of a few evil geniuses. But power in postmodernity operates most effectively through the media (at least in terms of influencing the opinions of First World populations), most of which is under corporate control. It would therefore be naive, if not dangerously complacent, to think of the world's economic elite as inept or subject to some inexorable logic of historical development.

### *The Salience of Social Class*

In the introduction to *A brief history of neoliberalism* (2005), Harvey describes the aim of the book,

While many general accounts of global transformations and their effects are now available, what is generally missing—and this is the gap this book aims to fill—is the political-economic story of where neoliberalization came from and how it proliferated so comprehensively on the world stage (p. 4).

The value of telling this political-economic story is in foregrounding the issue of social class, particularly the aforementioned gross disparities in wealth and income. Of course, many other determining factors are at work in the global transformations Harvey describes and social class is defined by much more than wealth and income. It is always

entangled with so many other facets of identity such as religion, race, and gender. Moreover, as already mentioned, traditional class categories no longer apply in any straightforward manner. Many of us here in America occupy “contradictory class locations” (Wright, 1985). But partly as a result of this complexity, class issues may be obscured. This is still more the case when the official neoliberal story will not admit that there is such a thing as social class:

One of the primary fictions of neoliberalism is that class is a fictional category that exists only in the imagination of socialists and crypt-communists. In the US in particular, the phrase ‘class warfare’ is now confined to the right-wing media (for example the Wall Street Journal) to denigrate all forms of criticism that threaten to undermine a supposedly unified and coherent national purpose. The first lesson we must learn, therefore, is that if it looks like class struggle and acts like class war then we have to name it unashamedly for what it is (Harvey, 2005, p. 202).

The point in doing so, Harvey claims, is not to regress to outmoded sociological analyses or to encourage nostalgia for “some lost golden age when some fictional category like ‘the proletariat’ was in motion” (2005, p. 202). Nor, he says, is there “some simple conception of class to which we can appeal as the primary (let alone exclusive) agent of historical transformation. There is no proletarian field of utopian Marxist fantasy to which we can retire” (2005, p. 202).

But with regard to the present theme of ecological sustainability, a major reason (though certainly not the only one) to agree with Harvey on the need for a direct engagement with the issue of class, muddy though it may be, is that a highly stratified social structure, with an elite minority governing a considerably poorer majority, is one of the hallmarks of societies whose decline or collapse was determined, at least in part,

by environmental factors. Inegalitarian societies, e.g. the Assyrians (Ehrlich & Ehrlich, 2003), the Maya (Diamond, 2005), and that of Easter Island (Diamond, 2005) tended not to cope well with their environmental problems while societies with more equitable distributions of material wealth and political power, Iceland (Diamond, 2005) for example, have tended to fare much better.

With regard to the collapse of Classic Mayan society, which occurred prior to contact with Europeans during the period from about A.D. 800 to 900, Jared Diamond (2005) wonders why the kings and nobles either did not recognize the problems (which he claims should have been obvious) that were destroying their society, or did recognize them but for some reason did not respond to them. He writes,

Their attention was evidently focused on their short-term concerns of enriching themselves, waging wars, erecting monuments, competing with each other, and extracting enough food from the peasants to support all those activities. Like most leaders throughout human history, the Maya kings and nobles did not heed long-term problems, insofar as they perceived them (p. 177).

Therefore, under what is fast becoming a global economic system based on neoliberal principles, it will likely prove impossible to institute the sorts of changes that might avert a global catastrophe unless the huge disparities in income, wealth, and power between the world's economic elite and the rest of world's population are remedied.

### *The Neoconservative Reaction*

Redress of these gross inequalities requires substantial political opposition to economic globalization and the neoliberal philosophy that promotes it. Of course, such

opposition has occurred both here in the United States and more so abroad, and it continues. But according to Harvey, much of it implicitly accepts neoliberalism's market ethic of individualism and competition:

Neoliberalization has spawned within itself an extensive oppositional culture. The opposition tends, however, to accept many of the basic propositions of neoliberalism. It focuses on internal contradictions. It takes questions of individual rights and freedoms seriously, for example, and opposes them to the authoritarianism and frequent arbitrariness of political, economic, and class power. It takes the neoliberal rhetoric of improving the welfare of all and condemns neoliberalization for failing in its own terms (2005, p. 176).

This is fair and accurate criticism. However, Harvey goes on to say,

By focusing on those [individual] rights rather than on the creation or re-creation of substantive and open democratic governance structures, the opposition cultivates methods that cannot escape the neoliberal frame. Neoliberal concern for the individual trumps any social democratic concern for equality, democracy, and social solidarities. (2005, p. 176).

Most mainstream environmental movements and attempts at environmental education fall under this broad heading. The focus is often on making better, more environmentally-informed consumer choices. Not a bad idea, but it falls far short of a collective reorganization of society based on principles of sustainability. Market logic alone cannot accomplish this. In other words, we will not be able to buy our way out of this situation.

But not all forms of opposition embrace neoliberalism's fundamental assumption of the primacy of individual rights. Harvey claims that there is a growing feeling that

The anarchy of the market, of competition, and of unbridled individualism (individual hopes, desires, anxieties, and fears; choices of lifestyle and of sexual habits and orientation; modes of self-expression and behaviours towards others)

generates a situation that becomes increasingly ungovernable. It may even lead to a breakdown of all bonds of solidarity and a condition verging on social anarchy and nihilism (2005, p. 82).

This is the neoconservative reaction to the social consequences of neoliberalization.

Neoliberalism and neoconservatism are not as far apart ideologically as they might first appear. Along with neoliberals,

Neoconservatives favor corporate power, private enterprise, and the restoration of class power. Neoconservatism is therefore entirely consistent with the neoliberal agenda of elite governance, mistrust of democracy, and the maintenance of market freedoms. But it veers away from the principles of pure neoliberalism in two fundamental respects: first, in its concern for order as an answer to the chaos of individual interests, and second, in its concern for an overweening morality as the necessary social glue to keep the body politic secure in the face of external and internal dangers (Harvey, 2005, p. 82).

Neoconservatism is therefore parasitic upon neoliberalism. It makes explicit the notion that neoliberalism necessitates authoritarian measures for its perpetuation.

“Neoconservatism,” Harvey says, “appears as a mere stripping away of the veil of authoritarianism in which neoliberalism sought to envelop itself” (2005, p. 82) Order must be kept at the expense the very individual liberties neoliberalism claims to uphold (the Patriot Acts, for example). Substantive democracy constitutes a threat to that order. Democracy is thus viewed “as a luxury, only possible under conditions of relative affluence coupled with a strong middle-class presence to guarantee political stability (Harvey, 2005, p. 66).

Fukuyama’s derision of the postmodern culture of “the last man” offers a concrete example of the neoconservative reaction. He writes,

In a situation in which all moralisms and religious fanaticisms are discouraged in the interest of tolerance, in an intellectual climate that weakens the possibility of belief in any one doctrine because of an overriding commitment to be open to all the world's belief and 'value systems,' it should not be surprising that the strength of community life has declined in America. This decline occurred not despite liberal principles, but because of them. This suggests that no fundamental strengthening of community life will be possible unless individuals give back certain of their rights to communities, and accept the return of certain historical forms of intolerance (1992, p. 326).

Both Fukuyama and Harvey describe a response to the perception that the bounds of liberalism have been stretched too far. But Fukuyama seems insufficiently wary of the sorts of "historical forms of intolerance" that might fill the social void created by liberal extremism. (Fascism and religious fanaticism come to mind.) For as Harvey argues, the predictable response to the disintegration of social bonds and basic standards of conduct "is to reconstruct social solidarities, albeit along different lines ... Neoliberalism in its pure form has always threatened to conjure up its own nemesis in varieties of authoritarian populism and nationalism (2005, p. 81).

Neoconservative appeals to an overbearing and therefore unifying morality will necessarily be rather tenuous as a result of the precariousness of the neoliberal social space, a wide open field "densely populated by the individuals lost in the hubbub of conflicting noises, with a lot of opportunity for violence and little, perhaps none at all for argument (Bauman, 1995, p. 161). For what often fills this social void left in the wake of neoliberalization are what Bauman terms, "neo-tribal would-be communities" (1995, p. 161). These neo-tribal communities demonstrate a propensity for violence, according to Bauman, precisely as a result of the social instability they try to overcome. For this type of community, he says,

is not even imagined – but *postulated*; its location is in the future, and it is brought from there into the present forcefully, though always ephemerally, through the combined force of individual loyalty acts. Because of the in-built uncertainty, such a community lives under the condition of constant anxiety and thus shows a sinister and but thinly masked tendency to aggression and intolerance (1995, p. 187).

It is for this reason that he argues, “Neo-tribalism is bad news for all wishing to see discourse and argument replacing knives and bombs as tools of self-assertion” (1995, p. 157). Neoconservatism fans these flames (through both enlistment and provocation) and this is why Fukuyama’s prescription of megalothymotic self-assertion as an antidote to this deteriorating social situation is so unforgivably irresponsible.

Of course, not all of the groups that spring up in the openings that neoliberalism creates are paranoid and belligerent. Many are quite benign—NGOs like the Red Cross, Amnesty International, and Doctors without Borders, for example. Yet these can be said to facilitate the neoliberal agenda by enabling governments to further withdraw from basic social provision: “privatization by NGO” as Harvey puts it (2005, p. 177.)

In summary, neoliberalism undermines the social structures necessary for democratic governance. Neoconservatism misreads the cause of the problem and proceeds to the wrong conclusion; it names solutions that only exacerbate existing trends. One might say that neoliberalism creates an unruly beast and neoconservatism tries, in vain, to beat it into submission.

This oscillation between the anomie and isolation of aimless individuals and the anxiety and violence of neo-tribes may not seem especially encouraging with regard to the development of a collective, just response to the ecological crisis. However, the

neoconservative reaction does at least represent a recognition of the intrinsic errors of neoliberalism:

The rise of moral argument among the neoconservatives attests not only to the fear of social dissolution under an individualizing neoliberalism but also to the broad swaths of moral repugnance already in motion against the alienations, anomie, exclusions, marginalizations, and environmental degradations produced through the practices of neoliberalization. The transformation of that moral repugnance towards a pure market ethic into cultural and then political resistance is one of the signs of our times that needs to be read correctly rather than shunted aside (Harvey, p. 205).

Perhaps there is a trace of hope in this sentiment. But for the time being, we must recognize that neoliberalization is now a global phenomenon, the social and environmental consequences of which are anything but hopeful.

## CHAPTER IV

### GLOBALIZATION

Globalization is a rather nebulous term. It has become quite the buzzword of late and its usages are sufficiently vague that it can have any of a number of meanings in different contexts, certainly not all of which I would describe negatively. I am generally in favor of the expansion of democratic governance, a global commitment to human rights, wider access to modern healthcare, broader availability of voluntary and benign forms of birth control, increasing availability of educational opportunities, the free exchange of information and ideas, and collegiality and collaboration across national borders. My attitude toward globalization is similar to the one expressed by the economist John Maynard Keynes in 1933:

Ideas, knowledge, science, hospitality, travel—these are the things which should of their nature be international. But let goods be homespun whenever it is reasonably and conveniently possible, and, above all, let finance be primarily national (p. 758).

The broad questions raised by globalization are these: what should become standard on a global scale and what constitutes an unnecessary and unhealthy imposition? In other words, which modern ideas should be jettisoned and which should be retained and expanded upon? And perhaps most importantly, how can the diversity and difference of particular localities be preserved and respected while simultaneously honoring a larger sense of community and revitalizing or creating anew the collective means necessary to

attend to common problems such as global warming?

In this chapter, I will be primarily concerned with *economic* globalization: the increasing homogenization and integration of the world's economies based on neoliberal principles. It should be obvious that a global economy based on such principles is socially and ecologically unsustainable over the long term. As Cavanaugh and Mander (2004) observe, economic globalization requires: "(1) a never-ending, always-expanding supply of inexpensive resources; (2) an ever expanding supply of accessible new markets; and (3) a steady supply of cheap labor to exploit" (Cavanaugh & Mander, p. 8, 2004). However, advocates of economic globalization would have us believe that there are no alternatives to this global system (Harvey, 2005.) Reminiscent of Fukuyama (1992), they argue that economic globalization is

a long-term, inevitable process, the result of economic and technological forces that have simply evolved over centuries to their present form. They describe these forces as if they were uncontrollable, like forces of nature; they say that it's utopianism to believe things could be otherwise (Cavanaugh & Mander, p. 32, 2004).

There is nothing naively utopian or unrealistic in believing that things could be otherwise. During the past decade or so, there has been substantial worldwide opposition to economic globalization. However, the U.S. is not in the forefront of this global movement. I do not mean to suggest that the U.S. should be at the forefront of everything. In fact, it is certainly arguable that the world would be better off if the United States did not so aggressively and violently attempt to dictate the direction of global events. My point here is that more of us in the United States should be joining this growing global

chorus. My concern is that far too many of us, being relatively insulated from the detrimental environmental and financial consequences of economic globalization (and often benefiting from them), are still buying into the alleged inevitability of economic globalization and accepting corporate media's characterization of oppositional movements as the lunatic fringe of global civil society.

In addition to portraying oppositional groups as marginal malcontents, mainstream media have done a very poor job of elucidating the role of the world's new economic structure in creating or exacerbating a suite of global problems—though given the concentration of media ownership in the hands of just a few transnational corporations, this is hardly surprising.

People are not being helped to understand that dozens of major issues—overcrowded cities, unusual weather patterns, the growth of global inequality, the spread of new diseases, the lowering of wages as profits and CEO salaries soar, the elimination of social services, the destruction of the environment—are all part of the same global process (Cavanaugh & Mander, 2004, p. 54).

The pedagogical aim of this chapter is to participate in the larger resistance movement by highlighting such connections.

Opposition to economic globalization is not equivalent to a refusal to acknowledge the necessity of economic relationships. We all have material needs that must be met and it would be unrealistic to suppose that everyone could live on a self-sufficient small farm with no need of trade among neighbors. As Cavanaugh and Mander volunteer, “Humans have engaged in trade since the beginning of time and as long as two

or more members of the species survive will surely continue to do so” (2004, p. 20). But economic globalization is not synonymous with trade.

Nor is it exactly synonymous with the expansion of market economies. Markets, by definition, are not planned by centralized, unaccountable authorities. Yet the form of economic globalization promoted by global bureaucracies like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Trade Organization (WTO), is “replacing self-organizing markets with centrally planned corporate economies” (Cavanaugh & Mander, 2004, p. 22). Diverse, small-scale, and local/regional forms of production and consumption are thus giving way to a one-size-fits-all economic model of homogenization. In other words, a global free market system tends to eliminate small markets thereby reducing the diversity of products and services, which in turn actually reduces competition.

With sufficient regulation and the presence of genuine and fair competition, markets work well enough at allocating rival, excludable commodities among people who have roughly equal access to capital. Currently, however, wealth and income distribution is highly imbalanced both within and between regions. And not everything is or should be treated as a commodity. The market alone cannot remedy this situation; it cannot determine the optimal scale of an economy or equitable distribution of income and wealth within an economy. It can only deal with allocation among competing, monied interests, which means that, in the absence of just regulation and equitable taxation, the world’s resources and wealth will continue to be concentrated in the hands of the wealthy, while the rest of the world is left with the bill: environmental damage, social disintegration, and

poverty. And this, according to David Harvey, is precisely the point: the new world order is a way for the core regions of the global economy “to exact tribute from the rest of the world” (Harvey, 2005, p. 83).

Furthermore, no political-economic system has proven intrinsically benign with regard to ecological sustainability. Both capitalist and communist societies have produced horrific environmental disasters. (The hybrid economies of Scandinavian nations, however, in which the ratio of public to private ownership is much higher than ours, do have a pretty good record of environmental stewardship.) The problem, then, is not one of instituting the right “system,” one that could be placed on autopilot, with desirable results flowing “naturally” from its operationalized repetitions. Justice cannot be systematized—but neither could it be achieved (or at least approximated) in the absence of law (Caputo, 1997). Questions will therefore remain regarding what should be privately held and what should be publicly owned, how much regulation is needed, what kinds, how regulations will be enforced, and so on. If scaled appropriately and embedded within suitable regulatory structures, with significantly more sharing of economic power, and with more concern for environmental quality and social protection, markets could certainly work much better than they currently do at distributing things to those who need them while impacting the environment much more minimally than is now the case.

### *The World Gets Flattened*

Economic globalization has many champions, many of whom tend to gloss over its negative social and environmental consequences. Guided by neoliberal assumptions,

many proponents of economic globalization regard it as the best way to solve social and environmental problems.

They see progress at hand everywhere, because from their vantage point the drive to privatize public assets and free the market from governmental interference spreads freedom and prosperity around the world, improving the lives of people everywhere and creating the financial and material wealth necessary to end poverty and protect the environment (Cavanaugh and Mander, 2004, p. 21).

I wonder if their motives are so honorable. But intentions aside, the argument is a non sequitur. As Cavanaugh and Mander note, citizen movements opposing economic globalization “reject as absurd the argument that the poor must be exploited and the environment destroyed to make the money necessary to end poverty and save the planet” (2004, p. 25). But despite the illogic of the argument, it continues to enjoy much support, especially here in the US. One of the more well known supporters is Thomas Friedman, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and columnist for the New York Times.

Friedman’s recent book, *The world is flat: A brief history of the twenty-first century* (2005) is not a scholarly work. It is a journalistic account of globalization written for popular audiences and its popularity is what sparked my interest in it. The first edition was so popular in fact that an updated and expanded edition was released just a year after the original. After hearing about this book for months in the media and from friends and colleagues, my interest was sufficiently piqued that I borrowed a copy. I wondered what Friedman could mean when he claims that the world is not, as I had assumed since elementary school, round.

*Flat* is an interesting metaphor to describe the condition of the world; it can mean “dull”, “sluggish”, “flavorless”, “monotonous”, “uniform”, and “lacking interest”, among other things. Attempts at the Westernization of the entire world could be said to promote just these kinds of qualities. But this is not what Friedman means. He means that a level playing field for global economic competition is now emerging. The world is being *leveled*. This is also an interesting expression in that “to level” can mean “to raze” or “to demolish.” Again, this might be an apt description of what is happening to non-Western cultures as particular aspects of Western culture spread like a virus across the globe. But Friedman’s view is much sunnier and his book is a representation of what is increasingly viewed as non-partisan common sense: the inevitability and, ultimately, the desirability of the globalization of Western economic institutions and practices.

I should briefly note that complete cultural assimilation will not likely result from the expansion of Western epistemologies and institutions. Wherever there is a confluence of cultures the outcome is usually hybridization (Li, 2003). Different contexts lead to different interpretations and practices and diversity, thankfully, persists. However, changes are occurring on a global scale and the point being made here is that things are not necessarily changing for the better.

Friedman opens *The World is Flat* with a retelling of the popular myth that Christopher Columbus’s travels to the New World (new to Europeans anyway) confirmed that the earth is round. (Evidently, the Greeks and other civilizations of antiquity knew the earth to be spherical (Boorstin, 1983), but an acknowledgement of that fact would sully Friedman’s catchy title and central metaphor.) Friedman’s travels to India, China,

and other emerging centers of capitalist economic activity have suggested to him, however, that world is in fact flat—not topographically but technologically and, hence, economically. New technologies, especially the recent expansion of global telecommunications, are enabling the “developing” world to quickly catch up with the “developed” world.

Friedman picks up, chronologically and ideologically, where Fukuyama leaves off. The break up of the former Soviet Union and the intensification of economic globalization during the 1990s has allowed about three billion new players to walk on to the ever-leveling playing field of the global market, to use Friedman’s sports metaphor. We have in just the past decade or so, he claims, witnessed a transition from the Berlin Wall to the “Berlin Mall” (Friedman, 2005, p. 182). In trying to sort out what this flat world means for America, his tone is equally enthusiastic and anxious. Here, he is almost giddy:

The Indians and Chinese are not racing us to the bottom. They are racing us to the top – and that is a good thing! They want higher standards of living, not sweatshops; they want brand names, not junk; they want to trade their motor scooters for cars and their pens and pencils for computers. And the more they do that, the higher they climb, the more room is created at the top—because the more they have, the more they spend, the more diverse product markets become, and the more niches for specialization are created as well (Friedman, 2005, p. 233).

The economic reasoning behind this position is specious at best, however, I am certainly not opposed in principle to better standards of living for Indians and Chinese—or any other group for that matter. It is very unfortunate but predictable in our culture of rugged individualism with its fundamental assumption of scarcity (and this in a period in history

when economic output has never been higher) that an awareness of ecological limitations leads to a sense that someone else's gain must be my loss; hence, the position of some environmentalists, not always stated explicitly, that other parts of the world must be kept on a short leash, so to speak, so that we can continue to enjoy our wildly disproportionate material affluence for as long as possible. It is not my intention to encourage this kind of thinking and I agree with Friedman's claim that there should exist among Americans, Indians, Chinese, and everyone else a spirit of cooperation with regard to certain common interests. We must be willing to work together—but toward what ends? If "higher standards of living" are to be achieved through steadily increasing economic growth and the adoption of American-style consumer culture, then Friedman is describing something like a global suicide mission. Economies cannot keep growing forever; this is the central message of the ecological crisis. To borrow from Kenneth Boulding once more, "Anyone who believes we can have infinite growth on a finite planet (the cowboy illusion) is either a madman or an economist!" (cited in Rasmussen, 1996, pp. 168-9). Tom Friedman, by the way, is not an economist.

But I would not go so far as to say that he is a madman. On the whole, Friedman makes some very sensible points. He favors much more in the way of social protections than do most cheerleaders for globalization, for example. And the world has really changed in remarkable ways over the past ten or fifteen years. His account of these changes, though mostly anecdotal, is very much on the mark I think. I do not take issue with his causal argument regarding the technological developments that are driving globalization, especially the expansion of telecommunications technologies. However,

his interpretation of what globalization means for the United States and the rest of the world displays an abject lack of consideration of the environmental costs associated with such increasing levels economic activity.

For example, Friedman reports that Seiyu, a Japanese retail chain, has recently partnered with Wal-Mart. Seiyu is learning to take advantage of global supply chains, an economy of scale as it is often called. But in return, Friedman reports, Seiyu is trying to teach Wal-Mart something about sushi, specifically how it might be possible to take a “big-box” approach to selling it. Friedman no doubt considers this a wonderful development (he mentions over and over again throughout the book how much he adores sushi). “I expect in the not-too-distant future,” he says, “we will see Wal-Mart sushi” (Friedman, 2005, p. 141). He then quips, “Somebody had better warn the tuna” (Friedman, 2005, p. 141).

This glib one-liner betrays an obliviousness to the economic and ecological impacts of overfishing in recent decades. According to Jared Diamond (2005),

The majority of the worlds’ commercially important marine fisheries have already either collapsed to the point of being commercially extinct, have been severely depleted, are currently overfished or fished to the limit, are recovering only slowly from past overfishing, or are otherwise in urgent need of management. Among the most important fisheries that have already collapsed are Atlantic halibut, Atlantic bluefin tuna, Atlantic swordfish, North Sea herring, Grand Banks cod, Argentinean hake, and Australian Murray River cod. In overfished areas of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, peak catches were attained in the year 1989 and have declined since then (p. 480).

A sober estimation of the negative potential impacts of supply-side sushi is therefore conspicuously absent in Friedman's account of globalization. Moreover, there is little indication of a general notion of ecological limits to economic growth. He writes,

The flattening of the world is moving ahead apace, and barring war or some catastrophic terrorist event, nothing is going to stop it. But what can happen is a decline in our standard of living, if more Americans are not empowered and educated to participate in a world where all the knowledge centers are being connected (Friedman, 2005, p. 305).

Only war or terrorism can stop it, he says—not global warming, not resource depletion, not the social dislocations associated with economic globalization. The biggest threat, it seems, is a decline in our material standard of living.

However, Friedman is not completely unaware of the potential for environmental damage; he simply believes we can engineer technical solutions and keep on going. From this perspective, environmental problems could be regarded as economically beneficial in that they spur technological innovation. Still worse, Friedman claims that a nation's success or failure in the new global economy will largely be a function of its "coefficient of flatness" (2005, p. 328): a measure of its natural resources. The fewer natural resources a country has, the better it will perform in the flat-world economy, for without natural resources it must mine its human resources, i.e. it must become innovative, dynamic, and above all else, entrepreneurial. Friedman's recipe for economic success therefore seems to involve burning through whatever natural endowment a region may have been blessed with so that it will then be forced to move on to something like software development—so much for conservation.

Friedman does, however, encourage business and industry to engage in more environmentally benign practices. This is very sensible advice, but the insistence on economic growth in perpetuity ensures continuing environmental degradation. We may be able to slow it down a bit, but the ecological crisis is moving ahead apace and nothing short of radical shift in values (a necessarily spiritual or religious endeavor) can stop it. We must rethink the meaning of the phrase “standard of living.” We need to redefine the criteria that determine an adequate standard of living in terms how the current needs of the human population (and not just material needs) can be met while preserving the environmental and social conditions necessary to meet the needs of future generations.

However, Friedman genuinely seems to believe that the entire world can enjoy the current material standard of the living of the American middle class (or perhaps the upper middle class standard since; that is the one advertised in the media). But he also seems genuinely terrified of a declining standard of living for Americans (defined largely in terms of access to the gadgets and toys offered by the market) that could result from ambitious Asians taking ever larger slices of the global economic pie. They are going to eat our lunch, he is fond of saying. (Incidentally, I think he may be right about that if current trends continue.) This is the source of Friedman’s ambivalence with regard to the flattening of the world. He displays a curious concern for America’s particular fate as a nation along with this almost unqualified embrace of transnational capitalism. The central issue for Friedman seems to be this rather paradoxical one: how can America remain on top of a flat world?

To avoid the prospect of declining standard of living Friedman's advice to future American workers (also known as children) is to be better than average: "It was never good to be mediocre in your job, but in a world of walls, mediocrity could still earn you a decent wage. In a flatter world, you *really* do not want to be mediocre" (2005, p. 237). (Of course, being better than average is a realistic solution for, at most, 49% of the population.)

Friedman makes familiar demands on American schools and universities to ramp up their efforts in teaching science and developing technological proficiency. Formal education, from pre-school to grad school, should be organized and evaluated in terms of promoting competitiveness in the global economy. This will pay off in the end because "there may be a limit to the number of good factory jobs in the world, *but there is no limit to the number of idea-generated jobs in the world*" (Friedman, 2005, p. 230).

Friedman sees no physical limits to economic activity, but no matter how far removed occupations may be from the kinds of economic production that meet material needs, those needs are not simply going to go away. Human needs and wants (which are much more common among postmodern consumers) may well prove to be infinite, or at least "highly elastic" as Fukuyama (1992, p. 131) puts it, but the earth's ability to supply them is not. Ideas are fine, but you cannot simply sell ideas to people. You cannot eat them; you cannot wear them, and you cannot build a house out of them. There can be no such thing as a metaphysical economy. Even books have to be printed, bound, packaged, and shipped. Even if they are scanned into a database, accessed over the internet, and downloaded to a PC or a laptop or a handheld device, all of these processes use energy:

electricity from a wall outlet or energy from a battery (often a rechargeable battery that is charged by plugging it into a wall outlet). And if you want to avoid becoming cross-eyed from reading an entire book off a computer screen, or if you want to make notes— simply, with a pen or a pencil and not some sort of Rube Goldberg device that allows you to mark on an LCD with a stylus—you are going to have to print it. And that takes lots of paper (real paper made from real wood pulp which comes from real trees), a printer that is powered by something other than neoliberal optimism (ultimately, a coal-fired power plant is the most likely source) and many, many, many ink cartridges.

Friedman's fantasy represents a typically masculine desire to deny interdependence. We can free ourselves from environmental and economic (social) necessity if we can just find the right ideas. This is the Enlightenment project in a nutshell (a substantial part of it anyway) and it is this kind of thinking that has brought us to the brink of global catastrophe. The popular notion of an information age with its idea-based economy is thus an unforgivably obtuse idea. Certainly by now we ought to know better.

In the last analysis, Friedman simultaneously promotes globalism and nationalism. He encourages initiative and hard work but embraces a consumerist ideology that militates against these. He advocates self-reliance and know-how but also a reliance on markets and technology that opposes such skills and encourages passivity. He admonishes Americans to anticipate and prepare for the future but he also supports the values of a consumer culture that thinks little about the future, a culture that is becoming evermore present-oriented precisely in response to globalizing economic trends. This is

reminiscent of Fukuyama's most glaring contradiction. Recall that he favors *megalothymotic* self-assertion to avoid cultural and economic stagnation but it is precisely the neoliberal version of *megalothymotic* self-assertion that produces the very culture he bemoans. Both Fukuyama and Friedman miss what ought to be obvious: the market alone cannot attend to the social and cultural problems both identify. In fact, leaving such problems to be mediated passively through market mechanisms actually makes them worse. Fukuyama's and Friedman's prescriptions are rather like trying to put out a fire with gasoline. Furthermore, Friedman overlooks what is perhaps the most important paradox of globalization: it creates lots of connectivity but little connection. Globalization creates or accelerates problems (social, political, and environmental) that are truly worldwide in scale but it simultaneously impedes the development of systemic understanding of them and it tends to inhibit a strong social integration capable of responding to them in any sort of coherent way (Gare, 1995).

It is ironic that while the world is not flatter in Friedman's metaphorical sense—he admits to the persistence, even exacerbation, of poverty as a result of globalization, but he invokes the standard neoliberal explanations for it—it is getting flatter in a more literal sense. Elevation is measured relative to sea level; hence the world *is* getting flatter as sea level continues to rise as a result of global warming. The increase could be as much as two feet over the next century (IPCC, 2007). That may not sound like much (and it is probably an overly conservative estimate), but bear in mind that the highest point in the Everglades, which comprises roughly the southernmost third of Florida, is about seven feet above sea level. The consequences of such an increase for this and other

wetlands, not to mention coastal cities, would be disastrous. Somebody had better warn the humans—especially since nearly three-quarters of us live within fifty miles of a coastline (Diamond, 2005, p. 479).

### *What is Economic Globalization?*

International development expert, David Korten argues that as a result of economic globalization “economic power has shifted from smaller, locally rooted producers to powerful global corporations beyond the reach of government regulation and freed from accountability to the public good” (1998, p. 71). In other words, the expansion of the global economy is greatly facilitated by the effacement of nation-states’ authority to control what goes on within their own borders. The modern state is thus weakening relative to transnational economic entities. Or it may be more accurate to say that the state apparatus has been hijacked by corporate power. It has been widely reported here in the United States for example that lobbyists are no longer simply influencing the legislative process but are now actually *writing* many laws themselves. Some elected legislators have simply become go-betweens in this process whereby large corporations create a legal environment conducive to their own profit-making potential (Franken, 2006).

The emergence of a global economic system and the simultaneous disintegration of the modern political architecture may, on the surface, seem like contradictory developments, but as Zygmunt Bauman explains,

Paradoxically, in the present era of cosmopolitan *economy* the splintering of *political* sovereignty becomes itself a major factor facilitating free movement of capital and commodities. The more fragmented are the sovereign units, the weaker and narrower in scope is their grip over their respective territories, the freer still is the global flow of capital and merchandise. The *globalization* of the economy and information and the *fragmentation* – indeed, a ‘re-parochialization’ of sorts – of political sovereignty are not, contrary to appearances, opposite and hence mutually conflicting and incongruent trends; they are rather factors in the ongoing rearrangement of various aspects of systemic integration (1995, p. 251).

This systemic integration is an integration across national boundaries, one with no particular allegiance to any place in particular. As Arran Gare succinctly puts it, “While capitalism is less organized at the national level, it is becoming more organized at the international level” (1995, p. 10). The World Bank, the IMF, and the WTO represent the most organized and powerful elements in this new international configuration. Referring specifically to the WTO, Cavanaugh and Mander observe that it “regulates national and local governments to prevent them from regulating international trade and investment” (2004, p. 69). Governments therefore cannot adequately protect citizens from corporate power. Instead, these international oligarchies “regulate governments to protect corporations” (Cavanaugh & Mander, 2004, p. 69).

Private interests (those of corporate executives, investment bankers, financial analysts, stockbrokers, fund managers, real estate developers, and so on) thus dictate the flow of capital, not governments. In this globalized economic environment, states are reduced to competing with each other to attract capital. The most effective strategy at the national level is to create conditions favorable to investment, which usually amounts to reducing taxes on businesses; removing controls on foreign investment, foreign ownership of domestic production, and repatriation of profits; and eliminating regulatory

statutes governing the treatment of workers and the protection of the environment. Subsequently, “with goods and capital flowing freely across national borders, governments lose the ability to manage what used to be national economies, bargain away their ability to collect taxes, and become increasingly irrelevant” (Korten, 1998, p. 71).

According to Arran Gare, “what is conspicuously lacking in this configuration of beliefs is any direction, any point to it all”—apart from making money (1995, p. 11). He rebukes the architects and administrators of this new transnational organization, “the new international bourgeoisie” (1995, p. 12) he calls them, for their abdication of responsibility for the common welfare, their rejection of modern notions of progress, and their abject lack of concern for the future. They are, Gare charges, opportunistic and parasitic nihilists who are systematically undermining the foundations of all societies and cultures, including their own:

Their entry into the mass media and book publishing and distribution has been associated almost uniformly with the decline in standards of newspapers, television and books, and the disruption and impoverishment of education and cultural life. Their domination of world agriculture is impoverishing farmers in affluent nations, is starving to death some twelve million people each year in Third World countries ... and is permanently destroying agricultural land at a rate which promises a catastrophe unparalleled in human history (1995, p. 12).

Along with this looming threat of global ecological collapse, David Harvey claims that, as a result of the new global casino economy, there is a more imminent danger of a global financial collapse. The crises in Mexico in 1994, Asia and Russia in 1997-1998, and Argentina in 2001 reveal the inherent instability of the new global

economic configuration and possibly presage a global crash. But even this threat, if internalized by the financial elite, may not be enough to provide the impetus for a sensible redistribution of wealth (downward this time) and an equalization of political power to put the brakes on this runaway economic train. Harvey cites the historical examples of 1873 and the 1920s as examples of previous episodes in which,

The upper classes, insisting on the sacrosanct nature of their property rights, preferred to crash the system rather than surrender any of their privileges and power. In so doing they were not oblivious of their own interest, for if they position themselves aright they can, like good bankruptcy lawyers, profit from a collapse while the rest of us are caught most horribly in the deluge (Harvey, 2005, p. 153).

As Andrew Mellon is reported to have said, “In a depression, assets return to their rightful owners” (cited in Harvey, 2005, p. 163).

The unsettling conclusion that follows from this is that disasters, financial and environmental, are, for some at least, very good for business—at least in the short term. There is simply nothing intrinsic to the capitalist system itself to promote the avoidance of disaster—quite the opposite in fact as a host of scholars, beginning with Marx, have shown. But the ecological crisis, unlike a financial crisis, threatens disasters from which recovery may not be possible. What I find absolutely terrifying is that, if Harvey is right, then the movers and shakers in the global economy may see such disasters as further and perhaps better opportunities to siphon off wealth.

Currently, most of the “international bourgeoisie” refuse to publicly acknowledge the possibility of an ecological collapse so severe that the global economy could be shaken all the way to its core (London, New York, Tokyo). But as the environmental

consequences of economic globalization become undeniable (I would argue that this is already the case) venture capitalists and financiers may seek to take further advantage of the circumstances rather than try to minimize the damage. Their attitude toward the environmental crisis may be as cavalier as George W. Bush's toward the early days of the Iraqi insurgency: "Bring it on." If added to this is the disintegration of the social and political structures necessary to mount a collective response along with the proliferation of conflict among all manner of neo-tribes and "groupuscules" (Jameson, 1991, p. 322), we may be facing unimaginably horrifying prospects with the potential to eclipse even the destruction of the twentieth century, the previous world-record holder for insanity and violence on a global scale.

Perhaps even the probability of the extinction of the human species would do little to unnerve or dissuade the international bourgeoisie and those whom they represent from continuing to plunge headlong toward disaster. "In the words of an economist writing in *Business and Society Review*: 'Suppose that, as a result of using up all the world's resources, human life did come to an end. So what?' (Gare, 1995, p. 12). The only thing that seems to really matter, the real bottom line, is the near-term profitability of a venture. If thousands or even millions of lives are disrupted in the process, that is just the way it goes; "In a Darwinian neoliberal world ... only the fittest should and do survive (Harvey, 2005, pp. 156-157).

This updated version of social Darwinism is made all the more palatable by the way in which global financial networks distort space and time. The sophisticated communications technologies and information systems of the new global economy enable

real-time financial transactions. Capital can thus be moved into or out of a region almost instantly by people thousands of miles away who do not have to live with the immediate consequences of their decisions; they do not have to drink the water, breathe the air, cede their land to a dam project, or send their children into the mines. Therefore,

In unregulated globalized markets, capital becomes rootless, impatient, and controlled by entities that have no commitment to place or people. Those who make decisions regarding the use of local resources live in distant places wholly insulated from the local consequences of those decisions. Markets respond to money and to those who have money. The most fundamental needs of the poor are ignored for the simple reason they do not have money (Korten, 1998, p. 71).

In addition to pointing out how widespread environmental and social devastation remains invisible to many First World denizens, Korten reveals an important aspect of globalization, one usually downplayed or ignored by its cheerleaders: markets respond to money and money alone. They can work fairly well at distributing rival and excludable goods among people who all have access to money. But in a system like the current global system, with its enormous disparities in wealth and income both within and between regions, markets are unresponsive to most of the world's population. The market alone cannot ensure an equitable distribution of goods and services. "It has been said that the free market is the most efficient human institution ever devised for assuring that when resources get scarce the rich will get them" (Korten, 1998, p. 72).

The unqualified embrace of the market ethic therefore tends to widen the gap between the haves and the have-nots.

Hence, without a major shift in policy, the world of the twenty-first century will be one of economic apartheid. There will be two dozen richer nations, a dozen or so poorer nations that have begun to close the gap with the rich, and approximately 140 poor nations slipping farther and farther behind (Cavanaugh & Mander, 2005, p. 59).

The impacts of the new economy are thus global but the benefits are not. This is due to the fact that large segments of the world's population are systematically isolated and excluded by the network structure of the new global economy. Fritjof Capra explains:

As the flows of capital and information interlink worldwide networks, they exclude from these networks all populations and territories that are of no value or interest to their search for financial gain. As a result, certain segments of societies, areas of cities, regions, and even entire countries become economically irrelevant (2004, p. 145).

The claims of Capra and Korten contrast rather starkly with those of promoters of global growth and development. Economist Gale Johnson (2002), for example, claims that the benefits of globalization have been “widely distributed” and “while much remains to be accomplished, much of what has been accomplished as a result of globalization has been enormous and largely unrecognized” (p. 438). These benefits, he says, include modest economic growth for some sectors of the global economy, increased agricultural productivity, wider availability of immunizations, increased life expectancy, and the spread of knowledge. But these assertions of globalization's beneficent outcomes are hardly uncontested:

Almost all global indicators on health levels, life expectancy, infant mortality, and the like show losses rather than gains in well-being since the 1960s. The proportion of the world's population in poverty has, however, fallen but this is

almost entirely due to improvements in India and China alone (2002, pp. 154-156).

I agree that increasing availability of immunizations and increasing average life expectancy would be laudable achievements. The globalization of knowledge may also be praiseworthy provided that it is truly shared rather sold as a commodity and that Western epistemologies are not imposed on non-western cultures; however, these two conditions are not usually met. The commodification of knowledge, especially intellectual property rights, tends to create conditions of artificial scarcity (more on this topic below). And even though the Western paradigm is not always enforced at gunpoint, much of the rest of the world is being colonized by the ecologically unsustainable consumer culture of the West. Johnson's attitude toward the globalization of knowledge may thus be overly sanguine.

Moreover, Johnson's claim of *modest* economic growth for *some* sectors of the global economy does not seem much of a cause for celebration. And it may not be indicative of any *growth* at all, but merely a reorganization of activities that were formerly being performed through other means. According to Korten, "A considerable portion of the economic growth of recent decades is simply a result of shifting functions from the social economy, where they are not counted in GNP, to the market economy, where they are" (1998, p. 73-74). In other words, globalization tends to privatize and marketize the reproductive functions of social groups, things like care of the young and elderly, food production and preparation, and mutual care of shared environmental resources. "Unlike market economies, which tend to join people in purely impersonal and

instrumental relationships – social economies create a dense fabric of relationships based on long-term sharing and cooperation” (Korten, 1998, p. 73). The pressures exerted by the forces of globalization tend to disrupt and disintegrate these extant social economies. Recent transformations in food production provide striking examples.

### *The Commodification of Agriculture*

Since the early 1970’s, two important developments in agriculture have occurred. The first is the Green Revolution; second and more recent is the development of genetically modified (GM) crops. Taking the long view, there are serious questions surrounding both of these practices with regard to economic and ecological sustainability.

The Green Revolution refers to the industrialization of agriculture: energy- and capital-intensive monoculture techniques which require large quantities of synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides; and mechanized, gas-powered equipment to distribute the chemicals, irrigate the crop, and harvest it. Industrialized agriculture has increased crop yields, but for reasons discussed below, this increase is probably only temporary.

A major problem with monoculture is indicated by its name: monocultures entail a lack of diversity of crops. According the Food and Agriculture Organization, 75 percent of the world’s crop varieties have been lost as a result of industrialized monoculture (Cavanaugh & Mander, 2004, p. 41). With so little crop diversity and with the lack of genetic diversity within single crop species, monocultures are particularly susceptible to pests and pathogens. If a pest or pathogen can kill one plant, all can be lost because they

are genetically identical. Since, whole crops can be wiped out by a single pest, infectious bacterial or fungal species, or weed infestation, pests, pathogens, and weeds must therefore be rigorously controlled with pesticides and herbicides. Hence, monoculture necessitates an escalating arms race with weeds and insects as they develop resistance to existing herbicides and pesticides. Research and development costs are high (so too are profit margins) and prices of herbicides and pesticides steadily creep upward. Moreover, the environmental damage from herbicide and pesticide use is significant: polluted surface and ground water, “collateral damage” among soil organisms and other non-pest species, and the associated health risks to agricultural workers and local residents—not to mention those of us who eat food contaminated with harmful chemicals.

Furthermore, chemical fertilizers, unlike organic fertilizers (composted plant matter or animal dung, for example) do not retain moisture. So as soils is depleted of humus (the organic layer) it gets ever drier and more sterile and therefore requires greater irrigation and more synthetic fertilizer, i.e. lots of capital investment. Also, runoff from farms which use chemical fertilizers deposits excess nitrogen into rivers and lakes causing a phenomenon called eutrophication, which results in the loss of aquatic vegetation, invertebrates, and vertebrate species. This occurs in rivers, lakes, even the oceans. In fact, as a result of eutrophication, there is a seasonal “dead zone” in the Gulf of Mexico at the mouth of the Mississippi River that covers an area of nearly twenty-two thousand square kilometers at its peak (Tobin & Dusheck, 2005). As one might imagine, this has not been a boon to the local fishing industry.

Monocultures also require large, open tracts of land to make for efficient planting, fertilizer/pesticide/herbicide distribution, and harvesting. The dry soils and lack of windbreaks create conditions favorable to wind and water erosion of topsoil. And along with the loss of topsoil, there is the potential for salinization of soils due to irrigation and the loss of native vegetation. Also problematic is the loss of wild habitat and native biodiversity as more land is cleared and dedicated to commercial agriculture.

Some recent changes in industrial farming practices, including newer and more efficient technologies, have lessened some of these impacts (Diamond, 2005). And more farms are now employing organic methods, but by no means could it be said that the majority of agriculture in industrialized countries is now sustainable. Furthermore, in developing countries, local farmers often cannot afford new technologies such as improved irrigation systems so they must continue with the older, more destructive practices. First World suppliers are all too happy to continue to sell them outdated equipment and even chemicals that have been banned for sale and use in their home countries.

The social consequences of these transformations in agriculture have been severe. Subsistence agriculture (growing a variety of crops for use within the local community with only the excess traded or sold in local markets) and small family farms are being displaced. According to Cavanaugh and Mander,

Local systems, small owners, indigenous systems, and family farming cannot be made compatible with global corporate operations, and so we face the very aggressive international campaign to undermine small farmers, get them off their traditional lands, and make way for industrial agricultural systems, absentee owners, and the introduction of luxury monocultures [like coffee, sugarcane, and

cotton] for export markets. The net outcome is that once-viable, self-reliant communities are being increasingly made landless, homeless, cashless, and hungry; there are few jobs available in an industrial model that emphasizes machine- and pesticide-intensive production or biotechnology. Meanwhile, food-growing activities that had been the economic, social, and spiritual heart of community life are decimated, the core fabric of the culture along with them. This has been true as much in the United States as everywhere else in the world. Thus, once self-reliant farmers become dependent on welfare systems for survival or flee to already overcrowded cities, searching for the rare factory job in competition with all the other new arrivals (2004, p. 211).

In the U.S., it has proven very difficult for smaller operations to keep up with larger ones that are better able to absorb the escalating capital requirements of commercialized farming. Most small farmers are now unable to earn a living from farming. Hence, the family farm is often most valuable economically as a commodity to be sold to one of the larger agribusiness firms or to a real estate developer (Diamond, 2005). A form of intergenerational livelihood is then traded for a one-time payment. Small farms in other parts of the world are at an even greater competitive disadvantage as industrial countries are able to dump their highly subsidized, and therefore artificially cheap, surpluses into their countries. They cannot make living selling to their local markets, so they succumb to the same short-term solution of selling their land. Indigenous farmers, who often do not hold legal title to the land they occupy, are in a still more difficult position. They do not have to be bought out, so local governments can evict them by force to make way for for-profit enterprises (Harvey, 2005; Korten, 1998).

For “developing” nations, the way to be profitable, as the World Bank and IMF often advise, is to seek a comparative advantage with a single or perhaps a few agricultural exports. Loans from these two institutions are often made on the condition

that the nation in question will adopt this policy; hence developing nations beholden to the IMF and/or the World Bank are effectively coerced into focusing on the export of one commodity.

Comparative advantage is a crucial component of globalization theory. It facilitates the replacement of diverse local or regional economic systems, including systems that may currently emphasize successful diversified, small-scale, industrial, artisanal, and agricultural systems that feature many small producers using mostly local or regional resources and local labor for local or regional consumption. The goal is to substitute large-scale monocultural export systems (Cavanaugh & Mander, 2004, p. 39).

The idea is to flood the global market with cheap commodities, cotton for example. Hence, the price of cotton goes down as the supply of cotton goes up and I (the First World consumer) can get a nice seersucker shirt at a good price—maybe even buy one, get one free. But as the energy and resources of locals are devoted to putting all their eggs in one basket, so to speak, they must then import most everything else that they need, needs that were formally met by local effort and material. Market dependency thus replaces self-sufficiency.

Genetic engineering of crop plants is complicating matters still further. Perhaps the most frightening potential complication is that no one has any idea what the long-term environmental impacts of the introduction of GM crops will be on the ecosystems in which they are grown (Capra, 2004). Proponents of genetic engineering of crops do not seem to recognize the inherent unmanageability of such a worldwide experiment. Perhaps this is due to their clinging to an outdated scientific paradigm, namely the assumption that everything in the universe, including life, functions like a machine. Here, Capra

describes the fallacy upon which much of this profit-driven biotechnology research is based:

What all these life sciences corporations have in common is a narrow understanding of life, based on the erroneous belief that nature can be subjected to human control. This ignores the self-generating and self-organizing dynamic that is the very essence of life and instead redefines living organisms as machines that can be managed from outside and be patented and sold as industrial resources. Life itself has become the ultimate commodity (2004, p. 200).

The hubris of presuming to rapidly and radically improve on nature's designs, which evolved through natural selection over time scale unfathomable to human beings, is particularly striking. Life's processes, it is thought, can be explained deterministically via simple, linear cause and effect relationships. Therefore, life can be controlled through the rational application of scientific principles. Many geneticists and molecular biologists employed by the agrochemical industry seem to continue to assume that genes determine what goes on inside a cell in a fairly linear and predictable manner. They tend to do just that in the laboratory, but out there in the wide world, things become substantially less predictable. When you change the ecology of a system, new niches open up and selection occurs. This invites changes in ecosystem dynamics that no one can predict with total accuracy. Proponents of biotechnology like to point out that human beings have been experimenting with genetic recombination since the beginning of the agricultural revolution through cross-breeding and artificial selection of crop plants and livestock. This is true. But these practices have in the past involved the manipulation of naturally interbreeding populations. Never before were human beings able to recombine genetic

material from different organisms e.g., splicing bacterial genetic sequences into a corn genome. To claim that such an act is perfectly “natural” or that there is a historical precedent for it dating back millennia strains credibility to put it mildly.

As Capra comments, biotech companies are not so much trying to create a better world with such experimentation as they are treating to generate revenue. “The overriding motivation for genetic engineering is not the advancement of science, the curing of disease, or the feeding of the hungry. It is the desire to secure unprecedented financial gain” (2004, p. 161). This is a new variation on the old colonial theme of expropriation, for example the isolation and patenting of genetic sequences derived from plants indigenous to developing nations. It is therefore unlikely that these new biotechnologies, especially the commodification of DNA, will be able to solve old problems like poverty and hunger. As Capra notes, “People go hungry because the means to produce and distribute food are controlled by the rich and powerful; world hunger is not a technical but a political problem” (2004, p. 189).

Added to the unpredictable impacts of the introduction of transgenic species into the complex networks of the world’s ecosystems, is the increasing reliance on agribusiness to meet the world’s demand for food. As more and more of the world’s agricultural production has been modernized over the past thirty or forty years, farmers have become ever more dependent on the products of the multinational agrochemical companies. These new products include seed that has been genetically tailored for use with the herbicide *du jour*. The idea is that farmers can douse their crops with the very potent and lethal herbicide thereby killing all the weeds and leaving the crop unharmed.

The problem with this practice is that it facilitates the development of resistance among weed species. Some individuals may be resistant because of random variation or possibly through transfer of the modified genes of the GM crop to local wild plants. In either event, the herbicide kills all the non-resistant individuals and then the resistant weeds take over. These “superweeds” constitute a formidable threat to world food production. The same goes for resistance among insect pest species and pathogenic microorganisms.

Indigenous farmers have long been content to leave the weeds and the bugs alone for the most part. They have also been able to rely on seed saved from the previous year’s crops to plant the following year. Collecting these seeds year after and experimenting with cross-breeding, they have developed vital banks of genetic diversity. This diversity of crops and crop varieties along with crop rotation, fallow periods, organic fertilizers, terracing, and other low-tech features of varied indigenous forms of agriculture have provided ample yields and have proven sustainable over thousands of years. It is a good system for seeing that everyone is fed and the local environment maintained but it is an abysmal way to make a profit because food and the resources needed to produce it are not treated as commodities in such systems. As agronomist Paul Gepts observes,

Indigenous societies or local farmer groups often practice an informal system of innovation and information dissemination, which does not fit well into a Western-style IPR [intellectual property rights] system, nor does the latter offer rewards for past efforts in innovation and conservation, on which the existence of biodiversity, in general, and crop biodiversity in centers of diversity, in particular, rests (2004, p. 1303).

Within a Western-style IPR system, profits from the sale of seed, agrochemical products, mechanized equipment, and water rights are the overriding concern. Stewardship of the

land and the community are not a priority. Furthermore, the leading agrochemical companies all plan to introduce versions of something called the “terminator technology”: “plants with genetically sterilized seeds that would force farmers to buy patented products year after year and end their vital ability to develop new crops” (Capra, 2004, p. 188). Saving and sharing seed would then not only be technically illegal, but physically impossible.

According to Cavanaugh and Mander,

Even in today’s computer age, nearly half of the worlds’ population still lives directly on the land, growing food for their families and communities, primarily staples and other mixed crops. These farmers replant with indigenous seed varieties and use crop rotation and community sharing of resources like water, seeds, and labor. Such systems have kept them going for millennia (2004, p. 41).

How long, one wonders, can this new industrialized system of agriculture last?

### *The Globalization of Poverty*

A major, if ostensive, goal of economic globalization is the elimination of poverty through economic growth and development. The argument is basically this: only through increases in economic output (growth) will the wealth necessary to end poverty be created and only through a one-size-fits-all model of economic modernization (development) can growth be achieved globally. As already discussed, there is little empirical support for this claim:

Relevant data demonstrate that trade and investment liberalization do not necessarily bring increased economic growth or prosperity. They do, however, contribute to serious imbalances in the global economy, including alarming

growth in inequality both inside and between nations. (Cavanaugh & Mander, 2004, p. 73).

The promise of growth therefore rings hollow for the euphemisms of “growth” and “development,” as Edmund O’Sullivan (1999) notes, are merely “acceptable code-names for imperialism” (p. 107). Yet the growth and development rhetoric continues because it simultaneously promotes the conditions necessary to perpetuate the consolidation of wealth among an elite minority while it obscures or distracts from the inequitable distribution of wealth. It also obviates the pursuit of democratic solutions because economic growth is assumed to be the only remedy for poverty. We will grow our way out of the situation or not at all. But if the tide were no longer expected to rise, the great disparities in the position (and size and condition) of boats could no longer be justified. The growth and development myth is therefore absolutely essential to the perpetuation of the current system. As David Orr observes, “As long as the total pie is growing, absolute but not relative wealth can be increased. If growth stops for any reason, the questions of distribution become acute” (1992, p. 10). Without the promise of growth, no one would be placated by the slim possibility of striking it rich somehow.

The failure of economic globalization to close or even shrink the gap in wealth within and between regions is condemnable, but the creation of poverty where none existed before is considerably more reprehensible. It is arguable that this is often the effect of what many economists refer to as economic development. As Zygmunt Bauman claims, the dominant model of development is replacing diverse livelihoods with the “the dependency of men and women on things and events they can neither produce, control,

see, nor understand” (1995, p. 31). In other words, development develops dependency among its alleged beneficiaries as it increases the distance “between what men and women make and what they need to appropriate and use in order to stay alive” (Bauman, 1995, p. 31).

There is no small amount of irony here. Dependency is exactly what economic development ostensibly seeks to abolish. Talk of *free* trade and *free* markets heralds the banishment of dependence, especially dependence on the natural world. Of course this is impossible, but now added to the ineluctable dependency on increasingly fragile ecosystems is the dependency on global markets and technology. People are becoming dependent upon volatile global markets in areas of the globe where they can least afford such dependency. As a result,

Unspeakable sufferings have been visited upon the extant ‘earth economies’ of the world in the name of happiness, identified now with the ‘developed’, that is modern, way of life. Their delicately balanced livelihood which could not survive the condemnation of simplicity, frugality, acceptance of human limits, and respect for non-human forms of life, now lies in the ruin, yet no viable, locally realistic alternative is in sight (Bauman, 1995, p. 30).

This is true even of the “success” stories of development. Take, for example, the case of the Naurans. Nauru is, according to Larry Rasmussen (1997), “the world’s smallest, most isolated republic,” an island of eight square miles and seventy-five hundred inhabitants located in the Western Pacific (p. 330). The island residents have made a great deal of money selling the mineral rights to their island. Phosphate mines have brought in tens of millions of dollars each year, Rasmussen reports. But due to the mining, “four-fifths of the island is a moonscape of gray limestone pinnacles, some as

high as seventy-five feet, while the only inhabitable strip is a coastal fringe of coconut palms and beaches” (Rasmussen, 1997, p. 331). Rising heat from the island’s barren surface drives away clouds, so rainfall is declining, agriculture is impossible, and fresh water supplies are dwindling. The environmental devastation is so nearly complete that the Naurans are contemplating using their new wealth to purchase a new island and relocate there. The Naurans it seems have lost their home to development. To those of us who tacitly accept the idea of always looking to move on to greener pastures, this might not seem like such a tragedy, but we all may eventually run out of places to go.

It should not be necessary to romanticize the “simple lives” of indigenous cultures to see that what currently passes for economic development leaves a great deal of poverty in its wake. There is no need to exalt the pristine ecological harmony of natives in contradistinction to the corrupting influence of the White man. Such sentiments are patronizing and tacitly white supremacist. Referring to a common attitude of whites toward Native Americans, Richard White (1996) notes,

We are pious toward Indian peoples, but we don’t take them seriously; we don’t credit them with the capacity to make changes. Whites readily grant certain nonwhites a “spiritual” or “traditional” knowledge that is timeless. It is not something gained through work or labor; it is not contingent knowledge in a contingent world. In North America, whites are the bearers of environmental original sin, because whites alone are recognized as laboring. But whites are thus also, by the same token, the only real bearers of history. This is why our flattery (for it is usually intended as such) of “simpler” peoples is an act of such immense condescension. For in a modern world defined by change, whites are portrayed as the only beings who make a difference (p. 175).

In criticizing the current global system, it may be tempting to invoke as an alternative some idyllic, mythical past in which physical needs were met without labor. It is an old

story after all: the Judeo-Christian myth of the garden. “Work is a fall from grace. In the beginning no one labored. In the beginning there was harmony and no human mark on the landscape” (White, 1996, p. 175). Certainly, this never happened. In fact, human beings were able to create quite a bit of environmental havoc with only Stone Age technology. Human activities probably contributed to the megafaunal extinctions of the Pleistocene if not caused them outright.

But it is common for Westerners to equate “primitive” cultures with such a time immemorial. This is not my intention. Nor am I suggesting that we could somehow return to an Edenic past. As Carolyn Merchant (1996) argues, the drive to accomplish such a feat is among the principle causes of the ecological crisis. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, work is regarded as the unpleasant means by which the garden can be recreated. The impossibility of recreating this ideal, original state explains, in part, the insatiability and restlessness of Western societies. The never-ending stream of allegedly labor-saving gadgets and the advertising that promotes them promise that we are, through technological advance, inching ever closer to abolition of work. Soon we will achieve the quintessentially modern dream of both the political left and right; we will move beyond the realm of necessity and into the realm of freedom.

But the ends of our labor cannot be *the end of labor*. There will always be work to do. The question is what kinds of work and for what purposes. With that in mind, I am interested in what works over the long term and what does not. I am not necessarily arguing that Western societies must begin to imitate “primitive” ways of understanding and living in the world. Certain modern advances can and should be retained. But as C.

A. Bowers (1995) has stated, there are human social groups that have survived continuously for millennia while modernity (become post-modernity) is only four or five centuries old and probably will not last another one. All human activities have ecological impacts but some ways of life are sustainable while others are not. With regard to the pursuit of sustainability, perhaps there are things that could be learned from so-called primitives.

The observation that global economic development *creates* poverty therefore need not issue from a mawkish reverence toward aboriginal moral purity. This becomes clearer as one abandons the conventional and uncritical idea of what constitutes poverty: the absence of the accoutrements of Western culture. Money and the things it can buy are most important in a thoroughly monetized economy. Hence, societies with social arrangements that do not rely almost exclusively on market exchanges often appear poor to the Western outsider. As Wolfgang Sachs writes,

To our eyes people have rather meager possessions, maybe the hut and some pots and Sunday costume, with money only playing a marginal role. Instead, everyone has access to fields, rivers and woods, while kinship and community duties guarantee services which elsewhere must be paid for in hard cash. Despite being in the 'low income bracket' nobody goes hungry... Here is a way of life maintained by a culture which recognizes the state of sufficiency; it only turns into demeaning 'poverty' when pressurized by an accumulating society" (cited in O'Sullivan, 1999, p. 109)

Poverty is socially constructed. This does not mean that it does not have objective and concrete consequences like hunger. But these consequences are the result of frugality that has been "deprived of its foundations" (O'Sullivan, 1999, p. 109). These foundations include "the infrastructures of life such as community ties, land, forest, and water"

(O'Sullivan, 1999, p. 109). As economic modernization proceeds, more of the world becomes poor in response to increasing dependency on markets, lack of money, and exposure to advertising's projection of "the good life." As O'Sullivan (1999) puts it,

It is a downward spiral when the capacity to achieve through one's own efforts gradually fades, while at the same time desires, fuelled by glimpses of high society, spiral towards infinity; this scissor-like effect of want is what characterizes modern poverty (p. 110).

This last element, the fuelling of desire—which is accomplished by portraying traditional ways of life as inadequate, antiquated, and inferior—is too often overlooked in discussions of poverty. After all, economic modernization and postmodern consumerism have little use for traditional cultures, except as commodities: anthropological novelties of food, dress, dance, music, and so on. As O'Sullivan observes,

Within the deep structure of our western colonial heritage, which is operating currently under the rubric of global economics and commerce, there must be a clear understanding that we can dismiss cultures on a global level as we march towards the global world market (1999, p. 23).

This is what "development" means and it carries a certain evolutionary connotation. To develop means to become more advanced. Hence, nations are "developing" in order to achieve more "advanced" economies. The result is a loss of cultural diversity, or at the very least major and largely detrimental transformations within different cultures. Referring to the pursuit of "First World lifestyles," Jared Diamond states,

That abstract phrase means many specific things to an individual Third World citizen: acquiring a house, appliances, utensils, clothes, and consumer products, manufactured commercially by energy-consuming processes, not made at home or locally by hand; having access to manufactured modern medicines, and to doctors and dentists educated and equipped at much expense; eating abundant food grown at high production rates with synthetic fertilizers, not with animal manure or plant mulches; eating some industrially processed food; traveling by motor vehicle (preferably one's own car), not by walking or bicycle; and having access to other products manufactured elsewhere and arriving by motor vehicle transport, not just to local products carried to consumers. All Third World peoples of whom I am aware—even those trying to retain or re-create some of their traditional lifestyle—also value at least some elements of this First World lifestyle (2005, p. 372).

I value some of these elements very highly myself and would like to see access to them become more widely available. But here is the dilemma: our levels of consumption here in the First World—or the Minority World as Edmund O'Sullivan (2002) terms it since the majority of world population lives elsewhere—are totally unsustainable. In fact, “the First World could not continue for long on its present course, even if the Third World didn't exist and weren't trying to catch up to us” (Diamond, 2005, p. 513). We must therefore confront a fundamental question: “how much of our traditional consumer values and First World living standard can we afford to retain” (Diamond, 2005, p. 524).

This is a problem that is almost universally denied or ignored by residents of the Minority World. The thought of there being real and intractable limits to growth, such as those detailed by Meadows, Randers, and Meadows (2004), seems especially repugnant to most every American. Depending on whether we lean right or left politically, we tell ourselves different (but equally false) stories to avoid making difficult choices. As Paul and Anne Ehrlich (2004) put it, “Those on the right believe that their end of the lifeboat is unsinkable ... Those on the left think that if the lifeboat's load were appropriately

redistributed and properly balanced, its capacity would be essentially infinite” (p. 13).

These are admittedly oversimplified positions, but they capture a certain measure of truth about our collective reluctance to squarely confront the reality of limits.

But ecological limits are not currently the primary factor in preventing an increase in the standard of living of the Third World. As previously discussed, neoliberalization (political-economic practices associated with globalization), to the embarrassment and consternation of some of its promoters, has not closed or even shrunk the gaps in wealth within and between regions. Its failure to do so has been attributed, in part, to unnecessary interventions into the functioning of markets. (Another popular explanation is the cultural inferiority of the poor.) Economists tend to assume that “all would be well with the world if only everyone behaved according to the precepts of their textbooks” (Harvey, 2005, p. 152). But according to economist Gale Johnson, despite the failure to deliver on this promise of growth and prosperity for all, no one is any worse off than before: “The rich have gotten richer but the poor have not gotten poorer” (2002, p. 437). The Third World was always poor. Colonialism and neo-colonialism in the form of economic globalization have nothing to do with it.

When the world had little inequality, it was poor. Virtually everyone was poor, very poor. This was true in Western Europe as well as in Asia and the other continents. The World Bank estimates that in 1820 75% of the world’s population lived on less than \$1 per day (1985 prices). This is the standard that the World Bank uses to define poverty – severe poverty. Today 20% of the world’s population lives on less than \$1 per day. Not a single country now has as high a percent of their population living on less than \$1 per day as existed in the world in 1820 (Johnson, 2002, p. 428).

Inequality is greater now than ever before, but that is because the wealthy have gained, not because anyone else has lost. No harm, no foul.

Johnson's argument assumes that increasing dependency on market exchange is unequivocally a good thing. He gives no indication of the social costs of increasing market dependency, or that market dependency has increased greatly since 1820. (How much money, one wonders—even in 1985 US dollars—did people living in rural Asia in 1820 require to meet their daily needs?) The argument also displays an ignorance of the importance of the social interactions and responsibilities that markets require in order to do what they theoretically do fairly well: allocate rival, excludable goods. Markets do not arise spontaneously and they are not self-sustaining organic entities with an entelechy of their own. However,

The fact that a market economy depends on a strong social economy to maintain the ethical structure, social stability, and personal security on which the smooth function of a market depends is routinely overlooked by economic policy makers (Korten, 1998, p. 75).

Gender plays an important role here. Economic policy makers are disproportionately male. In patriarchal societies such as our own, the social economies Korten references are administered mostly by women. "Woman's work" forms the backbone of these social economies and invisibility is a defining feature of the traditional work of women. It is simply taken for granted.

Susan Griffin notes an important connection between the devaluation and backgrounding of women's work and the denial of interdependency with ecosystems.

One is fed by this work in two ways, by the ingestion of food but also by the ingestion of knowledge. A knowledge of dependency. Of interdependency. This is evident, and yet it is not. The labor is hidden, in the 'private' life. So along with this secret, the dependency of human life on the life of the biosphere is also hidden. And in the same way the dependency of anyone, including men, on traditional 'women's work,' is hidden too (Griffin, 1997, p. 222).

This observation is especially instructive in terms of explaining the tendency of economists to be rather dismissive regarding the social and environmental disruptions associated with economic growth and development. With particular reference to disturbances to local economies and the devaluation of traditional skills, Johnson says,

Whenever new knowledge is created, some people will be adversely affected – skills that were valuable before may lose much of their value, for example. But this would be true in any economy in which there is growth, even if countries did not trade. The dislocations are primarily the result of growth not globalization except that the greater the degree of integration of an economy into the world economy, the greater will be the rate of growth and the greater the need for change and adjustment (2002, p. 438).

Globalization, he says, only accelerates these “natural” dislocations and his advice is similar to that offered by Friedman; be prepared to change and adapt fast even if this means abandoning practices that have sustained your group as far back as anyone can remember.

But a willingness to chase after the globalization train, so to speak, in no way guarantees that one will be able to catch up or keep up. Johnson's statement on the need to integrate with the global economy and change and adjust rapidly in order to facilitate growth reveals, somewhat obliquely, a central problem of economic globalization: gross disparities in income and wealth ensure that peripheral zones of the global economy will

never be able to keep up with the core zones under the current regime. The core regions invest in diverse financial markets and this reduces our vulnerability to perturbations in any single sector of the economy. Moreover, most of world capital is controlled by the core and it can move it into or out of the peripheries at lightning speed. This allows the core a dynamism that the peripheral zones cannot afford.

Before going further with this explanation, I should note that, if the current global regime is to be effectively challenged, this core-periphery relationship must not be essentialized and made to seem an inevitable historical outcome. In other words, it is vital to describe the asymmetries of power that exist in the global economy but not in such a way that reinforces them. As Huey-li Li (2003) argues,

In the age of globalization, the pursuit of the common bonds of reciprocity as a process of decolonization must go beyond the center-periphery framework. In other words, it cannot focus exclusively on decentering, what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak terms “the great macrostructural dominant group.” After all, “the great macrostructural dominant group” alone is unable to sustain economic exploitation and ecological destruction at the global level (pp. 16-17).

The diverse regions and peoples that are collectively referred to as the “Third World,” or “developing nations,” or “newly industrializing countries” (NICs) do not comprise a monolithic mass of innocent victims. There is both complicity and substantial and widespread resistance to economic globalization in these regions. But to frame the injustices of globalization exclusively in terms of the deleterious effects orchestrated by the “great macrostructural dominant group” implies passivity and powerlessness on the part of the other groups involved. Referring to efforts at critical global education, Li advises,

Without recognizing the diversity of so-called non-Western developing nations in the global pursuit of development, presumably socially reconstructive educational reforms can easily dismiss the persistent resistance movements in societies that divulge the subaltern people's agency. In other words, the perceptual perpetuation of victimization of subaltern people can lead to the romanticization of rather than the empowerment of marginalized indigenous cultural traditions (pp. 15-16, 2003).

It is thus important to recognize the diversity of actions and reactions among the nations and peoples that are linked via these asymmetric relations of power. To that end, Li advocates "a delicate and balanced educational endeavor that can acknowledge distinctive cultural and political practices of oppressed people without highlighting their marginality in such a way as to further marginalize them" (p. 16, 2003). The following paragraphs are intended to highlight the mechanism of oppression. I will have more to say about opposition and resistance in the next chapter.

As peripheral regions open up their economies to global markets, often at the behest of the IMF and/or the World Bank and amid both local support and protest, money often floods in rapidly in the form of loans and direct investment. The source of the attraction is the adoption of neoliberal policies mandated by the WTO to ensure "free trade." These include the removal of controls on the flow of capital into and out of a nation, the elimination or lessening of restrictions on foreign ownership, the reduction of the tax burden for foreign-owned operations, the elimination or reduction of protections for local labor and suppliers, and a relaxation or elimination of environmental regulations. (Noncompliance can result in one nation being sued by another in the WTO's Star Chamber.) To varying degrees in different countries, this often occurs along with increasing privatization of public sectors of the economy, thus increasing reliance on

foreign loans and investments. But at the first signs of economic instability (often resulting from activity in the core regions, especially currency speculation) those investments are withdrawn and further access to foreign capital is denied.

In reference to financial crises in Mexico in 1994 and in Asia, Russia, and Brazil in 1997-1998, Cavanaugh and Mander point out

When it became clear that the huge financial bubbles the inflows had created could not be sustained and that claims against foreign exchange could not be covered, speculators were spooked and suddenly pulled out billions of dollars. Currencies and stock markets went into free fall. Millions of people fell back into poverty (2004, p. 60).

Having bargained away their ability to regulate their own economies, the governments of these nations were in no position to deal with this situation. This is the point at which the IMF came to the rescue, but it is important to note who was rescued and who was blamed. These crises, and the still more massive one that occurred in Argentina in 2001,

were often reported as being caused by incompetence, inefficiency, corruption, and cronyism in the countries involved. The gigantic bailout by the International Monetary Fund was made to seem like a beneficent act of charity toward our underprivileged, dysfunctional friends, who had not yet achieved our own higher ethical standards. Rarely was it acknowledged that the money did not go to the citizens of those countries but rather was used to bail out the international bankers who caused the problem in the first place through reckless lending that created artificial economic bubbles (Cavanaugh & Mander, 2004, p. 52).

In international finance, it seems there really is no such thing as a non-performing loan, the kind that a small bank here in the United States would simply have to write off and absorb as a loss, because the IMF in effect transforms debts incurred by the private sector of a “developing” nation into a public obligation for its citizens. IMF emergency loans go

to pay off the creditors while the citizens of the nation that is being ‘bailed out’ are then required to pay back the IMF loan through the equivalent of a national fire sale.

These IMF emergency loans are made on the condition that further neoliberalization of the borrower nation’s economy will occur, despite the fact that neoliberalization precipitated the conditions that created the need for the loan. This is the notorious “structural adjustment” policy. The IMF advises borrower nations to raise interest rates to control inflation (which, along with the previous withdrawal of foreign capital, further constricts the domestic money supply), to drastically reduce public spending on social services, and to sell off public assets. With the domestic money supply greatly reduced by the internal manipulation of interest rates, the withdrawal of foreign investment, the denial of private loans from foreign banks, and sometimes the denial of liquidity to local depositors, domestic prices then fall precipitously. At that point, conditions are favorable for the return of foreign capital, which can then buy up what ever it wants at a huge discount—including those things had not been treated as commodities before entry into the global financial markets: common land, public utilities, etc.

This is what David Harvey calls “accumulation by dispossession” (2005, p. 154). “Since 1980, it has been calculated, over fifty Marshall Plans (over 4.6 trillion dollars) have been sent by the peoples at the Periphery to their creditors in the Center” (Harvey, 2005, p. 162). It is unlikely that everyone involved in this elaborate Ponzi scheme is aware of what is going, but I agree with Harvey that it is impossible to believe that this is

simply the case of a well-meaning but erroneous economic theory gone horribly awry in its implementation.

The new global economy therefore functions somewhat like a circulatory system in reverse. The circulatory metaphor is a popular one among economists. Money is the blood of the socioeconomic body. It ensures, theoretically, that nutrients (goods and services) are distributed properly. However, in an animal body, blood transports nutrients (oxygen, sugars, hormones, etc.) from the core (heart, lungs, digestive tract) to the peripheral regions of the body. It also picks up wastes (carbon dioxide, toxic metabolites, and so on) and brings them back to the core to be detoxified, exhaled, or excreted. This is the process that globalization gets backwards. To paraphrase Vandana Shiva (2000), nutrients in the form of natural resources move from the peripheral regions of the global economy to the core regions, while wastes, such as polluting industries offering low-skill and low-wage jobs, move from the core to the peripheries. And the flow is mostly unidirectional.

## CHAPTER V

### IN/CONCLUSION: POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS

Before discussing what conclusions, if any, can be drawn from the preceding analysis and speculating as to how these conclusions might inform educational policy and practice, let me begin this final chapter by summarizing the argument up to this point. The central question I set out to address is this: why is the global ecological crisis worsening despite the fact that environmental awareness has been on the increase for several decades? The hypothesis that I have explored thus far is that perhaps this paradoxical situation has something to do with postmodernity.

Recall that the “postmodern”, according to Lyotard (1984), is characterized by an incredulity toward the metanarratives of modernity. Of particular interest in this context is the metanarrative of progress. Postmodern skepticism of progress is not simply a glib denial of the achievements of the modern period, but an acknowledgement that along with these achievements came many unforeseen horrors, including the ecological crisis. However, the postmodern may not indicate a skepticism toward *all* metanarratives. Rather, the postmodern disinterest in metanarrative discourse could point to the ascendancy of one or more metanarratives to such a degree that they are no longer the subject of much active contestation. I have discussed three of these—or three interrelated variations on a single narrative theme—in the preceding chapters: the end of history myth, neoliberalism, and the rhetoric of economic globalization.

The end of history myth serves as a sort of metaphysical grounding for the other two. The basic idea is that the modern political and economic institutions of the West are the result of an evolutionary developmental process that has found its completion in democracy and capitalism, which together constitute the final form of human social organization. Neoliberalism carries the individualistic principles underpinning the end of history argument to their logical extreme. In doing so, it undermines public life by redefining political (public) issues as economic (private) issues. Democratic choice is reduced to consumer choice and the economic interests of the individual trump any social democratic concern for the quality of life of all citizens. The effect is the erosion of the democratic structures necessary to attend to common needs. Through economic globalization, neoliberalism's influence is expanding. National and local governments worldwide are weakening while transnational corporations and international bureaucracies are becoming better able to impose their will with impunity and without regard for the welfare of the great majority of global society. As David Harvey (2005) argues, these three strands taken together look suspiciously like an attempt to justify the advancement of the economic interests of an elite minority at the expense of everyone else. A large part of this expense is the ever-intensifying degradation of the environment on which we all, including future generations, depend.

In short, what I have described thus far is a juggernaut of social and environmental damage. If the legitimacy of the principles underlying these forces is a foregone conclusion for many Americans, including educators, what are the prospects for resistance and opposition? This is the question that will be pursued in this final chapter.

### *The Gentle Breezes of Change*

There are some encouraging developments occurring here in the United States and these may be suggestive of a turning point. The unexpected (to me anyway) commercial success of Al Gore's film, *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) is one example. (It recently won two Academy Awards, including Best Documentary Feature.) The hearings on global climate change that are now (February 2007) being held in the U.S. Congress are another. Republican Senator from Arizona, John McCain has publicly stated that the global warming debate is over. The earth's climate is warming; human activities are the cause and the recent release of the IPCC's Fourth Assessment (2007) confirms this. I am not convinced that these hearings will amount to much, but this situation is certainly preferable to having no hearings at all, especially the acknowledgement of the scientific basis of global warming on the part of many Republicans. It is welcome even if it is a bit late in coming.

Beyond the borders of the United States, the prognosis seems even more encouraging. Millions of people from dozens of nations, according to Cavanaugh and Mander (2004), have engaged in demonstrations in recent years against corporate globalization and the social, economic, and ecological devastation it promotes. The opposition is not just spontaneous and episodic. Much of it is organized and sustained: "Tens of thousands of representatives of civil society organizations now gather annually at the World Social Forum to strengthen their alliances and share a new vision of a world that can thrive if it is freed from the grip of corporate globalization" (Cavanaugh & Mander, 2004, p. 15). Furthermore, as Cavanaugh and Mander point out, the golden age

of economic globalization may already be ending. WTO negotiations fell through in Seattle in 1999; they failed again in Cancun in 2003; and meetings to establish the Free Trade Area of the Americas failed in Miami in 2003. And the most visible debacle of all, the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, has provided plain evidence of the “the failure of empire” (Cavanaugh & Mander, 2004, p. 8).

These developments, Cavanaugh and Mander claim, are not simply indicative of collapse and disorganization but of the potential for a global reorganization. They see hope for a new, sustainable configuration to emerge in response to the failures of economic globalization:

There are precedents for a grand alliance of progressive Southern leaders, global civil society, and sympathetic politicians in the North with the power to achieve sweeping institutional reform at the global level. Years ago, similar alliances between progressives in the North and popular leaders in the former colonies resulted in the dismantling of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and later of the empires of Europe’s colonial powers. Recent events give credence to the view that a new cycle of change is under way both at the institutional and grassroots levels, and that a new grand alliance may evolve with potential to remedy the injustices of our time (2004, p. 16).

These and other social movements have achieved impressive results in the past. In the U.S., the women’s suffrage movement and the Civil Rights movement are but two notable examples. And though racial and gender equity have yet to be achieved, advancements have been made and these are a source of hope and inspiration. There are also many environmental groups, from grassroots groups to major national and international organizations that are making positive contributions to the prevention, mitigation, and/or restoration of environmental damage.

Yet I cannot say that I am optimistic. There are two reasons for my hesitation. First, while I in no way wish to discount past and current efforts toward progressive change, it seems to me that the social and political climate has changed dramatically over the past several decades. I will say more about this below, but to put it in a nutshell: this is not the 1960s. Secondly, the ecological crisis is unprecedented; it is truly unique in gravity and scale. I am aware of no historical examples of human beings working together to deal with a problem of a similar magnitude to global warming. In short, in contradistinction to many of the issues that social movements have responded to in the past, any set of solutions to such a complex skein of problems—ecological, economic, social, political, cultural—must itself be so complex as to defy understanding. In other words, it is not very clear *what* ought to be done; and even with regard to those changes that must obviously take place, like rectifying the enormous disparities in wealth within and between regions, it is unclear *how*, specifically, this might be achieved. The problem seems to call for a level of coordinated political engagement (coordination between local, national, regional, and global levels, i.e. both bottom-up and top-down measures) that seems improbable at best.

Since the causes and impacts of the ecological crisis exceed human understanding, a neat and simple solution to the ecological crisis is probably beyond our ken as well. But perhaps no single person needs to understand in advance exactly what needs to happen on the global level to minimize the damage as much as possible. There certainly are many things that one can do as an individual, and we should each commit ourselves to doing them. The website ([www.climatecrisis.net](http://www.climatecrisis.net)) associated with *An*

*Inconvenient Truth*, for example, lists over thirty suggestions to reduce carbon emissions. An abbreviated list of “ten simple things to do” includes the following suggestions: 1) replacing incandescent light bulbs with compact fluorescent bulbs, 2) driving less, 3) recycling more, 4) maintaining proper air pressure in tires, 5) using less hot water, 6) avoiding products with a lot of packaging, 7) turning thermostats up 2 degrees in summer and down 2 degrees in winter, 8) planting a tree, 9) turning off and unplugging electronic devices when not in use, and 10) encouraging your friends to see *An Inconvenient Truth* (which a cynic might interpret as a shameless plug for the film). These are all very sensible ideas.

The website also lists several suggestions for bringing about change at the local, national, and international levels. These include encouraging schools and businesses to reduce emissions, joining a virtual march (see what I mean about the sixties being over?), encouraging the switch to renewable energy, protecting and conserving forests worldwide, considering the impacts of one’s financial investments, encouraging one’s local government to sign on to the U.S. Mayor’s Climate Protection Agreement, telling Congress to act, and making sure one’s voice is heard by voting. These too are perfectly reasonable suggestions, although they seem, in isolation, of paltry impact and/or dubious efficacy.

The ten principles for sustainable societies identified by Cavanaugh and Mander (2004) are also eminently reasonable. These principles emerged as common concerns among the various groups that participated in the “Battle of Seattle” during the 1999 WTO talks. They include 1) a new democracy (real sharing of power); 2) localization and

subsidiarity (in opposition to globalization); 3) ecological sustainability (rates of extraction and use of natural resources must not exceed rates of regeneration and rates of pollution must not exceed rates of harmless absorption); 4) common heritage (sharing of ecological resources and cultural resources); 5) diversity (maintaining cultural, economic, and biological diversity); 6) human rights; 7) jobs, livelihood, and employment (including the right to form and join trade unions), 8) food security and safety; 9) economic equity (including cancellation of Third World debt); and 10) the precautionary principle (i.e. first do no harm). I agree wholeheartedly with these principles and collectively they truly do constitute a radical shift away from economic globalization based on neoliberal principles.

But how likely is it that these will become the dominant guiding principles of societies in the near term? I am particularly concerned with how the gap could be bridged between what is quite doable at the micro level (e.g. “ten simple things to do”)—but may prove to be of little benefit, particularly if most everyone else continues with business as usual (especially China)—and what needs to be done on a macro level— which seems like pie in the sky given current trends.

I must admit that I have no answer to such questions but I feel compelled to offer something concrete rather than simply to characterize the suggestions of others as simplistic, impractical, or unrealistic. Bauman (1995) captures the difficulty of this situation:

It is all too easy to expose other people’s hopes as not firmly enough founded, and their solutions as not realistic enough. It is much more difficult to propose one’s own warrants for hope and one’s own solution that would be immune to similar

charges. This is not because of the shortage of imagination or good will – but because the present human condition itself is shot through with ambivalence, and any diagnosis seems to point in two opposite directions simultaneously – towards developments whose compatibility is far from evident (p. 286).

The truth, which I am reluctant to reveal, is that after researching this problem for quite some time now I am not sure how to get past this ambivalence, much as I want to. I still want to believe that given the right information human beings can act rationally in their own best interests. In other words, I bear the legacy of Enlightenment. But I also take postmodern thought seriously enough to recognize that history provides ample evidence that mocks the notion that rational control of events of this magnitude is possible. As Jared Diamond (2005) notes,

Even after a society has anticipated, perceived, or tried to solve a problem, it may still fail for obvious possible reasons: the problem may be beyond our present capacities to solve, a solution may exist but be prohibitively expensive, or our efforts may be too little and too late. Some attempted solutions backfire and make the problem worse, such as the Cane Toad's introduction into Australia to control insect pests, or forest fire suppression in the American West. Many past societies lacked the detailed ecological knowledge that now permits us to cope better with the problems that they faced. Others of those problems continue to resist solution today (p. 436).

In summary, I am not sure that any solution or set of solutions that is both realistic and adequate exists to the myriad problems that add up to what is called the global ecological crisis.

Yet I cannot bear Lyotard's (1984) notion that the ultimate point of research (whether quantitative, qualitative, or theoretical) is simply to generate more research. Even the theoretical questions raised by the ecological crisis cannot be considered simply

a language game. This would be to miss the point entirely. Perhaps I overestimate the possibility of this sort of theoretical work to have practical impacts (see Anderson, 2004; Fish, 1989). Or maybe I just am trying to conform to the common narrative expectation of a happy ending—the Hollywood ending. In any event, the question that I am left with is what is the point of my own critique? And in trying to answer, I find myself caught in the tension between the modern and the postmodern.

Bauman here describes the problem-solving approach typical of modernity:

The modern critique was incomplete unless leading to the ‘positive’ programme; only a ‘positive’ critique was acceptable; however fearful and shocking, the critique had to point toward a happy end. The modern critique drew its energy and its legitimation from the unshaken belief that a ‘solution’ can be found, that a ‘positive’ programme is certainly possible and most certainly imperative. In retrospect, the lauded modern disenchantment [of pre-modern belief] seems like passing the baton in the relay race of magicians. The modern disenchantment came in package-deal that contained a new, fully operative enchantment kit (1995, p. 21).

The modern enchantment that Bauman refers to is the belief that Reason operating through History or that History as the self-realization of Reason could somehow save us from ourselves. It should not be necessary to mention at this point, but this has not happened and the growing realization that this is the case marks, as Jameson puts it, “a certain end of idealism constitutive of the postmodern” (Jameson, 1991, p. 352). Or, as Bauman (1995) puts it, the veil of modernity has been pierced. The foundations of modernity have been exposed as unfounded. Being, we now know, was always “underpinned by Chaos and Absurdity rather than preordained Order and Meaning” (Bauman, 1995, p. 23). This will always be the case and nothing can be done to “solve”

this problem. In fact, the pursuit of such “solutions” in many cases only makes matters worse. All of the modern emphasis on control, on subduing nature to bring about order has created a situation that is more uncontrollable and unpredictable than was ever known in the past.

What has in fact happened is that the processes set afoot with the advent of modernity, mistaken for a progress towards coordinated and/or guided (universal rationality, gave birth to the multitude of uncoordinated and self-guided (local, parochial) rationalities which turned into the principal obstacle to universal rational order (Bauman, 1995, p. 25)

What this means with regard to the ecological crisis is that the modern impulse to tame nature, to subdue in the service of the civilizing process, has yielded to the postmodern view of nature as a source of both the stuff of playthings and scenic places in which to play with them. Neither view seems especially promising in terms of achieving ecologically sustainable societies. We now face this increasingly menacing situation with “no guarantee of any kind that history will not repeat itself this time. As before, we need to act without victory being assured in advance. This was, by the way, always the case. Only now we know that it was, and that it is” (Bauman, 1995, p. 162).

### *The Tragic View*

The retrograde search for solutions is doomed to fail and this realization can lead to a certain resignation to the fact that the ecological crisis will eventually take care of itself (long after we have died, we hope). The climate will continue to warm, human population will increase, species will continue to go extinct (the current estimated rate is

about 50,000 per year—how long can this continue without major consequences?), supplies of fresh water will dwindle, air quality will worsen, arable acreage will decrease, loss of topsoil will reach a critical value, crop yields will decline, wars over natural resources will escalate, the number of refugees will increase, and eventually the human population will crash. This is Ecology 101: overloaded systems cannot remain overloaded indefinitely. These changes may occur over many decades or they could come faster, but things are definitely going to change and most likely for the worse. As Diamond observes, “because we are rapidly advancing along this non-sustainable course, the world’s environmental problems *will* get resolved, in one way or another, within the lifetimes of the children and young adults alive today” (Diamond, 2005, p. 498). And perhaps the most likely scenario is that the situation will not be resolved through benevolent means of our own choosing but through human malevolence and natural disasters “such as warfare, genocide, starvation, disease epidemics, and collapses of societies” (Diamond, 2005, p. 498).

There is a temptation in the face of such a strong probability of disaster to give in to pessimism. As David Purpel (2003) observes,

This is an era of increasing cynicism, despair, and helplessness and a time when suggest that the best we can do is either to ride out the storm or reduce the damage as much as possible. Still others say that the apocalypse is now and that we should abandon ship and/or learn to tread water (p. 262).

I do not want to contribute to this sort of empty negativity. I agree with Purpel that “this is a time when we must vigorously and passionately counteract the cynicism and despair which only deepens and extends the danger” (2003, pp. 262-263). But in the absence of

an obvious remedy to the dilemma, one could certainly move too far in the opposite direction and acquiesce to what John Caputo (2001) has called “the tragic sense of life” (p. 118). One could embrace the notion of an environmental collapse with a sort of Nietzschean bravado, for as Caputo notes,

There is something perversely *appealing* about the tragic view, a certain heroic hopelessness, a phallic fist-shaking defiance that enjoys cursing the darkness and even dances to the tune, that says “yes” to it, that goes chin to chin with the cosmos and dares it to break our will (2001, p. 121).

The perverse appeal of this sort of hopelessness is that it obviates a response. Nothing can be done about a hopeless situation and this resignation can come as a peculiar sort of relief.

But though there may be no obvious and simple answers to the ecological crisis, we are not therefore excused from trying to do something about it. There are two dangers that must be navigated here: one is this feeling of hopelessness and despair, the other is a naive optimism coupled with facile proposals for action, especially those based on market principles—the neoliberal notion that we can end poverty and save the planet by shopping, for example. A delicate balance must therefore be achieved by any serious attempt at ecological education. We must hazard an honest and accurate assessment of the seriousness of the problems we face without, at the same time, making the situation seem utterly hopeless. There are glimmers of hope and hope is needed. But hope is not the same thing as wishful thinking.

*Postmodern Politics and the Representation of Nature*

Is it wishful thinking to suppose that the sorts of political opposition now operating in the postmodern era hold much potential for effective resistance to the forces that have produced the ecological crisis? Can postmodernism be of some help here? Perhaps. Postmodern theory has proven especially adept at revealing the dominating and destructive tendencies of modernity and the acceleration of these tendencies in postmodernity. As Arran Gare (1995) notes, the poststructuralists, the theorists most closely associated with “postmodernism” such as Jacques Derrida,

have furthered the analyses revealing the drive to domination in Western thought, and thereby have helped to legitimate discourses, suppressed by the dominant discourses of science and by Marxism, which are not oriented towards the domination of the world and which accord more with a way of dwelling within the world which lets things be. They have also gone beyond language as such to investigate the institutional context of discourses and to show the way power operates in these. Finally, they have defended a new kind of political practice (pp. 90-91).

But it is this new kind of political practice with which Gare takes issue. Poststructuralists, he says, have been conspicuously silent on the environment as a political issue.

Postmodern theorists, Gare claims, are guilty not only of neglect but of undermining the efforts of environmentalists by leaving them “no way to defend their belief that there is a global crisis or to work out what kind of response is required to meet it” (1995, p. 99).

Ultimately, Gare concludes, postmodern thought holds no promise as an antidote to the ecological crisis. In fact, he claims the failure of First World societies to deal with it the crisis is directly attributable to postmodernism and the culture it represents:

In their failure to orient people for action, their attack on rationality per se as a form of oppression, their effort to liberate suppressed desires, their rejection of perspective and finally, their loss of contact with any reality beyond language and texts, poststructuralists are expressing the spirit of postmodern culture, and the failures of the poststructuralists are revelations of the defects of this culture. It is these defects which account for the career of the environmentalist cause in the affluent West (1995, p. 99).

I think Gare overstates the matter, but I agree that “postmodernism,” however it is defined (or not defined), may not provide an adequate basis for an environmental ethics, one that would readily translate into concrete political practice. As Derridean scholar Simon Critchley (1999) volunteers (as one who has sought to demonstrate an ethico-political dimension to deconstruction), “The move that deconstruction is unable to make—what I have called its impasse—concerns the passage from undecidability to the decision, from responsibility to questioning, from deconstruction to critique, from ethics to politics” (p. 236). He adds,

There is a need for a political supplement to deconstruction, in the full sense of that word, as something which both makes up for a lack and adds to what is already complete. I believe that this supplement is necessary in order to prevent deconstruction from becoming a fail-safe strategy for reading – an empty formalism – which, as Rorty would have it, is a means to private autonomy that is publicly useless and politically pernicious (1999, p. 237).

Hence, there are political problems with postmodernism in general and deconstruction in particular, as even many of their proponents would admit. The most significant of these is perhaps the splintering and fragmentation characteristic of postmodern oppositional politics. As Jameson describes, “the ‘micropolitics’ that corresponds to the emergence of this whole range of small-group, nonclass political practices is a profoundly postmodern

phenomenon, or else the world has no meaning whatsoever (1991, pp. 318-319). Gare, who is particularly unflattering of Derrida and deconstruction, phrases it this way:

The relativism argued for by those influenced by Derrida would fragment all oppositional political movements completely, and make any concerted response to the environmental crisis impossible. Ultimately the effect of the social critiques of thinkers such as these is to disempower people (1995, p. 97).

Gare's criticism of deconstruction's limitations with respect to political opposition has some merit, but there is a rather obvious problem with the accusation. Perhaps deconstruction *would* fragment all oppositional movements—if most people knew who Derrida was and were familiar with his work. But nobody reads Derrida—or Lyotard, or Baudrillard, or Lacan, or Foucault, or Bataille, or Deleuze and Guattari. Some academics read them, yes, but the obscurity (in both senses of the term) of postmodern theory seems to indicate that it bears little responsibility for our present environmental plight. Again, maybe the various strands of postmodern thought hold little promise for the emergence of an ecological consciousness and substantive social change, but that is, as a practical matter, mostly due to the fact that most people have never heard of these theories. The charge of political irresponsibility does not stick—not so much because it is untrue, but because most consumers in First World societies do not read dense theory.

What is interesting about the appeal of blaming the French (hardly a novel thing to do) is the mix of both legitimate concern over postmodern theory's rather dim prospects for constructive social change and a sort of reactionary nostalgia for a time that never was. For example, Gare argues that what is now required "is a new postmodernism which not only negates the cultural forms of modernity, but which can replace these

forms” (1995, p. 139). We must develop new ecological grand narratives, he says, (or recover old ones, or affirm certain existing, but marginalized narratives) to “effectively challenge the hegemonic culture, so that [these alternative narratives] can orient people in practice, in their daily lives, to create an environmentally sustainable civilization” (Gare, 1995, p. 139). Sounds good. But is this a matter of looking forward to something that transcends the modern/postmodern or, as Bauman suggests, is this indicative of an attempt to retreat to the safety and certainty that modernity never really provided?

The postmodernist (as distinct from postmodern) discourse of philosophers in the grip of legislative [modern] nostalgia follows faithfully the agenda of all narratives of frustration. Expectedly, it is the carriers of the news who are blamed with venom, while the news itself is strenuously rebutted or disdainfully dismissed (1995 p. 25).

Environmental philosopher Michael Zimmerman (1994) argues that radical ecologists (those concerned with deep, systemic change rather superficial reform) ought to affirm modernity’s emphasis on progress defined as the expansion and increase of human freedom, but they should also be wary of modernity’s tendency to create a great deal of human misery in the pursuit of that goal. In other words, radical ecologists can benefit from the postmodern revelation of modernity’s logic of domination but they should also be concerned about postmodernism’s tendency to support (even if unintentionally) the political and economic status quo:

Though they agree with postmodern theory’s critique of modernity’s totalizing control obsession, many radical ecologists are also like progressive critics in suspecting that postmodern theory can be neoconservative, since it renounces the possibility of a general critique of the conditions generating social and ecological problems. One progressive critic, for instance, asks, whether it is any accident

that, at the very moment in which capitalism is transforming the planet into a homogenized production unit, many postmodern theorists encourage students “to reject global and universal narratives in favor of fragmentary conceptions of the world as ‘text’.” Postmodern theorists reply, however, that their work criticizes oppression and encourages freedom, even if the latter can be both construed and achieved only in limited ways and then under particular circumstances. Moreover, postmodern theorists, along with some radical ecologists influenced by postmodern theory, remain skeptical of large-scale, radical ecological narratives that are reminiscent of the metaphysical foundationalism characteristic of modernist ideologies and their countercultural cousins. According to these skeptics, yearning for a new age in which social antagonism and humanity-nature dualism will finally be overcome may in fact lead to new forms of social oppression that may also, paradoxically, *worsen* the ecological situation (Zimmerman, 1994, p. 8).

The best elements of postmodern theory allow for the kind of work that must be done to expose the death-drive inherent in the dominant political and economic paradigm while remaining on guard with respect to the establishment of some other regime that might be as oppressive as the old one—or more so. This is why many radical ecologists, ecofeminists in particular, warn of the possibility of perhaps initially well-meaning and progressive environmentalisms giving birth to forms of *ecofascism*, which amounts to defining the good of the planet in terms of the benefit of an elite minority. As Gare admits,

There is a tendency for resistance movements to continue positing some absolute, supposedly given as immediately present ... It reinforces the idea that there is some absolute truth, and this gives some privileged group the authority to rule the rest of society (1995, p. 92).

Deconstruction is eminently useful in such a situation. But when Gare claims that, “For poststructuralists, the notion of a ‘global environmental crisis’ can be deconstructed and shown to serve the power of those who are attempting to mobilize people address it”

(1995, p. 99), he is not praising deconstruction. He means to criticize a position he attributes to the poststructuralists, namely that there is nothing objectively real about the global environmental crisis—a position certainly worthy of being debunked.

Conservation biologist, Michael Soulé (1995) raises the same issue:

Living nature – the native species of plants and animals in their native settings – is under two kinds of siege; one is overt, the other covert. The overt siege is physical; it is carried out by increasing multitudes of human beings equipped and accompanied by bulldozers, chainsaws, plows, and livestock. The covert assault is ideological and therefore social; it serves to justify, where useful, the physical assault. A principal tool of the social assault is deconstruction (p. 137).

For Soulé, deconstruction is compatible with, even supporting of, the exploitation of the natural world by promoting a type of relativism that undermines scientists' claims that there is such a thing as a physical, natural environment and that its viability is threatened.

According to Soulé:

Objectivist biologists say that living nature, species and associations, are real – “out there” – and that science is a way of gradually increasing our knowledge of them. The deconstructionist alternative, nihilistic monism, is to deny that nature is real – or to insist that if there is anything “out there,” we cannot know it because we are shut up in the concentric prisons of cultural bias and sensory apparatus. Therefore, it is impossible to know nature at all. All we have are culturally tainted reports, texts or words, including scientific studies about the world, *none of which is anymore valid than any other* [italics mine] (1995, p. 149).

The italicized portion of the quote turns a statement of a very valid and serious philosophical problem into a caricature. Does anyone really believe this? If so, it seems a foolish position and I think Soulé should heed Mark Twain's advice about arguing with fools. (Twain cautioned against it.) Clichéd characterizations of various postmodern

bugaboos—mindless relativism, “nihilistic monism”, apolitical aestheticism, linguistic idealism—are unnecessary. Science takes as its first principle that there exists an objective reality independent of and external to human consciousness. So too does common sense. There is no need for such rhetorical flourishes or the pretense of a genuine debate about the reality of the natural world. No reasonable person would suggest that there is not a “real world” somewhere “out there.”

And yet there *are* limits to what we can know about the “real world” for what we do know of this reality ineluctably comes to us through the lenses of language, culture, and biology. In other words, all of our knowledge is situated in a particular historical and social context and is mediated by the human sensory apparatus, which registers only a tiny fraction of available information. And through habituation, we take notice of an even smaller fraction. Science cannot offer an exact and unmediated representation of objective reality. Yet scientists persist in the reification of scientific abstractions, i.e. forgetting that the objective understanding of the world generated by scientific investigation and the actual world of objects are not identical—what A.N. Whitehead (1948) called the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness,” (p. 58) or, to paraphrase Gregory Bateson (1972), mistaking the map for the territory.

Furthermore, since the advent of the modern period and the rise of modern science, there has been an increasing reliance on vision at the expense of our other senses. According to Heidegger (1977), from a modern perspective the world is conceived as a picture. Scientific language is thus dominated by visual metaphors, metaphors which suggest objectivity, distance, detachment, disinterest, and control over

discrete objects. My own use of a visual metaphor—“the lenses of language, culture, and biology”—provides immediate evidence of how casually most of us tend to use this kind of language. However, we mortals are incapable of attaining a God’s-eye-view of the world. We should therefore be mindful of the limitations of human perspective (while also acknowledging and affirming the value of different human perspectives) and abandon “the assumption that the universe is a totally knowable, integrated totality” (Gare, 1995, p. 107). We must also be more mindful of the way in which science’s nearly exclusive reliance on the visual sense and visual analogies “blinds” us to other ways of conceiving of the world. Both Neil Evernden (1993) and Gare (1995) offer excellent discussions of the qualitative differences in worldview (yet another visual metaphor) that emerge from an inclusion of auditory analogies in our understanding of ourselves and nature. If visual analogies suggest objectivity, detachment, disinterest, autonomy and control over discrete objects, then auditory metaphors might be better suited to cultivating an understanding of subjectivity, interdependence, caring, connection, commitment, and cooperation.

However, it does not follow from the admission that our understanding of the world is necessarily partial (in two senses of that word) that, as a matter of logical necessity, all representations of the world are equally valid. Some representations *are* better than others. Some have greater explanatory power; some are more internally consistent; some are more consistent with experience. To put it bluntly, some are true while many others are patently false, such as those of the few remaining global warming skeptics. But none of us, including scientists, have recourse to a transhistorical,

transcultural, absolute, and eternal standard of Truth. We are therefore condemned to a certain degree of relativism. But this does not imply that “anything goes.” On the contrary, relativism is not a license to be irresponsible; it necessitates serious and competent discernment.

If there were no relationship, however tenuous, between words and their referents, words would have no meaning. No interpretation of objective conditions would be possible. Critics of the moral and ethical consequences of poststructuralist theory are therefore right to point out that, if it were the case that language can point to nothing outside of itself or at least not with any consistency (linguistic idealism and epistemological relativism), any sense of personal or collective history would vanish. “Humans must constantly construct and reconstruct historical narratives,” as Gare says, “to orient themselves and evaluate actual and possible social and cultural transformations” (1995, p. 134).

And yet it is the loose, contingent relationship between words and referents that is the condition of possibility of narrative construction and historical interpretation. If this relation were completely solid and eternal, interpretation would be redundant. The practical consequences of an absolute, unmediated relationship between language and the world (a strong objectivism) would therefore be equally devastating as absolute relativism, to use an oxymoronic phrase, for this would mean the end of narrative and the end of dialogue, both within oneself and between the self and others. Remarking on these two epistemological extremes, Gare writes,

Relativism is merely the obverse of objectivism and dogmatism. Both deny any value to dialogue; if no point of view is better than any other, differences are not worth arguing about, while if we already have the truth, or at least a method for gaining and accumulating certain knowledge, there is no need to consider alternative ideas. In practice, relativism and dogmatism complement each other as relativists silence dialogue, allowing dogmatists to impose their conception of the world on others (1995, p. 111).

Gare identifies the potential pitfall of going overboard with either relativism or objectivism. But with postmodernism in mind, it is the notion of the malleability of the connections between interpretations and an objective reality with which one must be especially careful. Pushing this trope too far, as Gare says, renders opposition to the dominant forces of global environmental destruction impossible.

Still, it seems that language can coordinate action in the world perhaps even more easily than it can convince us that such action is impracticable. And it would be very difficult indeed to resist the widespread fragmentation and the endless particularity of problems spawned by neoliberalization without recourse to “a universalistic rhetoric of human rights, dignity, sustainable ecological practices, environmental rights, and the like, as a basis for a unified oppositional politics” (Harvey, 2005, p. 178).

Soulé is therefore quite right when he reminds his readers that “the bludgeon of multicultural relativism can also be used to defend oppression and cruelty” (1995, p. 150). Yet so too can scientific discourses even when they are, by all conventional criteria, sound (yet tentative) representations of the external world. This is why science is always ripe for deconstruction, the point of which is not to totally undermine scientists’ credibility with the public but to keep them honest. In fact, John Caputo (1997) argues that science, in responding to its highest calling and noblest ideal of increasing human

understanding of ourselves and the world in which we live, is perfectly compatible with deconstruction:

A “deconstruction” of natural science ... would be good news. Its effects would be to keep the laws of science in a self-revising, self-questioning mode of openness to the “other,” which here would mean the scientific “anomaly,” the thing that defies or transgresses the law (nomos). A deconstructive approach to science would keep the scientific community open to the upstarts, the new ideas, the audacious young graduate students who come up with unexpected hypotheses that at first look a little funny and then a little brilliant. A deconstructive approach to natural science would maintain that the “laws” of science are always deconstructible (revisable) just in virtue of a science to come, one that is presently unforeseeable. A deconstructive approach to science would be good news and hard science. The sneaking suspicions that something may be wrong with what we currently believe, while keeping a watchful eye that current paradigms not be taken dogmatically, that something else, something other, still to come, is being missed – that deeply deconstructive frame of mind goes to the heart of hardball science if it has a heart! (pp. 73-74).

Considering some of the shadier episodes in the history of science (the eugenics movement comes to mind), this seems an excellent idea, one that scientists committed to fairness and justice should welcome in an open, democratic society.

### *Consumerism*

Postmodern thought appears to offer no solid grounding for the establishment of substantive principles that are consistent with ecological sustainability because, as Bauman (1995) has shown, no such grounding is possible. But does this mean that the promotion of self-limitation and self-sacrifice in the name of a livable future for both human and non-human life is impossible in the postmodern period? No, but it may be very unlikely because of the compatibility between postmodernism and market logic.

There is, after all, an eerie similarity between the notion of the “invisible hand” of the market promoting the public good through the disorganized actions of competing private interests and the idea that postmodern “micropolitics” could bring disparate individuals and groups together such that their messages would amplify rather than cancel each other.

The issue of whether or not postmodern politics could achieve a high enough signal-to-noise ratio to effectively challenge and overturn the hegemony of the neoliberal model, turns on the following questions raised by Jameson (1991):

Are the new units generated by the system itself in its interminable inner self-differentiation and self-reproduction? Or are they precisely the “new agents of history” who spring into being in resistance to the system as forms of opposition to it, forcing it against the direction of its own internal logic into new reforms and internal modifications (p. 326).

In other words, are the new social movements of the postmodern era simply products of the “system,” or are they capable of transcending the system by force of will and action?

This choice between “system” and “agency”, says Jameson, is a false one. Both are operative and neither casts the deciding vote with regard to the course of history. But the way in which the two come together and become indistinct in postmodernity has to do with “agency” being defined largely in terms of consumer choice, i.e. the choices the “system” provides or allows. In consumerism, the line between “system” and “agency” therefore becomes nearly impossibly blurred. The most obvious, and currently the most effective modes of resistance—exerting pressure on the political-economic system through changes in consumer habits—occur through and are circumscribed by the very structures that have produced the problems we now seek to set aright. How likely is it

then that changes in consumer attitudes and habits could really lead to sustainable ways of living?

The environmental impacts of consumerism are fairly straightforward. The mass production and consumption of material goods exhausts non-renewable resources, outpaces the rate of regeneration of renewable resources, generates waste and pollution, and destroys the natural habitats of countless species. Moreover, the heavy dependence of production, distribution, and consumption processes on fossil fuels is altering the earth's climate, which threatens to exacerbate existing problems and accelerate further damage. We consumers are literally destroying the planet and, as mentioned earlier, this may ultimately prove to be the only "real solution" to the ecological crisis. As Gare observes,

It would appear that barring some almost unimaginable catastrophe, the global market will remain with us until massive environmental destruction makes it impossible to function. Under these circumstances, and given the immediacy of the environmental crisis, it is clearly necessary to formulate critiques of the existing state of affairs and the thinking on which policies are based in terms which will facilitate the formulation of realistic alternatives (1995, p. 104).

What then will consumers accept as realistic alternatives? Is consuming less "stuff" a realistic alternative?

The textbook I am currently using in a freshman course in biology reflects a common stance on issues of conservation. The following passage deals specifically with global warming but the sentiment readily applies to conventional attitudes toward other environmental problems as well:

Most proposed solutions to the problem of global warming do not include the obvious solution, which is to burn less fuel. This could be accomplished through a combination of energy conservation and the use of alternative sources of energy such as solar power, wind power, or nuclear power. But because most nations want to maintain or even increase fuel consumption, researchers are looking for ways to remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere (Tobin & Dusheck, 2005, p. 529).

We will have technical solutions or no solutions at all. Conservation is not an attractive option for those who have grown accustomed to high rates of consumption and to people in “developing” nations who aspire to higher (Western) standards of living. This is the thinking on which current policies are based.

The attractiveness of the technological fix stems from the assumption that consumerism, the material satisfaction of desire, breeds happiness and fulfillment. This is the primary justification for globalized economic development modeled after Western societies and it derives from a belief, says Bauman, “with strong commonsensical roots, in spite of being repeatedly discredited by a chain of eminent thinkers from Schopenhauer to Freud” (1995, p. 32).

The conclusion of this quasi-syllogism, based on one tautological and one false premise, is that development is necessary and desirable and ethically correct because it increases the volume of human happiness; while in another bout of circular reasoning that conclusion is over and over again corroborated by the statistics of increased income and volume of trade in the ‘developed’ part of the world” (32).

Schooling certainly does little to expose circularity of this argument. In general, formal education does just the opposite by helping to mold students into *possessive individuals* (Apple, 1982). Parents, teachers, business leaders, and the rest usually advise

young people to do well in school so they can get the high-paying jobs that will allow them to buy the luxury items that will make them happy. Knowledge and skills are thus viewed as forms of private property to be obtained in the marketplace and to be used in the marketplace. Education, in this view, is mostly concerned with credentialing.

Education has thus become just another consumer product.

Even the idea of education as “transformation,” something of a sacred cow within the liberal emancipatory tradition, has been absorbed by the larger context of consumerism and redefined in advertising terms. With issues of educational leadership in mind, Glenn Hudak (2005) reflects on the ways in which educational “transformation” is marketed.

Publicity is the language of transformation—through consumption. It is through consumption, publicity tells us, that we can bridge that “gap” between who we are now—our 24/7 working lives—and who we would like to be in the future. Publicity “transforms” our lives into a strategy: a plan for a “better” life. This is to say that the focus on living, from publicity’s perspective, is on ways of making the future real, making our fantasy a reality. To this end, perhaps we need to go back to graduate school for a credential that will provide for more organizational mobility, or perhaps leadership workshops, or perhaps moving to a new school. In any case these are acts of consuming, of bringing into our world a commodity, be it credential, workshop, or venue, all of which share one thing in common: they all offer to improve and transform our lives (p. 307).

Not surprisingly then, there is a positive correlation between educational attainment and consumerist behavior, i.e. the better-educated among us tend to spend more and save less (Schor, 1998). Economist Juliet Schor (1998) offers the following (unnecessarily tentative) explanation:

Apparently people with more education are more status-oriented, more tuned in to identity and positional consumption, and more concerned about keeping up with the upscale groups to which they aspire to belong. It's hard to say why. Maybe the more status-conscious among us are more likely to stay in school. Or maybe status orientation is a value system that we *learn* in school. But whatever the causality, the outcome seems clear: the highly educated are more immersed in the culture of upscale acquisition (p. 76).

Given the emphasis in schools on classification and hierarchy, competition, individualism, and grading and assessment, it is not surprising that schools reinforce the consumer values of the larger culture. Recognition of the connection between environmental degradation and this dominant view of the purpose of schools reveals the deep need of a radically different vision of education. As David Orr (1992) notes, "The crisis cannot be solved by the same kind of education that helped create the problems" (p. 83).

It is very important to keep this in mind when thinking about what sorts of changes need to be enacted in schools. It is a noble and worthwhile pursuit to try to increase access to the bounty of the global economy among those who currently have little or no access to it. Here, I am referring to sufficiency: shelter, clothing, food. The lives of those who cannot meet these basic needs are obviously greatly improved by the achievement of sufficiency. But beyond a certain level of stability and material satisfaction, more "things" have little positive impact on quality of life. So when we talk about the liberating potential of education it is important to be very clear that this does not simply equate to promoting greater participation in the spiritually bankrupt and ecologically unhealthy cultural patterns of postmodern consumer society. Consuming more does not, by itself, herald liberation.

Yet it is equally important to bear in mind that we must consume. We have no choice but to consume for this is our inescapable biological mode of existence. In the terminology of scientific ecology, *producer* and *autotroph* both refer to organisms which have the ability to photosynthesize: plants, certain bacteria, and several protists, including the algae. (*Auto-troph* literally means self-feeder.) Organisms that lack the ability to photosynthesize and must therefore depend on organisms that do for their survival are obligate *consumers*, or equivalently, *heterotrophs*. Since humans cannot photosynthesize, we must consume. But being a consumer in the ineluctable ecological sense of the word does not necessary entail the insatiability of “the culture of upscale acquisition.” Consuming does not and should not define who we are.

Human beings are more than consumers, more than stomachs craving to be filled. We are producers as well, looking to express ourselves through stable, meaningful work. We are members of families and communities, moral beings with interest in fairness and justice, living organisms dependent on a healthy and beautiful environment. We are parents and children (De Graaf et al., 2002, p. 50).

Yet, many of us continue to embrace consumerism, primarily because we define ourselves through what we consume.

### *Constructing Consumer Identities*

According to Bauman (1995), differences in identity construction most clearly mark the transition from the modern to the postmodern:

The most seminal change underlying the passage into the postmodern phase of modernity can be found in the profound modification of the way in which individuality is socially constructed and of the fashion in which

the bulk of the population is socially integrated and riveted into the process of systemic reproduction (p. 153).

During modern era, the identity of most citizens was constructed in such a way as to contribute to the nation-state's productive and war-making capability. Prototypical modern identities were those of the producer and the soldier. But in the postmodern era, fewer and fewer members of postmodern societies are required to participate in production, mostly as a result of increasing technological proficiency but also through the displacement of manual labor to "developing" nations. And war is conducted by professional armies composed of a tiny fraction of the total population (but a very specific class fraction). However:

What cannot be done today without active involvement of all or a great majority of the population is the dispensation of products ('clearing demand') and thus reproduction of the need to restock, the reproduction of productive conditions – implemented in contemporary society through the mechanism of the market. The market engages men and women in the capacity of consumers (Bauman, 1995, p. 155).

Postmodern identities may be fragmented, multiple and individualized, but they share a common feature: they are constructed around acts of consumption.

As the more traditional indicators of identity and social position break down, such as birth and occupation, patterns of consumption become important determinants of who we think we are and how we are perceived by others. Identity is no longer defined so much by how or what we *produce* as by what we *consume*. Hence, "our daily lives, and indeed our very identities, are structured and regulated by acts of spending" (Schor, 1998, p. 24). In short, we are what we buy.

Judith Williamson (1978) has described the ways in which advertising, the language of consumerism and the therefore the most effective means of communication in postmodern consumer societies, creates “structures of meaning” by which ads translate “the language of objects to that of people, and vice versa” (p. 12). In doing so, the lop-sided power relations that constitute consumer societies are obscured.

In our society, while the real distinctions between people are created by their role in the *process* of production, as workers, it is the *products* of their own work that are used, in the false categories invoked by advertising, to obscure the real structure of society by replacing class with the distinctions made by the consumption of particular goods. Thus instead of being identified with what they produce, people are made to identify themselves with what they consume. From this arises the false assumption that workers ‘with two cars and a color TV’ are not part of the working class. We are made to feel that we can rise or fall in society through what we are able to buy, and this obscures the actual class basis which still underlies social position (Williamson, 1978, p. 13).

Consuming therefore obscures important aspects of identity. Furthermore, identity as a consumer is only available to those who have the financial means necessary to exercise consumer choice: if you have no money, you are nobody.

But even for those of us who have the financial means to consume, consumer choice presents a very poor option for creating a distinct, integrated, and relatively stable sense of self because of the degree to which practical skill and autonomous aesthetic judgment are diminished in consumer society. The market substitutes mass-produced objects for items that were formerly crafted by hand. We gain convenience, certainly, but, as Christopher Lasch (1984) argues, something important has been lost in the bargain:

The social arrangements that support a system of mass production and mass consumption tend to discourage initiative and self-reliance and to promote dependence, passivity, and a spectatorial state of mind both at work and at play. Consumerism is only the other side of the degradation of work – the elimination of playfulness and craftsmanship from the process of production (p. 27).

The result is that many of us no longer trust our own ability to judge the aesthetics or usefulness of the products we buy. That information is provided by advertising. But what is lost is not only the ability to make and judge the quality of useful objects. It is the absence of control and understanding of the production process that is disappearing. We are surrounded by machines on which we depend, but we do not know how they are produced or even how most of them work and “our growing dependence on technologies no one seems to understand or control has given rise to a widespread feeling of powerlessness and victimization” (Lasch, 1984, p. 44). We thus experience what Jameson calls a “Promethean inferiority complex in front of the machine” (1991, p. 315).

This sense of powerlessness reinforces dependence on the market because, as practical know-how and moral and aesthetic judgment are ceded to the market, the possibility of an “authentic” or “organic” identity goes with them. According to the logic of consumerism, identity itself is just “another commodity offered up for consumption on the open market” (Lasch, 1984, p. 30). (For concrete examples, observe the way people advertise themselves on social networking websites such as *Facebook* and *MySpace*.) Identities are bought and sold. Even identities that ostensibly oppose the consumerism exhibit a certain degree of commodification. Environmentalism, for example, has a certain look to it. To be an environmentalist one seems to require lots of expensive gear:

hiking boots, canvas pants, fleece vests, a mountain bike, camping equipment, a home based on “green” design principles, an energy-efficient refrigerator stocked with organic produce, perhaps even a hybrid gas/electric vehicle. This brief description of the outward appearance, the accoutrements of the “environmentalist,” is undoubtedly a stereotypical media construction—and that is precisely the point. Stereotypes are propagated by the media and they serve as identity templates for consumers in search of something new and different to “try on.”

Consumerism, then, represents both a cause of the problem of identity (but by no means the only one) and its purported solution. Advertising, in particular, perpetuates the notion that consumption can solve the problem of identity. But on that promise, it cannot deliver because advertising sells a future that will never come to pass. According to John Berger (1972), “The [advertising] image which is ephemeral uses only the future tense. With this you *will* become desirable. In these surroundings all your relationships *will* become happy and radiant” (p. 144). By slightly modifying your purchasing habits, you *will* save the planet.

Ads offer a shortcut, through the purchase of consumer goods, to becoming the person you should want to be (as defined by advertising and other media, of course):

[The consumer] is meant to envy herself as she will become if she buys the product. She is meant to imagine herself transformed by the product into an object of envy for others, an envy which will then justify her loving herself. One could put this another way: the publicity image steals her love of herself as she is, and offers it back to her for the price of the product (Berger, 1972, p. 134).

Why do we not recognize the gap between what is promised (a unique and satisfying sense of self) and what is really delivered (a persistent sense of dissatisfaction with one's life)? According to Berger, though ads do not accurately reflect our concrete experiences, they do correspond to our basic dream structure, which they also help to create. They appeal to desires for autonomy or a sense of belonging, which are quite real. Somewhat counterintuitively, the fact that ads create but do not satisfy these desires contributes to advertising's continuing appeal. Ads cannot fully deliver on the promises they make; if they did, advertisers would put themselves and many of the companies they represent out of business. People who are basically satisfied with their lives do not tend spend a lot of money on gadgets of dubious utility and status symbols. They do not try to fill up what Philip Cushman (1990) calls, "the empty self" with products that are alleged to create a "life-style":

Customers buy life-style in a vain attempt to transform their lives because their lives are unsatisfying and (without massive societal change) ultimately unfixable. But without the option of providing a viable solution through the vehicle of structural change, advertising can only offer the illusory exchange of one life for another (p. 605).

Advertising exploits this gap between the lives we lead and the lives we wish for by encouraging us to adjust to existing social and cultural conditions while ignoring the ways in which the broader social and cultural environment engenders the myriad difficulties we are experiencing. Advertising tells us that the personal consumption of material goods can satisfy our nonmaterial, social needs. The message is packaged differently for different audiences, but the story remains the same.

## *The Problem of Identity*

According to Bauman, “The modern problem of identity was how to construct an identity and keep it solid and stable; the postmodern problem of identity is primarily how to avoid fixation and keep the options open” (1995, p. 81). This change in the conceptualization of identity as a problem is attributable, he says, to “the privatization, deregulation, and decentralization of identity problems” (Bauman, 1995, p. 161). Neoliberalism has penetrated so deeply that identity has become, as Bauman calls it, a DIY (do-it-yourself) project:

The postmodern sensations-gathering body is a DIY creation, and its dysfunctions are self-inflicted mishaps. Failures do not add up to the vision of a collective deprivation, and complaints do not congeal into collective vindications; redress, whatever its substance, must be individually sought, obtained and applied (p. 118).

In postmodernity, as we have seen, the ability to do it yourself is exactly what is diminished as a result of increasing dependence on the market. In fact, Bauman wonders “whether the current obsession [with identity] is not just another case of the general rule according to which things are noticed only *ex post facto*; when they vanish, go bust or fall out of joint” (1995, p. 81). *Identity* is a name for something that barely exists and this is what makes the postmodern consumer such an easy target. The state’s abandonment of its charge to hold chaos and uncertainty at bay—indeed the neoliberal embrace of the market’s alleged ability to approximate certainty and safety through its chaotic interactions—has produced a great deal of anxiety among individuals who have been left to their own devices to create meaningful lives in the absence of the old modern

standards like God, Reason, History, and Progress. The market is perfectly suited to exploit this anxiety:

There is an evident selective affinity between the privatization of the uncertainty-handling function and the market catering for private consumption. Once the fear of uncertainty has been reforged into the fear of personal self-forming ineptitude, the offer of the consumer market is irresistible; it needs no coercion and no indoctrination to be taken up; it will be chosen freely (Bauman, 1995, p. 114).

The difficulty here is that if the market appears as the only solution to the problem of identity but is intrinsically incapable of solving the problem, then ours is consumer society based not, as some might say, on instant gratification but on “the *impossibility* of being gratified” (Bauman, 1995, p. 76). This means an ever-increasing demand for ever-increasing economic activity and all that that entails: increasing loss of habitat, more pollution, exhaustion on non-renewable resources, and on and on.

Most contemporary criticism of consumerism focuses on the antagonism of consumer values toward traditional values like family responsibility, hard work, and delayed gratification. Advertising encourages consumers to spend for what they want today at the expense of future generations. Christopher Lasch (1984) regards this criticism as a superficially accurate analysis, but one that fails “to distinguish a moralistic indictment of ‘consumerism’ ... from an analysis that understands mass consumption as part of a larger pattern of dependence, disorientation, and loss of control” (p. 27).

Bauman here describes the apprehensive mood of postmodern consumer society:

[The world] has lost its apparent unity and continuity – when various aspects of life could be tied together into a meaningful whole, and what happened today could be traced back to yesterday’s roots and forward to

tomorrow's consequences. What most of us learn from our experience now is that all forms in the world around us, however solid they may seem, are not immune to change; that things burst into attention without warning and then disappear or sink into oblivion without a trace; that what is all the rage today become the butt of ridicule tomorrow; that what is vaunted and recommended and hammered home today is treated with disdain tomorrow – that is, if still remembered; that, on the whole, time is cut into episodes – each with a beginning and an end but with neither pre-history nor future; that there is little or no logical connection between episodes, even their succession looking suspiciously as though purely coincidental, contingent, or random; and that much as they come from nowhere, episodes go by and away without leaving lasting consequences. In other words, the world we live in (and help to bring about through our life pursuits) appears to be marked by fragmentarity, discontinuity, and inconsequentiality. In such a world it is wise and prudent not to make long-term plans or invest in the distant future (1995, p. 266).

It is therefore not surprising that the episodes of postmodern life are, according to Bauman, are often “played with the *intention* of inconsequentiality” (Bauman, 1995, p. 50).

The kind of consumer behavior that is often dismissed out of hand as personalistic hedonism is therefore better understood as a response to this larger pattern of social and cultural change. In the absence of a strong connection to such a larger community with well-established traditions and structures of meaning, the only apparent means available for creating order and meaning derive from the very consumer society that reproduces individual experiences of anomie and disorder in the first place.

It is difficult to understate the negative consequences of the privatization of identity problems in terms of the diminishment of effective political opposition to the forces of social and ecological devastation.

The dismantling of the collective, institutionalized, and centralized frames of identity-building, whether accomplished by design or default, whether welcomed or bewailed, has had this effect, that – as Peter Wagner recently pointed out – the site from which an intervention on behalf of common interests capable of overriding localized animosities ‘could be undertaken, previously held by the state, is seen as non-existent or empty’. What is needed is a ‘communicative process about what it is that various social groups have in common under current social practices, and to find out whether they have to commonly regulate the impacts of these practices’. This need, however, is seeking anchorage in vain, because of – as Hannah Arendt put it – ‘the emptiness of political space’. The void is filled by neotribal would-be communities, and if it is not filled by them, then it stays wide open, densely populated by the individuals lost in the hubbub of conflicting noises, with a lot of opportunity for violence and little, perhaps none at all, for argument (Bauman, 1995, p. 161).

What has been lost here it seems is the very distinction between public and private. Consumer culture blurs the distinction between self and world, between private and public, and therefore promotes a “culture of narcissism” (Lasch, 1979) Narcissism, Lasch claims, should not be confused or conflated with mere selfishness: “Narcissism signifies a loss of selfhood, not self-assertion. It refers to a self threatened with disintegration by a sense of inner emptiness” (Lasch, 1984, p. 57). He cites a common misreading of the myth of Narcissus to illustrate the distinction:

Narcissus drowns in his own reflection, never understanding that it is a reflection. He mistakes his own image for someone else and seeks to embrace it without regard to his safety. The point of the story is not that Narcissus falls in love with himself, but, since he fails to recognize his own reflection, that he lacks any conception of the difference between himself and his surroundings (1984, p. 184).

Myopic criticism of the personal, moral failings of materialistic consumers, therefore “misses the more insidious effects of a culture of consumption, which dissolves the world of substantial things (far from reinforcing it), replaces it with a shadowy world of images,

and thus obliterates the boundaries between the self and its surroundings” (Lasch, 1984, 52). In other words, there does not appear to be a stable (not to be confused with fixed or eternal), external frame of reference in relation to which one can develop a stable, internal sense of self. “Reality” is now largely defined by the flickering images and transient messages of television, film, and the Internet: the primary advertising outlets of large corporations. This “reality” functions as a mirror; people see themselves in it—sometimes literally, as in the case of “reality television”—and are at least partly defined through it. In fact, “reality television” is a particularly instructive example of the way in which this highly mediated reality produces and reproduces undesirable trends in the culture. These programs, *Survivor* for example, mirror the nastiness, competitiveness, fear, and distrust that many people feel threatened by in their “real” lives. The public world—the world of work, politics, religion, and so on—seems increasingly menacing. So much so in fact, it is now a commonplace to lament the loss of public spaces, and legitimately so, but Lasch (1979) points out that the erosion of private life is a concomitant and equally troubling problem:

Our society, far from fostering private life at the expense of public life, has made deep and lasting friendships, love affairs, and marriages increasingly difficult to achieve. As social life becomes more and more warlike and barbaric, personal relations, which ostensibly provide relief from these conditions, take on the character of combat (p. 30).

A vibrant public realm cannot exist without a well-defined and respected private sphere: each presupposes the other. The reconstitution of meaningful private lives will therefore be necessary to revitalize public life. According to Bauman,

What may help in this effort is the awareness of the intimate connection (not contradiction!) between the autonomous, morally self-sustained and self-governed (therefore often unruly, unwieldy, and awkward) citizen and a fully fledged, self-reflective, and self-correcting political community. They can only come together; neither is thinkable without the other (1995, p. 287).

The alleged contradiction between the individual and society, he says, is an illusion.

There is no *necessary* contradiction between the two.

### *Educational Implications*

Elizabeth Vallance argued over thirty years ago that the “hidden curriculum” of schooling—the social control function of schools—was not always hidden. Issues of social control—“the inculcation of values, political socialization, training in obedience and docility, the perpetuation of traditional class structure” (2003, p. 85)—were openly debated in the nineteenth century because they were considered to be within the proper jurisdiction of schools and such issues were as yet undecided. What is now referred to as the hidden curriculum

went underground only when schooling as a social institution was secure enough to turn for its justification from the control of groups to the welfare of individuals. The hidden curriculum became hidden only when school people were satisfied that it was working (Vallance, 2003, p. 86).

The hidden curriculum is therefore “hidden only in the sense that the function of social control goes unacknowledged in current rationales for public education” (Vallance, 2003, p. 85).

Currently, the dominant narrative themes of postmodernity (the superiority of the Western political-economic model, the neoliberal abdication of responsibility for effective governance, and the inevitability of economic globalization) are not exactly unacknowledged or unnoticeable in the rhetoric of education, but they are largely unquestioned. Many educational goals remain contentious, but the claim that schooling in the United States should be predominantly concerned with promoting competitiveness in the new global economy is widely regarded as sound and sensible. As David Purpel has described,

Our most powerful and influential leaders call upon education to meet the demands of a cruel economy and a meritocratic culture. The great bulk of formal educational policies and practices reflect and facilitate structured inequality, rationed dignity, rationalized privilege, and self-righteous hierarchy. Moreover, much of the rhetorical justification for this violation of our commitment to a vision of liberty and justice for all comes from the ranks of the school and the academy. Perhaps most disturbing of all is the realization that the movers and shakers in government, business, communications, advertising, banking, et. al., that is to say those institutions that shape our lives in critical ways, are people who almost surely have had what we have come to accept as a “good education” (2003, pp. 251-252).

It is disconcerting to realize that a “good education” is among the primary means by which the values of a culture that “emphasizes achievement, competition, conquest, and domination at the expense of compassion, caring, community, and dignity” are reproduced (Purpel, 2003, p. 251). It follows that a different sort of education will be necessary to turn schools away from being a farm system for socially and environmentally destructive corporations and to transform them into integral elements of an ecologically sustainable society. All that is needed, it seems, is an articulation of an

environmental ethics suitable to the task before us and the development and implementation of a curriculum informed by such an ethics. Ultimately, the answer is simple: “The kind of transformation that is required is one that energizes us to pursue personal meaning, social justice, world peace, and ecological harmony” (Purpel, 2003, p. 258). But assuming that the details of such a curriculum of transformation could be worked in way that would satisfy most interested parties (and that is a big assumption), it is still unlikely that such a transformation could be initiated within the schools:

The difficulty is that those who favor this kind of transformation do not have the political clout to direct the energies of our social and cultural institutions and hence it is quite naive to expect that the public schools can be a primary source of such a transformation (Purpel, 2003, p. 258).

Purpel reminds us that while there is a tradition within the profession of education calling for schools to help bring about constructive social change, that tradition is a minor one. Much of the discourse surrounding public education is dominated by social conservatives and liberal technocrats (Bowers, 1995). Purpel also notes that schools are beholden to powerful interests; hence, the governance structures of public schools simply do not allow for much in the way of experimentation and change—not from the bottom up, anyway. Public schools reflect the interests of the powerful. Therefore, the larger social and cultural context must first change before we can expect much change in public school practice. It should not be left to the public schools alone to “solve” all the world’s problems—though they have historically been charged with just that level of responsibility and scapegoated when they have failed to deliver.

But I agree with David Purpel that

if and when public school educators commit themselves to the task of participating in the continuing responsibility to create a just and loving world, the nature of their work would change dramatically and profoundly even within the context of severe restrictions (2003, p. 262).

With the current obsession with objective, quantifiable standards and the de-skilling of the profession, things have gotten so bad that one could put a cautiously positive spin on the situation by saying that there is scarcely anywhere to go from here but upward. But the question remains regarding just how we might create a more just, loving, and enduring world for “no guarantee can be given that such a community will indeed be build, and there are no foolproof methods to make sure that it will. In fact, the only assurance is the relentless efforts of the builders themselves” (Bauman, 1995, p. 287). There is no formula, no blueprint, no standard course of study to which we can appeal, no standardized assessment instruments to measure our “progress” toward our goals.

The construction of ecologically sustainable communities may prove impossible, but paradoxically, the seeming impossibility of the task before is a source of hope. As Bauman puts it,

Hope is always the hope of being fulfilled, but what keeps the hope alive and so keeps the being open and on the move is precisely its unfulfilment. One may say that the paradox of hope (and the paradox of possibility founded in hope) is that it may pursue its destination solely through betraying its nature; the most exuberant of energies expends itself in the urge towards rest. Possibility uses up its openness in search of closure. Its image of the better being is its own impoverishment (1995, p. 69).

The situation seems impossible, yet hope emerges in spite of, and because of this.

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