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Author(s): Fredric Jameson

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PERIODIZING THE 60s

FREDRIC JAMESON

Nostalgic commemoration of the glories of the 60s or abject public confession of the decade's many failures and missed opportunities are two errors which cannot be avoided by some middle path that threads its way in between. The following sketch starts from the position that History is necessity, that the 60s had to happen the way it did, and that its opportunities and failures were inextricably intertwined, marked by the objective constraints and openings of a determinate historical situation, of which I thus wish to offer a tentative and provisional model.

To speak of the "situation" of the 60s, however, is necessarily to think in terms of historical periods and to work with models of historical periodization which are at the present moment theoretically unfashionable, to say the least. Leave aside the existential fact that the veterans of the decade, who have seen so many things change dramatically from year to year, think more historically than their predecessors; the classification by generations has become as meaningful for us as it was for the Russians of the late 19th century, who sorted character types out with reference to specific decades. And intellectuals of a certain age now find it normal to justify their current positions by way of an historical narrative ("then the limits of Althusserianism began to be evident," etc.). Now, this is not the place for a theoretical justification of periodization in the writing of history, but to those who think that cultural periodization implies some massive kinship and homogeneity or identity within a given period, it may quickly be replied that it is surely only against a certain conception of what is historically dominant or hegemonic that the full value of the exceptional—what Raymond Williams calls the "residual" or "emergent"—can be assessed. Here, in any case, the "period" in question is understood not as some omnipresent and uniform shared style or way of thinking and acting, but rather as the sharing of a common objective situation, to which a whole range of varied responses and creative innovations is then possible, but always within that situation's structural limits.

Yet a whole range of rather different theoretical objections will also

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bear on the selectiveness of such a historical narrative: if the critique of periodization questions the possibilities of diachrony, these involve the problems of synchrony and in particular of the relationship to be established between the various “levels” of historical change singled out for attention. Indeed, the present narrative will claim to say something meaningful about the 60s by way of brief sketches of but four of those levels: the history of philosophy, revolutionary political theory and practice, cultural production, and economic cycles (and this in a context limited essentially to the United States, France and the third world.) Such selectiveness seems not merely to give equal historical weight to base and superstructure indifferently, but also to raise the specter of a practice of homologies—the kind of analogical parallelism in which the poetic production of Wallace Stevens is somehow “the same” as the political practice of Che Guevara—which have been thought abusive at least as far back as Spengler.

There is of course no reason why specialized and elite phenomena, such as the writing of poetry, cannot reveal historical trends and tendencies as vividly as “real life”—or perhaps even more visibly, in their isolation and semiautonomy which approximates a laboratory situation. In any case, there is a fundamental difference between the present narrative and those of an older organic history which sought “expressive” unification through analogies and homologies between widely distinct levels of social life. Where the latter proposed identities between the forms on such various levels, what will be argued here is a series of significant homologies between the *breaks* in those forms and their development. What is at stake then is not some proposition about the organic unity of the 60s on all its levels, but rather a hypothesis about the rhythm and dynamics of the fundamental situation in which those very different levels develop according to their own internal laws.

At that point, what looked like a weakness in this historical or narrative procedure turns out to be an unexpected strength, particularly in allowing for some sort of “verification” of the separate strands of the narrative. One sometimes feels—especially in the area of culture and cultural histories and critiques—that an infinite number of narrative interpretations of history are possible, limited only by the ingenuity of the practitioners whose claim to originality depends on the novelty of the new theory of history they bring to market. It is more reassuring, then, to find the regularities hypothetically proposed for one field of activity (e.g., the cognitive, or the aesthetic, or the revolutionary) dramatically and surprisingly “confirmed” by the reappearance of just such regularities in a widely different and seemingly unrelated field, as will be the case with the economic in the present context.

At any rate, it will already have become clear that nothing like a his-

tory of the 60s in the traditional, narrative sense will be offered here. But historical representation is just as surely in crisis as its distant cousin, the linear novel, and for much the same reasons. The most intelligent “solution” to such a crisis does not consist in abandoning historiography altogether, as an impossible aim and an ideological category all at once, but rather—as in the modernist aesthetic itself—in reorganizing its traditional procedures on a different level. Althusser’s proposal seems the wisest in this situation: as old-fashioned narrative or “realistic” historiography became problematic, the historian should reformulate her vocation—not any longer to produce some vivid representation of History “as it really happened,” but rather to produce the *concept* of history. Such will at least be the gamble of the following pages.

1. THIRD WORLD BEGINNINGS

It does not seem particularly controversial to mark the beginnings of what will come to be called the 60s in the third world with the great movement of decolonization in British and French Africa. It can be argued that the most characteristic expressions of a properly first world 60s are all later than this, whether they are understood in countercultural terms—drugs and rock—or in the political terms of a student new left and a mass antiwar movement. Indeed, politically, a first world 60s owed much to third-worldism in terms of politicocultural models, as in a symbolic Maoism, and, moreover, found its mission in resistance to wars aimed precisely at stemming the new revolutionary forces in the third world. (Elsewhere in this work, Belden Fields suggests that the two first world nations in which the most powerful student mass movements emerged—the United States and France—became privileged political spaces precisely *because* these were the two countries involved in colonial wars, although the French new left appears after the resolution of the Algerian conflict.) The one significant exception to all this is in many ways the most important first world political movement of all—the new black politics and the civil rights movement, which must be dated, not from the Supreme Court decision of 1954, but rather from the first sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina, in February of 1960. Yet it might be argued that this was also a movement of decolonization, and in any case the constant exchange and mutual influences between the American black movements and the various African and Caribbean ones are continuous and incalculable throughout this period.

The independence of Ghana (1957), the agony of the Congo (Lumumba was murdered in January 1961), the independence of France’s sub-Saharan colonies following the Gaullist referendum of 1959, finally the Algerian Revolution (which might plausibly mark our schema here with its internal high point, the Battle of Algiers, in January–March 1957, as with its diplomatic resolution in 1962)—all of these signal the convulsive birth of what will come in time to be known as the 60s:

Not so very long ago, the earth numbered two thousand million inhabitants: five hundred million *men* and one thousand five hundred million *natives*. The former had the Word; the others merely had use of it. . . .

Sartre, "Preface" to *The Wretched of the Earth*

The 60s was, then, the period in which all these "natives" became human beings, and this internally as well as externally: those inner colonized of the first world — "minorities," marginals, and women — fully as much as its external subjects and official "natives." The process can and has been described in a number of ways, each one of which implies a certain "vision of History" and a certain uniquely thematized reading of the 60s proper: it can be seen as a decisive and global chapter in Croce's conception of history as the history of human freedom; as a more classically Hegelian process of the coming to self-consciousness of subject peoples; as some post-Lukácsian or more Marcusean, new left conception of the emergence of new "subjects of history" of a nonclass type (blacks, students, third world peoples); or as some poststructuralist, Foucaultian notion (significantly anticipated by Sartre in the passage just quoted) of the conquest of the right to speak in a new collective voice, never before heard on the world stage—and of the concomitant dismissal of the intermediaries (liberals, first world intellectuals) who hitherto claimed to talk in your name; not forgetting the more properly political rhetoric of self-determination or independence, or the more psychological and cultural rhetoric of new collective "identities."

It is, however, important to situate the emergence of these new collective "identities" or "subjects of history" in the historical situation which made that emergence possible, and in particular to relate the emergence of these new social and political categories (the colonized, race, marginality, gender and the like) to something like a crisis in the more universal category that had hitherto seemed to subsume all the varieties of social resistance, namely the classical conception of social class. This is to be understood, however, not in some intellectual but rather in an institutional sense: it would be idealistic to suppose that deficiencies in the abstract idea of social class, and in particular in the Marxian conception of class struggle, can have been responsible for the emergence of what seem to be new non-class forces. What can be noted, rather, is a crisis in the institutions through which a real class politics had however imperfectly been able to express itself. In this respect, the merger of the AFL and the CIO in 1955 can be seen as a fundamental "condition of possibility" for the unleashing of the new social and political dynamics of the 60s: that merger, a triumph of McCarthyism, secured the expulsion of the Communists from the American labor movement, consolidated the new antipolitical "social contract" between American business and the American labor unions, and created a situation in which the privileges of a white male labor force take precedence over the demands of black and women workers and other minorities. These last have therefore no place in the classical institutions of an

older working-class politics. They will thus be “liberated” from social class, in the charged and ambivalent sense which Marxism gives to that word (in the context of enclosure, for instance): they are separated from the older institutions and thus “released” to find new modes of social and political expression.

The virtual disappearance of the American Communist Party as a small but significant political force in American society in 1956 suggests another dimension to this general situation: the crisis of the American party is “overdetermined” by its repression under McCarthyism and by the “revolution” in the Soviet bloc unleashed by Khrushchev’s deStalinization campaign, which will have analogous but distinct and specific equivalents for the European Communist Parties. In France, in particular, after the brief moment of a Communist “humanism,” developed essentially by philosophers in the eastern countries, and with the fall of Khrushchev himself and the definitive failure of his various experiments in 1964, an unparalleled situation emerges in which, virtually for the first time since the Congress of Tours in 1919, it becomes possible for radical intellectuals to conceive of revolutionary work outside and independent of the French Communist Party. (The older attitudes—“we know all about it, we don’t like it much, but nothing is to be done politically without the CP”—are classically expressed in Sartre’s own political journalism, in particular in *Les Communistes et la paix*.) Now Trotskyism gets a new lease on life, and the new Maoist forms, followed by a whole explosion of extraparliamentary formations of all ideological complexions, the so-called “groupuscules,” offer the promise of a new kind of politics equally “liberated” from the traditional class categories.

Two further key events need to be noted here before we go on. For many of us, indeed, the crucial detonator—a new Year I, the palpable demonstration that revolution was not merely a historical concept and a museum piece but real and achievable—was furnished by a people whose imperialist subjugation had developed among North Americans a sympathy and a sense of fraternity we could never have for other third world peoples in their struggle, except in an abstract and intellectual way. Yet by January 1, 1959, the Cuban Revolution remained symbolically ambiguous. It could be read as a third world revolution of a different type from either the classical Leninist one or the Maoist experience, for it had a revolutionary strategy entirely its own, the *foco* theory, more about which later. This great event also announces the impending 60s as a period of unexpected political innovation rather than as the confirmation of older social and conceptual schemes.

Meanwhile, personal testimony seems to make it clear that for many white American students—in particular for many of those later active in the new left—the assassination of President Kennedy played a significant role in delegitimizing the state itself and in discrediting the parliamentary process, seeming to mark the decisive end of the well-known passing of the torch to

a younger generation of leadership, as well as the dramatic defeat of some new spirit of public or civic idealism. As for the reality of the appearance, it does not much matter that, in hindsight, such a view of the Kennedy presidency may be wholly erroneous, considering his conservatism and anti-communism, the gruesome gamble of the “missile crisis,” and his responsibility for the American engagement in Vietnam itself. More significantly, the legacy of the Kennedy regime to the development of a 60s politics may well have been the rhetoric of youth and of the “generation gap” which he exploited, but which outlived him and dialectically offered itself as an expressive form through which the political discontent of American students and young people could articulate itself.

Such were some of the preconditions or “conditions of possibility”—both in traditional working class political institutions and in the arena of the legitimation of state power—for the “new” social forces of the 60s to develop as they did. Returning to these new forces, there is a way in which their ultimate fate marks the close of the 60s as well: the end of “third-worldism” in the U.S. and Europe largely predates the Chinese Thermidor, and coincides with the awareness of increasing institutional corruption in many of the newly independent states of Africa and the almost complete militarization of the Latin American regimes after the Chilean coup of 1973 (the later revolutionary triumphs in the former Portuguese colonies are henceforth felt to be “Marxist” rather than “third-worldist,” while Vietnam vanishes from American consciousness as completely after the ultimate American withdrawal as did Algeria from French consciousness after the Evian accords of 1963). In the first world of the late 60s, there is certainly a return to a more internal politics, as the antiwar movement in the United States and May 68 in France testify. Yet the American movement remains organically linked to its third world “occasion” in the Vietnam War itself, as well as to the Maoist inspiration of the Progressive Labor-type groups which emerge from SDS, such that the movement as a whole will lose its momentum as the war winds down and the draft ceases. In France, the “common program” of the left (1972)—in which the current Socialist government finds its origins—marks a new turn towards Gramscian models and a new kind of “Eurocommunist” spirit which owes very little to third world antecedents of any kind. Finally, the black movement in the U.S. enters into a crisis at much the same time, as its dominant ideology—cultural nationalism, an ideology profoundly linked to third world models—is exhausted. The women’s movement also owed something to this kind of third world inspiration, but it too, in the period 1972–1974, will know an increasing articulation into relatively distinct ideological positions (“bourgeois” feminism, lesbian separatism, socialist feminism).

For reasons enumerated above, and others, it seems plausible to mark the end of the 60s around 1972–74; the problem of this general “break” will be returned to at the end of this sketch. For the moment we must

complete our characterization of the overall dynamic of third world history during this period, particularly if it is granted that this dynamic or “narrative line” entertains some privileged relationship of influence on the unfolding of a first world 60s (either through direct intervention—wars of national liberation—or through the prestige of exotic political models—most obviously, the Maoist one—or finally, owing to some global dynamic which both worlds share and respond to in relatively distinct ways).

This is of course the moment to observe that the “liberation” of new forces in the third world is as ambiguous as this term frequently tends to be (freedom as separation from older systems); to put it more sharply, it is the moment to recall the obvious, that decolonization historically went hand in hand with neo-colonialism, and that the graceful, grudging or violent end of an old-fashioned imperialism certainly meant the end of one kind of domination but evidently also the invention and construction of a new kind—symbolically, something like the replacement of the British Empire by the International Monetary Fund. This is, incidentally, why the currently fashionable rhetoric of power and domination (Foucault is the most influential of these rhetoricians, but the basic displacement from the economic to the political is already made in Max Weber) is ultimately unsatisfactory: it is of course politically important to “contest” the various forms of power and domination, but the latter cannot be understood unless their functional relationships to economic exploitation are articulated—that is, until the political is once again subsumed beneath the economic. (On the other hand—particularly in the historicizing perspective of the present essay—it will obviously be a significant historical and social *symptom* that, in the mid-60s, people felt it necessary to express their sense of the situation and their projected praxis in a reified political language of power, domination, authority and antiauthoritarianism, and so forth: here, second and third world developments—with their conceptions of a “primacy of the political” under socialism—offer an interesting and curious cross-lighting.) Meanwhile, something similar can be said of the conceptions of collective identity and in particular of the poststructuralist slogan of the conquest of speech, of the right to speak in your own voice, for yourself: but to articulate new demands, in your own voice, is not necessarily to satisfy them, and to speak is not necessarily to achieve a Hegelian recognition from the Other (or at least then only in the more somber and baleful sense that the Other now has to take you into consideration in a new way and to invent new methods for dealing with that new presence you have achieved). In hindsight, the “materialist kernel” of this characteristic rhetoric or ideological vision of the 60s may be found in a more fundamental reflection on the nature of cultural revolution itself (now independent of its local and now historical Chinese manifestation).

The paradoxical, or dialectical, combination of decolonization and neocolonialism can perhaps best be grasped in economic terms by a re-

flection on the nature of another process whose beginning coincides with the general beginnings we have suggested for this period as a whole. This is a process generally described in the neutral but obviously ideological language of a technological “revolution” in agriculture: the so-called Green Revolution, with its new applications of chemical procedures to fertilization, its intensified strategies of mechanization, and its predictable celebration of progress and wonder-working technology, supposedly destined to free the world from hunger (the Green Revolution, incidentally, finds its second world equivalent in Khrushchev’s disastrous “virgin lands” experiment). But these are far from neutral achievements, and is their export — essentially pioneered by the Kennedys — a benevolent and altruistic activity. In the 19th and early 20th century, capitalist penetration of the third world did not necessarily mean a capitalist transformation of the latter’s traditional modes of production. Rather, they were for most part left intact, ‘merely’ exploited by a more political and military structure. The very enclave nature of these older agricultural modes—in combination with the violence of the occupier and that other violence, the introduction of money—established a sort of tributary relation that was beneficial to the imperialist metropolis for a considerable period of time. The Green Revolution carries this penetration and expansion of the “logic of capital” into a new stage.

The older village structures and precapitalist forms of agriculture are now systematically destroyed, to be replaced by an industrial agriculture whose effects are fully as disastrous as, and analogous to, the moment of enclosure in the emergence of capital in what was to become the first world. The “organic” social relations of village societies are now shattered, an enormous landless preproletariat “produced,” which migrates to the urban areas (as the tremendous growth of Mexico City can testify), while new, more proletarian, wage-working forms of agricultural labor replace the older collective or traditional kinds. Such ambiguous “liberation” needs to be described with all the dialectical ambivalence with which Marx and Engels celebrate the dynamism of capital itself in the *Manifesto* or the historical progress achieved by the British occupation of India.

The conception of the third world 60s as a moment in which all over the world chains and shackles of a classical imperialist kind were thrown off in a stirring wave of “wars of national liberation,” is an altogether mythical simplification. Such resistance is generated as much by the new penetration of the Green Revolution as it is by the ultimate impatience with the older imperialist structures, the latter itself overdetermined by the historical spectacle of the supremacy of another former third world entity, namely Japan, in its sweeping initial victories over the old imperial powers in World War II. Eric Wolf’s indispensable *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* underscores the relationship between possibilities of resistance, the development of a revolutionary ethos, and a certain constitutive distance

from the more absolutely demoralizing social and economic logic of capital.

The final ambiguity with which we leave this topic is the following: the 60s, often imagined as a period in which capital and first world power are in retreat all over the globe, can just as easily be conceptualized as a period in which capital is in full dynamic and innovative expansion, equipped with a whole armature of fresh production techniques and new “means of production.” It now remains to be seen whether this ambiguity, and the far greater specificity of the agricultural developments in the third world, have any equivalent in the dynamics with which the 60s unfold in the advanced countries themselves.

2. THE POLITICS OF OTHERNESS

If the history of philosophy is understood not as some sequence of timeless yet somehow finite positions in the eternal, but rather as the history of attempts to conceptualize a historical and social substance itself in constant dialectical transformation, whose aporias and contradictions mark all of those successive philosophies as determinate failures, yet failures from which we can read off something of the nature of the object on which they themselves came to grief—then it does not seem quite so far-fetched to scan the more limited trajectory of that now highly specialized discipline for symptoms of the deeper rhythms of the “real” or “concrete” 60s itself.

As far as the history of philosophy during that period is concerned, one of the more influential versions of its story is told as follows: the gradual supercession of a hegemonic Sartrean existentialism (with its essentially phenomenological perspectives) by what is often loosely called “structuralism,” namely, by a variety of new theoretical attempts which share in common at least a single fundamental “experience”—the discovery of the primacy of Language or the Symbolic (an area in which phenomenology and Sartrean existentialism remain relatively conventional or traditional). The moment of high structuralism—whose most influential monuments are seemingly not philosophical at all, but can be characterized, alongside the new linguistics itself, as linguistic transformations of anthropology and psychoanalysis by Claude Levi-Strauss and Jacques Lacan respectively—is however an inherently unstable one which has the vocation of becoming a new type of universal mathesis, under pain of vanishing as one more intellectual fad. The breakdown products of that moment of high structuralism can then be seen on the one hand as the recution to a kind of scientism, to sheer method and analytical technique (in *semiotics*); and on the other, as the transformation of structuralist approaches into active ideologies in which ethical, political and historical consequences are drawn from the hitherto more epistemological “structuralist” positions; this last is of course the moment of what is now generally known as *post-structuralism*, associated with familiar names like

those of Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida and so forth. That the paradigm, although obviously French in its references, is not merely local can be judged from an analogous mutation of the classical Frankfurt School via problems of communication, in the work of Habermas; or by the current revival of pragmatism in the work of Richard Rorty, which has a home-grown American “post-structuralist” feeling to it (Peirce after all having largely preceded and outclassed Saussure).

The crisis of the philosophical institution and the gradual extinction of the philosopher’s classic political vocation, of which Sartre was for our time the supreme embodiment, can in some ways be said to be about the so-called death of the subject: the individual ego or personality, but also the supreme philosophical Subject, the cogito but also the *auteur* of the great philosophical *system*. It is certainly possible to see Sartre as one of the last great systembuilders of traditional philosophy (but then at least one dimension of classical existentialism must also be seen as an ideology or a metaphysic: that of the heroic pathos of existential choice and freedom in the void, and that of the “absurd,” more particularly in Camus). Some of us also came to *Marxism* through dialectical elements in the early Sartre (he himself then turning to follow up this avenue in his own later, more Marxian work, such as the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* [1960]). But on balance that component of his work which underwent the richest practical elaboration at other people’s hands as well as his own was his theory of interpersonal relations, his stunning rewrite of Hegel’s Master/Slave chapter, his conception of the Look as the most concrete mode in which I relate to other subjects and struggle with them, the dimension of my alienation in my “being-for-other-people,” in which each of us vainly attempts, by looking at the other, to turn the tables and transform the baleful alienating gaze of the Other into an object for my equally alienating gaze. Sartre will go on, in the *Critique*, to try to erect a more positive and political theory of group dynamics on this seemingly sterile territory: the struggle between two people now becoming dialectically transformed into the struggle between groups themselves. The *Critique* was however an anticipatory work, whose import and significance would not finally be recognized until May 68 and beyond, whose rich consequences indeed have not even fully been drawn to this day. Suffice it to say, in the present context, that the *Critique* fails to reach its appointed terminus, and to complete the projected highway that was to have led from the individual subject of existential experience all the way to fully constituted social classes. It breaks down at the point of the constitution of small groups, and is ultimately usable principally for ideologies of small guerrilla bands (in a later moment of the 60s) and of microgroups (at the period’s end): the significance of this trajectory will soon be clear.

However, at the dawn of the 60s, the Sartrean paradigm of the Look and the struggle for recognition between individual subjects will also be

appropriated dramatically for a very different model of political struggle, in Frantz Fanon's enormously influential vision (*The Wretched of the Earth*, 1961) of the struggle between Colonizer and Colonized, where the objectifying reversal of the Look is apocalyptically rewritten as the act of redemptive violence of Slave against Master, the moment in which, in fear and the anxiety of death, the hierarchical positions of Self and Other, Center and Margin, are forcibly reversed, and in which the subservient consciousness of the Colonized achieves collective identity and self-affirmation in the face of colonizers in abject flight.

What is at once significant is the way in which what had been a technical philosophical subject (the "problem" of solipsism, the nature of relationships between individual subjects or "cogitos") has fallen into the world and become an explosive and scandalous political ideology: a piece of the old-fashioned technical philosophical system of high existentialism breaking off and migrating outside philosophy departments altogether, into a more frightening landscape of praxis and terror. Fanon's great myth could be read at the time, by those it appalled equally well as by those it energized, as an irresponsible call to mindless violence: in retrospect, and in the light of Fanon's other, clinical work (he was a psychiatrist working with victims of colonization and of the torture and terror of the Algerian war), it can more appropriately be read as a significant contribution to a whole theory of cultural revolution as the collective reeducation (or even collective psychoanalysis) of oppressed peoples or unrevolutionary working classes. Cultural revolution as a strategy for breaking the immemorial habits of subalternity and obedience which have become internalized as a kind of second nature in all the laborious and exploited classes in human history—such is the vaster problematic to which, today, Gramsci and Wilhelm Reich, Fanon and Rudolf Bahro, can be seen as contributing as richly as the more official practices of Maoism.

3. DIGRESSION ON MAOISM

But with this new and fateful reference, an awkward but unavoidable parenthetical digression is in order: Maoism, richest of all the great new ideologies of the 60s, will be a shadowy but central presence throughout this essay, yet owing to its very polyvalence it cannot be neatly inserted at any point nor exhaustively confronted on its own. One understands, of course, why left militants here and abroad, fatigued by Maoist dogmatism, must have heaved a collective sigh of relief when the Chinese turn consigned "Maoism" itself to the ashcan of history. Theories, however, are often liberated on their own terms when they are thus radically disjoined from the practical interests of state power. Meanwhile, as I have suggested above, the symbolic terrain of the present debate is fully as much chosen and dictated by the right as by left survivors: and the current propagandist campaign,

everywhere in the world, to Stalinize and discredit Maoism and the experience of the Chinese cultural revolution — now rewritten as yet another Gulag to the East—all of this, make no mistake about it, is part and parcel of the larger attempt to trash the 60s generally: it would not be prudent to abandon rapidly and without thoughtful reconsideration any of this terrain to the “other side.”

As for the more ludicrous features of Western third-worldism generally—a kind of modern exotic or orientalist version of Marx’s revolutionaries of 1848, who “anxiously conjure up the spirits of (the Great Revolution of 1789) to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes”—these are now widely understood in a more cynical light, as in Régis Debray’s remark: “In France, the Columbuses of political modernity thought that following Godard’s *La Chinoise* they were discovering China in Paris, when in fact they were landing in California.”

Most paradoxical and fascinating of all, however, is the unexpected and unpredictable sequel to the Sino-Soviet split itself: the new Chinese rhetoric, intent on castigating the Soviet bureaucracy as revisionistic and “bourgeois,” will have the curious effect of evacuating the class content of these slogans. There is then an inevitable terminological slippage and displacement: the new binary opposite to the term “bourgeois” will no longer be “proletarian” but rather “revolutionary,” and the new qualifications for political judgements of this kind are no longer made in terms of class or party affiliation but rather in terms of personal life—your relationship to special privileges, to middle-class luxuries and dachas and managerial incomes and other perks—Mao Tse-tung’s own monthly “salary,” we are told, was something in the neighborhood of a hundred American dollars. As with all forms of anticommunism, this rhetoric can of course be appropriated by the anti-Marxist thematics of “bureaucracy,” of the end of ideology and social class, etc. But it is important to understand how for western militants what began to emerge from this at first merely tactical and rhetorical shift was a whole new political space, a space which will come to be articulated by the slogan, “the personal is the political,” and into which—in one of the most stunning and unforeseeable of historical turns—the women’s movement will triumphantly move at the end of the decade, building a Yenan of a new and unpredictable kind which is still impregnable at the present moment.

4. THE WITHERING AWAY OF PHILOSOPHY

The limit as well as the strength of the stark Fanonian model of struggle was set by the relative simplicity of the colonial situation; this can be shown in two ways, first of all in the sequel to the “war of national independence.” For with the Slave’s symbolic and literal victory over the (now former) Master, the “politics of otherness” touches its limit as well; the rhetoric of a

conquest of collective identity has then nowhere else to go but into a kind of secessionary logic of which black cultural nationalism and (later on) lesbian separatism are the most dramatic examples (the dialectic of cultural and linguistic independence in Quebec province would be yet another instructive one). But this result is also contradictory, insofar as the newly constituted group (we here pick up Sartre's account in the *Critique*) needs outside enemies to survive as a group, to produce and perpetuate a sense of collective cohesion and identity. Ultimately, in the absence of the clear-cut Manichaeic situation of the older imperialist period, this hard-won collective self-definition of a first moment of resistance will break up into the smaller and more comfortable unities of face-to-face microgroups (of which the official political sects are only one example).

The gradual waning of the Fanonian model can also be described from the perspective of what will shortly become its "structuralist" critique. On this view, it is still a model based on a conception of individual subjects, albeit mythical and collective ones. It is thereby both anthropomorphic and transparent, in the sense in which nothing intervenes between the great collective adversaries, between the Master and the Slave, between the Colonizer and the Colonized. Yet even in Hegel, there was always a third term, namely matter itself, the raw materials on which the slave is made to labor and to work out a long and anonymous salvation through the rest of history. The "third term" of the 60s is however rather different from this. It was as though the protracted experiences of the earlier part of the decade gradually burned into the minds of the participants a specific lesson. In the United States, it was the experience of the interminable Vietnam War itself; in France, it was the astonishing and apparently invincible technocratic dynamism, and the seemingly unshakeable inertia and resistance to deStalinization of the French Communist Party; and everywhere, it was the tremendous expansion of the media apparatus and the culture of consumerism. This lesson might well be described as the discovery, within a hitherto antagonistic and "transparent" political praxis, of the opacity of the Institution itself as the radically transindividual, with its own inner dynamic and laws, which are not those of individual human action or intention, something which Sartre theorized in the *Critique* as the "practico-inert," and which will take the definitive form, in competing "structuralism," of "structure" or "synchronic system," a realm of impersonal logic in terms of which human consciousness is itself little more than an "effect of structure."

On this reading, then, the new philosophical turn will be interpreted less in the idealistic perspective of some discovery of a new scientific truth (the Symbolic) than as the symptom of an essentially protopolitical and social experience, the shock of some new, hard, unconceptualized, resistant object which the older conceptuality cannot process and which thus gradually generates a whole new problematic. The conceptualization of this

new problematic in the coding of linguistics or information theory may then be attributed to the unexpected explosion of information and messages of all kinds in the media revolution, about which more in the following section. Suffice it to remark at this point that there is some historical irony in the way in which this moment, essentially the Third Technological Revolution in the West (electronics, nuclear energy)—in other words, a whole new step in the conquest of nature by human praxis—is philosophically greeted and conceptually expressed in a kind of thought officially designated as “antihumanist” and concerned to think what transcends or escapes human consciousness and intention. Similarly, the Second Technological Revolution of the late 19th century—an unparalleled quantum leap in human power over nature—was the moment of expression of a whole range of nihilisms associated with “modernity” or with high modernism in culture.

In the present context, the Althusserian experiment of the mid- to late 60s is the most revealing and suggestive of the various “structuralisms,” since it was the only one to be explicitly political and indeed to have very wide-ranging political effects in Europe and Latin America. The story of Althusserianism can be told only schematically here: its initial thrust is twofold, against the unliquided Stalinist tradition (strategically designated by the code words “Hegel” and “expressive causality” in Althusser’s own texts), and against the “transparency” of the eastern attempts to reinvent a Marxist humanism on the basis of the theory of alienation in Marx’s early manuscripts. That Althusserianism is essentially a meditation on the “institutional” and on the opacity of the “practico-inert” may be judged by the three successive formulations of this object by Althusser himself in the course of the 60s: that of a “structure in dominance” or *structure à dominante* (in *For Marx*), that of “structural causality” (in *Reading Capital*), and that of “ideological state apparatuses” (in the essay of that name). What is less often remembered, but what should be perfectly obvious from any re-reading of *For Marx*, is the origin of this new problematic in Maoism itself, and particularly in Mao Tse-tung’s essay “On Contradiction,” in which the notion of a complex, already-given *overdetermined* conjuncture of various kinds of antagonistic and non-antagonistic contradictions is mapped out.

The modification which will emerge from Althusser’s “process of theoretical production” as it works over its Maoist “raw materials” can be conveyed by the problem and slogan of the “semi-autonomy” of the levels of social life (a problem already invoked in our opening pages). This formula will involve a struggle on two fronts: on the one hand against the monism or “expressive causality” of Stalinism, in which the “levels” are identified, conflated, and brutally collapsed into one another (changes in economic production will be “the same” as political and cultural changes), and, on the other, against bourgeois avant-garde philosophy, which finds just such a denunciation of organic concepts of totality most congenial, but

draws from it the consequence of a post- or anti-Marxist celebration of Nietzschean heterogeneity. The notion of a semi-autonomy of the various levels or instances, most notably of the political instance and of the dynamics of state power, will have enormous resonance (outstandingly in the work of Nicos Poulantzas), since it seems to reflect, and to offer a way of theorizing, the enormous growth of the state bureaucracy since the war, the “relative autonomy” of the state apparatus from any classical and reductive functionality in the service of big business, as well as the very active new terrain of political struggle presented by government or public sector workers. The theory could also be appealed to to justify a semi-autonomy in the cultural sphere, as well, and especially a semi-autonomous cultural politics, of a variety which ranges from Godard’s films and *situationnisme* to the “festival” of May 68 and the Yippie movement here (not excluding, perhaps, even those forms of so-called “terrorism” which aimed, not at any classical seizure of state power, but rather at essentially pedagogical or informational demonstrations, e.g., “forcing the state to reveal its fundamentally fascist nature”).

Nonetheless, the attempt to open up a semi-autonomy of the levels with one hand, while holding them all together in the ultimate unity of some “structural totality” (with its still classical Marxian ultimately determining instance of the economic), tends under its own momentum, in the centrifugal force of the critique of totality it had itself elaborated, to self-destruct (most dramatically so in the trajectory of Hindess and Hirst). What will emerge is not merely a heterogeneity of *levels* — henceforth, semi-autonomy will relax into autonomy *tout court*, and it will be conceivable that in the decentered and “schizophrenic” world of late capitalism the various instances may really have no organic relationship to one another at all — but, more importantly, the idea will emerge that the struggles appropriate to each of these levels (purely political struggles, purely economic struggles, purely cultural struggles, purely “theoretical” struggles) may have no necessary relationship to one another either. With this ultimate “meltdown” of the Althusserian apparatus, we are in the (still contemporary) world of microgroups and micropolitics — variously theorized as local or molecular politics, but clearly characterized, however different the various conceptions are, as a repudiation of old-fashioned class and party politics of a “totalizing” kind, and most obviously epitomized by the challenge of the women’s movement whose unique new strategies and concerns cut across (or in some cases undermine and discredit altogether) many classical inherited forms of “public” or “official” political action, including the electoral kind. The repudiation of “theory” itself as an essentially masculine enterprise of “power through knowledge” in French feminism (see in particular the work of Luce Irigaray) may be taken as the final moment in this particular “withering away of philosophy.”

Yet there is another way to read the destiny of Althusserianism, a way

which will form the transition to our subsequent discussion of the transformation of the cultural sphere in the 60s; and this involves the significance of the slogan of “theory” itself as it comes to replace the older term “philosophy” throughout this period. The “discovery” of the Symbolic, the development of its linguistic-related thematics (as, e.g., in the notion of understanding as an essentially synchronic process, which influences the construction of relatively ahistorical “structures,” such as the Althusserian one described above), is now to be correlated with a modification of the practice of the symbolic, of language itself in the “structuralist” texts, henceforth characterized as “theory,” rather than work in a particular traditional discipline. Two features of this evolution, or mutation, must be stressed. The first is a consequence of the crisis in, or the disappearance of, the classical *canon* of philosophical writings which necessarily results from the contestation of philosophy as a discipline and an institution. Henceforth, the new “philosophical” text will no longer draw its significance from an insertion into the issues and debates of the philosophical tradition, which means that its basic “intertextual” references become random, an *ad hoc* constellation which forms and dissolves on the occasion of each new text. The new text must necessarily be a commentary on other texts (indeed, that dependence on a body of texts to be glossed, rewritten, interconnected in fresh ways, will now intensify if anything), yet those texts, drawn from the most wildly distant disciplines (anthropology, psychiatry, literature, history of science), will be selected in a seemingly arbitrary fashion: Mumford side by side with Antonin Artaud, Kant with Sade, pre-Socratic philosophy, President Schreber, a novel of Maurice Blanchot, Owen Lattimore on Mongolia, and a host of obscure Latin medical treatises from the 18th century. The vocation of what was formerly “philosophy” is thereby restructured and displaced: since there is no longer a tradition of philosophical problems in terms of which new positions and new statements can meaningfully be proposed, such works now tend towards what can be called metaphilosophy—the very different work of coordinating a series of pregiven, already constituted codes or systems of signifiers, of producing a discourse fashioned out of the already fashioned discourse of the constellation of *ad hoc* reference works. “Philosophy” thereby becomes radically occasional; one would want to call it disposable theory, the production of a *metabook*, to be replaced by a different one next season, rather than the ambition to express a proposition, a position or a system with greater “truth” value. (The obvious analogy with the evolution of literary and cultural studies today, with the crisis and disappearance of the latter’s own canon of great books—the last one having been augmented to include the once recalcitrant “masterpieces” of high modernism—will be taken for granted in our next section.)

All of this can perhaps be grasped in a different way by tracing the effects of another significant feature of contemporary theory, namely its

privileged theme in the so-called critique of representation. Traditional philosophy will now be grasped in those terms, as a practice of representation in which the philosophical text or system (misguidedly) attempts to express something other than itself, namely truth or meaning (which now stand as the “signified” to the “signifier” of the system). If, however, the whole aesthetic of representation is metaphysical and ideological, then philosophical discourse can no longer entertain this vocation, and it must stand as the mere addition of another text to what is now conceived as an infinite chain of texts (not necessarily all verbal—daily life is a text, clothing is a text, state power is a text, that whole external world, about which “meaning” or “truth” were once asserted and which is now contemptuously characterized as the illusion of reference or the “referent,” is an indeterminate superposition of texts of all kinds). Whence the significance of the currently fashionable slogan of “materialism,” when sounded in the area of philosophy and theory: materialism here means the dissolution of any belief in “meaning” or in the “signified” conceived as ideas or concepts which are distinct from their linguistic expressions. However paradoxical a “materialist” philosophy may be in this respect, a “materialist theory of language” will clearly transform the very function and operation of “theory,” since it opens up a dynamic in which it is no longer ideas, but rather texts, material texts, which struggle with one another. Theory so defined, (and it will have become clear that the term now greatly transcends what used to be called philosophy and its specialized content) conceives of its vocation, not as the discovery of truth and the repudiation of error, but rather as a struggle about purely linguistic formulations, as the attempt to formulate verbal propositions (material language) in such a way that they are unable to imply unwanted or ideological consequences. Since this aim is evidently an impossible one to achieve, what emerges from the practice of theory—and this was most dramatic and visible during the high point of Althusserianism itself in 1967–68—is a violent and obsessive return to ideological critique in the new form of a perpetual guerrilla war among the material signifiers of textual formulations. With the transformation of philosophy into a material practice, however, we touch on a development that cannot fully be appreciated until it is replaced in the context of a general mutation of culture throughout this period, a context in which “theory” will come to be grasped as a specific (or semi-autonomous) form of what must be called postmodernism generally.

5. THE ADVENTURES OF THE SIGN

Postmodernism is one significant framework in which to describe what happened to culture in the 60s, but a full discussion of this hotly contested concept is not possible here. Such a discussion would want to cover, among other things, the following features: that well-known post-

structuralist theme, the “death” of the subject (including the creative subject, the *auteur* or the “genius”); the nature and function of a *culture of the simulacrum* (an idea developed out of Plato by Deleuze and Baudrillard to convey some specificity of a reproducible object world, not of copies or reproductions marked as such, but of a proliferation of trompe-l’oeil copies *without originals*); the relation of this last to media culture or the “society of the spectacle” (Debord), under two heads: 1/ the peculiar new status of the image, the “material” or what might better be called the “literal,” signifier: a materiality or literality from which the older sensory richness of the medium has been abstracted (just as on the other side of the dialectical relationship, the old individuality of the subject and his/her “brushstrokes” have equally been effaced); and 2/ the emergence, in the work’s temporality, of an aesthetic of *textuality* or what is often described as schizophrenic time; the eclipse, finally, of all depth, especially *historicity* itself, with the subsequent appearance of pastiche and nostalgia art (what the French call *la mode rétro*), and including the supercession of the accompanying models of depth-interpretation in philosophy (the various forms of hermeneutics, as well as the Freudian conception of “repression,” of manifest and latent levels).

What is generally objected to in characterizations of this kind is the empirical observation that all of these features can be abundantly located in this or that variety of high modernism; indeed, one of the difficulties in specifying postmodernism lies in its symbiotic or parasitical relationship to the latter. In effect, with the canonization of a hitherto scandalous, ugly, dissonant, amoral, anti-social, bohemian high modernism offensive to the middle classes, its promotion to the very figure of high culture generally, and perhaps most important, its enshrinement in the academic institution, postmodernism emerges as a way of making creative space for artists now oppressed by those henceforth hegemonic modernist categories of irony, complexity, ambiguity, dense temporality, and particularly, aesthetic and utopian monumentality. In some analogous way, it will be said, high modernism itself won its autonomy from the preceding hegemonic realism (the symbolic language or mode of representation of classical or market capitalism). But there is a difference in that realism itself underwent a significant mutation: it became *naturalism* and at once generated the representational forms of mass culture (the narrative apparatus of the contemporary bestseller is an invention of naturalism and one of the most stunningly successful of French cultural exports). High modernism and mass culture then develop in dialectical opposition and interrelationship with one another. It is precisely the waning of their opposition, and some new conflation of the forms of high and mass culture, which characterizes postmodernism itself.

The historical specificity of postmodernism must therefore finally be argued in terms of the social functionality of culture itself. As stated above,

high modernism, whatever its overt political content, was oppositional and marginal within a middle-class Victorian or philistine or gilded age culture. Although postmodernism is equally offensive in all the respects enumerated (think of punk rock or pornography), it is no longer at all “oppositional” in that sense; indeed, it constitutes the very dominant or hegemonic aesthetic of consumer society itself and significantly serves the latter’s commodity production as a virtual laboratory of new forms and fashions. The argument for a conception of postmodernism as a periodizing category is thus based on the presupposition that, even if *all* the formal features enumerated above were already present in the older high modernism, the very significance of those features changes when they become a cultural *dominant*, with a precise socioeconomic functionality.

At this point it may be well to shift the terms (or the “code”) of our description to the seemingly more traditional one of a cultural “sphere,” a conception developed by Herbert Marcuse in what is to my mind his single most important text, the great essay on “The Affirmative Character of Culture.” (It should be added that the conception of a “public sphere” generally is a very contemporary one in Germany in the works of Habermas and of Negt and Kluge, where such a system of categories stands in interesting contrast to the code of “levels” or “instances” in French poststructuralism.) Marcuse there rehearses the paradoxical dialectic of the classical (German) aesthetic, which projects as play and “purposefulness without purpose” a utopian realm of beauty and culture beyond the fallen empirical world of money and business activity, thereby winning a powerful critical and negative value through its capacity to condemn, by its own very existence, the totality of *what is*, while at the same time forfeiting all ability to social or political intervention in what is, by virtue of its constitutive disjunction or autonomy from society and history.

The account therefore begins to coincide in a suggestive way with the problematic of autonomous or semi-autonomous levels developed in the preceding section. To historicize Marcuse’s dialectic, however, would demand that we take into account the possibility that in our time this very autonomy of the cultural sphere (or level or instance) may be in the process of modification; and also, that we develop the means to furnish a description of the process whereby such modification might take place, as well as of the prior process whereby culture became “autonomous” or “semi-autonomous” in the first place.

This requires recourse to yet another (unrelated) analytic code, one more generally familiar to us today, since it involves the now classical structural concept of the *sign*, with its two components, the signifier (the material vehicle or image—sound or printed word) and the signified (the mental image, meaning or “conceptual” content), and a third component—the external object of the sign, its reference or “referent”—henceforth expelled from the unity and yet haunting it as a ghostly residual aftereffect

(illusion or ideology). The scientific value of this conception of the sign will be bracketed here since we are concerned, on the one hand, to historicize it, to interpret it as a conceptual symptom of developments in the period, and on the other, to “set it in motion,” to see whether changes in its inner structure can offer some adequate small-scale emblem or electrocardiogram of changes and permutations in the cultural sphere generally throughout this period.

Such changes are already suggested by the fate of the “referent” in the “conditions of possibility” of the new structural concept of the sign (a significant ambiguity must however be noted: theorists of the sign notoriously glide from a conception of reference as designating a “real” object outside the unity of Signifier and Signified to a position in which the Signified itself—or meaning, or the idea or the concept of a thing—becomes somehow identified with the referent and stigmatized along with it; we will return to this below). Saussure, at the dawn of the semiotic revolution, liked to describe the relationship of Signifier to Signified as that of the two sides, the recto and verso, of a sheet of paper. In what is then a logical sequel, and a text which naturally enough becomes equally canonical, Borges will push “representation” to the point of imagining a map so rigorous and referential that it becomes coterminous with its object. The stage is then set for the structuralist emblem par excellence, the Moebius Strip, which succeeds in peeling itself off its referent altogether and thus achieves a free-floating closure in the void, a kind of absolute self-referentiality and autocircularity from which all remaining traces of reference, or of any externality, have triumphantly been effaced.

To be even more eclectic about it, I will suggest that this process, seemingly internal to the Sign itself, requires a supplementary explanatory code, that of the more universal process of reification and fragmentation at one with the logic of capital itself. Nonetheless, taken on its own terms, the inner convulsions of the Sign is a useful initial figure of the process of transformation of culture generally, which must in some first moment (that described by Marcuse) separate itself from the “referent” the existing social and historical world itself, only in a subsequent stage of the 60s, in what is here termed “postmodernism,” to develop further into some new and heightened, free-floating, self-referential “autonomy.”

The problem now turns around this very term, “autonomy,” with its paradoxical Althusserian modification, the concept of “semi-autonomy.” The paradox is that the Sign, as an “autonomous” unity in its own right, as a realm divorced from the referent, can preserve that initial autonomy, and the unity and coherence demanded by it, only at the price of keeping a phantom of reference alive, as the ghostly reminder of its own outside or exterior, since this allows it closure, self-definition and an essential boundary line. Marcuse’s own tormented dialectic expresses this dramatically in the curious oscillation whereby his autonomous realm of

beauty and culture both returns upon some “real world” to judge and negate it, at the same time that it separates itself so radically from that real world as to become a place of mere illusion and impotent “ideals,” the “infinite,” etc.

The first moment in the adventures of the Sign is perplexing enough as to demand more concrete, if schematic, illustration in the most characteristic cultural productions themselves. It might well be demonstrated in the classical French *nouveau roman* (in particular, the novels of Robbe-Grillet himself), which established its new language in the early 1960s, using systematic variations of narrative segments to “undermine” representation, yet in some sense confirming this last by teasing and stimulating an appetite for it.

As an American illustration seems more appropriate, however, something similar may be seen in connection with the final and canonical form of high modernism in American poetry, namely the work of Wallace Stevens, which becomes, in the years following the poet’s death in 1956, institutionalized in the university as a purer and more quintessential fulfillment of poetic language than the still impure (read: ideological and political) works of an Eliot or a Pound, and can therefore be numbered among the literary “events” of the early 60s. As Frank Lentricchia has shown, in *Beyond the New Criticism*, the serviceability of Stevens’ poetic production for this normative and hegemonic role depends in large measure on the increasing conflation, in that work, of poetic practice and poetic theory:

This endlessly elaborating poem
Displays the theory of poetry
As the life of poetry . . .

“Stevens” is therefore a locus and fulfillment of aesthetics and aesthetic theory fully as much as the latter’s exemplar and privileged exegetical object; the theory or aesthetic ideology in question being very much an affirmation of the “autonomy” of the cultural sphere in the sense developed above, a valorization of the supreme power of the poetic imagination over the “reality” it produces. Stevens’ work, therefore, offers an extraordinary laboratory situation in which to observe the autonomization of culture as a process: a detailed examination of his development (something for which we have no space here) would show how some initial “set towards” or “attention to” a kind of poetic *pensée sauvage*, the operation of great preconscious *stereotypes*, opens up a vast inner world in which little by little the images of things and their “ideas” begin to be substituted for the things themselves. Yet what distinguishes this experience in Stevens is the sense of a vast systematicity in all this, the operation of a whole set of cosmic oppositions far too complex to be reduced to the schemata of “structuralist” binary oppositions, yet akin to those in spirit, and somehow pre-given in the Symbolic Order of the mind, discoverable to

the passive exploration of the “poetic imagination,” that is, of some heightened and impersonal power of free association in the realm of “objective spirit” or “objective culture.” The examination would further show the strategic limitation of this process to landscape, the reduction of the ideas and images of things to the names for things, and finally to those irreducibles which are place names, among which the exotic has a privileged function (Key West, Oklahoma, Yucatan, Java). Here the poetic “totality” begins to trace a ghostly mimesis or *analogon* of the totality of the imperialist world system itself, with third world materials in a similarly strategic, marginal yet essential place (much as Adorno showed how Schoenberg’s twelve-tone system unconsciously produced a formal imitation of the “total system” of capital). This very unconscious replication of the “real” totality of the world system in the mind is then what allows culture to separate itself as a closed and self-sufficient “system” in its own right: reduplication, and at the same time, floating above the real. It is because of this essential lack of content in Stevens’ verse that his poetry ultimately comes to be auto-referential with a vengeance, taking as its primal subject matter the very operation of poetic production itself. This is an impulse shared by most of the great high modernisms, as has been shown most dramatically in the recent critiques of architectural modernism, in particular of the International style, whose great monumental objects constitute themselves, by projecting a protopolitical and utopian spirit of transformation, *against* a fallen city fabric all around them and, as Venturi has demonstrated, end up necessarily displaying and speaking of themselves alone. Now, this also accounts for what must puzzle any serious reader of Stevens’ verse, namely the extraordinary combination of verbal richness and experimental hollowness or impoverishment in it (the latter being attributable as well to the impersonality of the poetic imagination in Stevens, and to the essentially contemplative and epistemological stance of the subject in it, over and against the static object world of his landscapes).

The essential point here, however, is that this characteristic movement of the high modernist impulse needs to justify itself by way of an ideology, an ideological supplement which can generally be described as that of “existentialism” (the supreme fiction, the meaninglessness of a contingent object-world unredeemed by the imagination, etc.). This is the most uninteresting and banal dimension of Stevens’ work, yet it betrays along with other existentialisms (e.g., Sartre’s tree root in *Nausea*) that fatal seam or link which must be retained in order for the contingent, the “outside world,” the meaningless referent, to be just present enough dramatically to be overcome within the language: nowhere is this ultimate point so clearly deduced, over and over again, as in Stevens, in the eye of the blackbird, the angels or the Sun itself—that last residual vanishing point of reference as distant as a dwarf star upon the horizon, yet which cannot disappear altogether without the whole vocation of poetry and the poetic

imagination being called back into question. Stevens thus exemplifies for us the fundamental paradox of the “autonomy” of the cultural sphere: the sign can only become autonomous by remaining semi-autonomous and the realm of culture can absolutize itself over against the real world only at the price of retaining a final tenuous sense of that exterior or external world of which it is the replication and the imaginary double.

All of which can also be demonstrated by showing what happens when, in a second moment, the perfectly logical conclusion is drawn that the referent is itself a myth and does not exist, a second moment hitherto described as postmodernism. Its trajectory can be seen as a movement from the older *nouveau roman* to that of Sollers or of properly “schizophrenic” writing, or from the primacy of Stevens to that of John Ashbery. This new moment is a radical break (which can be localized around 1967 for reasons to be given later on), but it is important to grasp it as dialectical, that is, as a passage from quantity to quality in which the *same* force, reaching a certain threshold of excess, in its prolongation now produces qualitatively distinct effects and seems to generate a whole new system.

That force has been described as reification, but we can now also begin to make some connections with another figural language used earlier: in a first moment, reification “liberated” the Sign from its referent, but this is not a force to be released with impunity. Now, in a second moment, it continues its work of dissolution, penetrating the interior of the Sign itself and liberating the Signifier from the Signified, or from meaning proper. This play, no longer of a realm of signs, but of pure or literal signifiers freed from the ballast of their signifieds, their former meanings, now generates a new kind of textuality in all the arts (and in philosophy as well, as we have seen above), and begins to project the mirage of some ultimate language of pure signifiers which is also frequently associated with schizophrenic discourse. (Indeed, the Lacanian theory of schizophrenia — a language disorder in which syntactical time breaks down, and leaves a succession of empty Signifiers, absolute moments of a perpetual present, behind itself—has offered one of the more influential explanations and ideological justifications for postmodernist textual practice.)

All of which would have to be demonstrated in some detail by way of a concrete analysis of the postmodernist experience in all the arts today: but the present argument can be concluded by drawing the consequences of this second moment—the culture of the Signifier or of the Simulacrum—for the whole problematic of some “autonomy” of the cultural sphere which has concerned us here. For that autonomous realm is not itself spared by the intensified process by which the classical Sign is dissolved: if its autonomy depended paradoxically on its possibility of remaining “semi-autonomous” (in an Althusserian sense) and of preserving the last tenuous link with some ultimate referent (or, in Althusserian language, of preserving the ultimate unity of a properly “structural totality”), then evidently in the

new cultural moment culture will have ceased to be autonomous, and the realm of an autonomous play of signs becomes impossible, when that ultimate final referent to which the balloon of the mind was moored is now definitively cut. The break-up of the Sign in mid-air determines a fall back into a now absolutely fragmented and anarchic social reality; the broken pieces of language (the pure Signifiers) now falling again into the world, as so many more pieces of material junk among all the other rusting and superannuated apparatuses and buildings that litter the commodity landscape and that strew the “collage city,” the “delirious New York” of a postmodernist late capitalism in full crisis.

But, returning to a Marcusean terminology, all of this can also be said in a different way: with the eclipse of culture as an autonomous space or sphere, culture itself falls into the world, and the result is not its disappearance but its prodigious expansion, to the point where culture becomes coterminous with social life in general: now all the levels become “acculturated,” and in the society of the spectacle, the image, or the simulacrum, everything has at length become cultural, from the superstructures down into the mechanisms of the infrastructure itself. If this development then places acutely on the agenda the neoGramscian problem of a new cultural politics today—in a social system in which the very status of both culture and politics have been profoundly, functionally and structurally modified—it also renders problematic any further discussion of what used to be called “culture” proper, whose artifacts have become the random experiences of daily life itself.

6. IN THE SIERRA MAESTRA

All of which will have been little more than a lengthy excursion into a very specialized (or “elite”) area, unless it can be shown that the dynamic therein visible, with something of the artificial simplification of the laboratory situation, finds striking analogies or homologies in very different and distant areas of social practice. It is precisely this replication of a common diachronic rhythm or “genetic code” which we will now observe in the very different realities of revolutionary practice and theory in the course of the 60s in the third world.

From the beginning, the Cuban experience affirmed itself as an original one, as a new revolutionary model, to be radically distinguished from more traditional forms of revolutionary practice. *Foco* theory, indeed, as it was associated with Che Guevara and theorized in Régis Debray’s influential handbook, *Revolution in the Revolution?*, asserted itself (as the title of the book suggests) both against a more traditional Leninist conception of party practice and against the experience of the Chinese revolution in its first essential stage of the conquest of power (what will later come to be designated as “Maoism,” China’s own very different

“revolution in the revolution” or Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, will not become visible to the outside world until the moment in which the fate of the Cuban strategy has been sealed).

A reading of Debray’s text shows that *foco* strategy, the strategy of the mobile guerrilla base or revolutionary *foyer*, is conceived as yet a third term, as something distinct from *either* the traditional model of class struggle (an essentially *urban* proletariat rising against a bourgeoisie or ruling class) *or* the Chinese experience of a mass peasant movement in the countryside (and has little in common either with a Fanonian struggle for recognition between Colonizer and Colonized). The *foco*, or guerrilla operation, is conceptualized as being neither “in” nor “of” either country or city: geographically, of course, it is positioned in the countryside, yet that location is not the permanently “liberated territory” of the Yanan region, well beyond the reach of the enemy forces of Chiang Kai-shek or of the Japanese occupier. It is not indeed located in the cultivated area of the peasant fields at all, but rather in that third or non-place which is the wilderness of the Sierra Maestra, neither country nor city, but rather a whole new element in which the guerrilla band moves in perpetual displacement.

This peculiarity of the way in which the spatial coordinates of the Cuban strategy is conceived has then immediate consequences for the way in which the class elements of the revolutionary movement are theorized. Neither city nor country: by the same token, paradoxically, the guerrillas themselves are grasped as being neither workers nor peasants (still less, intellectuals), but rather something entirely new, for which the prerevolutionary class society has no categories: new revolutionary subjects, forged in the guerrilla struggle indifferently out of the social material of peasants, city workers or intellectuals, yet now largely transcending those class categories (just as this moment of Cuban theory will claim largely to transcend the older revolutionary ideologies predicated on class categories, whether those of Trotskyist workerism, Maoist populism and peasant consciousness, or of Leninist vanguard intellectualism).

What becomes clear in a text like Debray’s is that the guerrilla *foco*—so mobile as to be beyond geography in the static sense—is in and of itself a *figure* for the transformed, revolutionary society to come. Its revolutionary militants are not simply “soldiers” to whose specialized role and function one would then have to “add” supplementary roles in the revolutionary division of labor, such as political commissars and the political vanguard party itself, both explicitly rejected here. Rather, in them is abolished all such prerevolutionary divisions and categories. This conception of a newly emergent revolutionary “space” — situated outside the “real” political, social and geographical world of country and city, and of the historical social classes, yet at one and the same time a figure or small-scale image and prefiguration of the revolutionary transformation of that real world—may be designated as a properly utopian space, a Hegelian “inverted world,” an

autonomous revolutionary sphere, in which the fallen real world over against it is itself set right and transformed into a new socialist society.

For all practical purposes, this powerful model is exhausted, even before Che's own tragic death in Bolivia in 1967, with the failure of the guerrilla movements in Peru and Venezuela in 1966; not uncoincidentally, that failure will be accompanied by something like a disinvestment of revolutionary libido and fascination on the part of a first world left, its return (with some leavening of the newer Maoism) to their own "current situation," in the American antiwar movement and May 68. In Latin America, however, the radical strategy which effectively replaces *foco* theory is that of the so-called urban guerrilla movement, pioneered in Uruguay by the Tupamaros: it will have become clear that this break-up of the utopian space of the older guerrilla *foco*, the fall of politics back into the world in the form of a very different style of political practice indeed—one that seeks to dramatize features of state power, rather than, as in traditional revolutionary movements, to build towards some ultimate encounter with it—will be interpreted here as something of a structural equivalent to the final stage of the sign as characterized above.

Several qualifications must be made, however. For one thing, it is clear that this new form of political activity will be endowed, by association, with something of the tragic prestige of the Palestinian liberation movement, which comes into being in its contemporary form as a result of the Israeli seizure of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in 1967, and which will thereafter become one of the dominant worldwide symbols of revolutionary praxis in the late 60s. Equally clearly, however, the struggle of this desperate and victimized people cannot be made to bear responsibility for the excesses of this kind of strategy elsewhere in the world, whose universal results (whether in Latin America, or with Cointelpro in the United States, or, belatedly, in West Germany and Italy) have been to legitimize an intensification of the repressive apparatus of state power.

This objective coincidence between a misguided assessment of the social and political situation on the part of left militants (for the most part students and intellectuals eager to force a revolutionary conjuncture by voluntaristic acts) and a willing exploitation by the state of precisely those provocations suggests that what is often loosely called "terrorism" must be the object of complex and properly dialectical analysis. However rightly a responsible left chooses to dissociate itself from such strategy (and the Marxian opposition to terrorism is an old and established tradition that goes back to the 19th century), it is important to remember that "terrorism," as a "concept," is also an ideologeme of the right and must therefore be refused in that form. Along with the disaster films of the late 60s and early 70s, mass culture itself makes clear that "terrorism"—the image of the "terrorist"—is one of the privileged forms in which an ahistorical society imagines radical social change; meanwhile, an inspection of the content of the modern

thriller or adventure story also makes it clear that the “otherness” of so-called terrorism has begun to replace older images of criminal “insanity” as an unexamined and seemingly “natural” motivation in the construction of plots—yet another sign of the ideological nature of this particular pseudo-concept. Understood in this way, “terrorism” is a collective obsession, a symptomatic fantasy of the American political unconscious, which demands decoding and analysis in its own right.

As for the thing itself, for all practical purposes it comes to an end with the Chilean coup in 1973 and the fall of virtually all the Latin American countries to various forms of military dictatorship. The belated reemergence of this kind of political activity in West Germany and in Italy must surely at least in part be attributed to the fascist past of these two countries, to their failure to liquidate that past after the war, and to a violent moral revulsion against it on the part of a segment of the youth and intellectuals who grew up in the 60s.

7. RETURN OF THE “ULTIMATELY DETERMINING INSTANCE”

The two “breaks” which have emerged in the preceding section—one in the general area around 1967, the other in the immediate neighborhood of 1973—will now serve as the framework for a more general hypothesis about the periodization of the 60s in general. Beginning with the second of these, a whole series of other, seemingly unrelated events in the general area of 1972–1974 suggests that this moment is not merely a decisive one on the relatively specialized level of thirdworld or Latin American radical politics, but signals the definitive end of what is called the 60s in a far more global way. In the first world, for example, the end of the draft and the withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam (in 1973) spell the end of the mass politics of the antiwar movement (the crisis of the new left itself—which can be largely dated from the break-up of SDS in 1969—would seem related to the other break mentioned, to which we will return below), while the signing of the Common Program between the Communist Party and the new Socialist Party in France (as well as the wider currency of slogans associated with “Eurocommunism” at this time) would seem to mark a strategic turn away from the kinds of political activities associated with May 68 and its sequels. This is also the moment at which, as a result of the Yom Kippur war, the oil weapon emerges and administers a different kind of shock to the economies, the political strategies, and the daily life habits of the advanced countries. Concomitantly, on the more general cultural and ideological level, the intellectuals associated with the establishment itself (particularly in the United States) begin to recover from the fright and defensive posture which was theirs during the decade now

ending, and again find their voices in a series of attacks on 60s culture and 60s politics which, as was noted at the beginning, are not even yet at an end. One of the more influential documents was Lionel Trilling's *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972), an Arnoldian call to reverse the tide of 60s countercultural "barbarism." (This will, of course, be followed by the equally influential diagnosis of some 60s concept of "authenticity" in terms of a "culture of narcissism".) Meanwhile, in July 1973, some rather different "intellectuals," representing various concrete forms of political and economic power, will begin to rethink the failure in Vietnam in terms of a new global strategy for American and first world interests; their establishment of the Trilateral Commission will at least symbolically be a significant marker in the recovery of momentum by what must be called "the ruling classes." The emergence of a widely accepted new popular concept and term at this same time, the notion of the "multinational corporation," is also another symptom, signifying, as the authors of *Global Reach* have suggested, the moment in which private business finds itself obliged to emerge in public as a visible "subject of history" and a visible actor on the world stage—think of the role of ITT in Chile—when the American government, having been badly burned by the failure of the Vietnam intervention, is generally reluctant to undertake further ventures of this kind.

For all these reasons it seems appropriate to mark the definitive end of the "60s" in the general area of 1972–1974. But we have omitted until now the decisive element in any argument for a periodization or "punctuation" of this kind, and this new kind of material will direct our attention to a "level" or "instance" which has hitherto significantly been absent from the present discussion, namely the economic itself. For 1973–1974 is the moment of the onset of a worldwide economic crisis, whose dynamic is still with us today, and which put a decisive full stop to the economic expansion and prosperity characteristic of the postwar period generally and of the 60s in particular. When we add to this another key economic marker—the recession in West Germany in 1966 and that in the other advanced countries, in particular in the United States a year or so later—we may well thereby find ourselves in a better position more formally to conceptualize that sense of a secondary break around 1967–68 which has begun to surface on the philosophical, cultural, and political levels as they were analyzed or "narrated" above.

Such confirmation by the economic "level" itself of periodizing reading derived from other, sample levels or instances of social life during the 60s will now perhaps put us in a better position to answer the two theoretical issues raised at the beginning of this essay. The first had to do with the validity of Marxist analysis for a period whose active political categories no longer seemed to be those of social class, and in which in a

more general way traditional forms of Marxist theory and practice seemed to have entered a "crisis." The second involved the problem of some "unified field theory" in terms of which such seemingly distant realities as third-world peasant movements and first-world mass culture (or indeed, more abstractly, intellectual or superstructural levels like philosophy and culture generally, and those of mass resistance and political practice) might conceptually be related in some coherent way.

A pathbreaking synthesis by Ernest Mandel, in his book *Late Capitalism*, will suggest a hypothetical answer to both these questions at once. The book presents, among other things, an elaborate system of business cycles under capitalism, whose most familiar unit, the 7-to-10 year alternation of boom, overproduction, recession and economic recovery, adequately enough accounts for the mid-point break in the 60s suggested above.

Mandel's account of the worldwide crisis of 1974, however, draws on a far more controversial conception of vaster cycles of some thirty to fifty year periods each—cycles which are then obviously much more difficult to perceive experientially or "phenomenologically" insofar as they transcend the rhythms and limits of the biological life of individuals. These "Kondratiev waves" (named after the Soviet economist who hypothesized them) have according to Mandel been renewed four times since the 18th century, and are characterized by quantum leaps in the technology of production, which enable decisive increases in the rate of profit generally, until at length the advantages of the new production processes have been explored and exhausted and the cycle therewith comes to an end. The latest of these Kondratiev cycles is that marked by computer technology, nuclear energy and the mechanization of agriculture (particularly in foodstuffs and also primary materials), which Mandel dates from 1940 in North America and the postwar period in the other imperialist countries: what is decisive in the present context is his notion that, with the worldwide recession of 1973–74, the dynamics of this latest "long wave" are spent.

The hypothesis is attractive, however, not only because of its abstract usefulness in confirming our periodization schemes, but also because of the actual analysis of this latest wave of capitalist expansion, and of the properly Marxian version he gives of a whole range of developments which have generally been thought to demonstrate the end of the "classical" capitalism theorized by Marx and to require this or that postMarxist theory of social mutation (as in theories of consumer society, postindustrial society, and the like).

We have already described the way in which neocolonialism is characterized by the radically new technology (the so-called Green Revolution in agriculture: new machinery, new farming methods, and new types of chemical fertilizer and genetic experiments with hybrid plants and

the like), with which capitalism transforms its relationship to its colonies from an old-fashioned imperialist control to market penetration, destroying the older village communities and creating a whole new wage-labor pool and lumpenproletariat. The militancy of the new social forces is at one and the same time a result of the “liberation” of peasants from their older self-sustaining village communities, and a movement of self-defense, generally originating in the stabler yet more isolated areas of a given third world country, against what is rightly perceived as a far more thoroughgoing form of penetration and colonization than the older colonial armies.

It is now in terms of this process of “mechanization” that Mandel will make the link between the neocolonialist transformation of the third world during the 60s and the emergence of that seemingly very different thing in the first world, variously termed consumer society, postindustrial society, media society, and the like:

Far from representing a postindustrial society, late capitalism . . . constitutes *generalized universal industrialization* for the first time in history. Mechanization, standardization, overspecialization and parcellization of labor, which in the past determined only the realm of commodity production in actual industry, now penetrate into all sectors of social life. It is characteristic of late capitalism that agriculture is step by step becoming just as industrialized as industry, the sphere of circulation [e.g., credit cards and the like] just as much as the sphere of production, and recreation just as much as the organization of work.

With this last, Mandel touches on what he elsewhere calls the mechanization of the superstructure, or in other words the penetration of culture itself by what the Frankfurt School called the culture industry, and of which the growth of the media is only a part. We may thus generalize his description as follows: late capitalism in general (and the 60s in particular) constitute a process in which the last surviving internal and external zones of precapitalism—the last vestiges of noncommodified or traditional space within and outside the advanced world—are now ultimately penetrated and colonized in their turn. Late capitalism can therefore be described as the moment in which the last vestiges of Nature which survived on into classical capitalism are at length eliminated: namely the third world and the unconscious. The 60s will then have been the momentous transformational period in which this systemic restructuring takes place on a global scale.

With such an account, our “unified field theory” of the 60s is given—the discovery of a single process at work in first and third worlds, in global economy and in consciousness and culture, a properly *dialectical* process, in which “liberation” and domination are inextricably combined. We may now therefore proceed to a final characterization of the period as a whole.

The simplest yet most universal formulation surely remains the widely shared feeling that in the 60s, for a time, everything was possible: that this period, in other words, was a moment of a universal liberation, a global unbinding of energies. Mao Tse-tung’s figure for this process is in this respect

most revealing: "Our nation," he cried, "is like an atom When this atom's nucleus is smashed, the thermal energy released will have really tremendous power!" The image evokes the emergence of a genuine mass democracy from the breakup of the older feudal and village structures, and from the therapeutic dissolution of the habits of those structures in cultural revolutions: yet the effects of fission, the release of molecular energies, the unbinding of "material signifiers," can be a properly terrifying spectacle; and we now know that Mao Tse-tung himself drew back from the ultimate consequences of the process he had set in motion, when, at the supreme moment of the Cultural Revolution, that of the founding of the Shanghai Commune, he called a halt to the dissolution of the party apparatus and effectively reversed the direction of this collective experiment as a whole (with consequences only too obvious at the present time). In the west also, the great explosions of the 60s have led, in the worldwide economic crisis, to powerful restorations of the social order and a renewal of the repressive power of the various state apparatuses.

Yet the forces these must now confront, contain and control are new ones, on which the older methods do not necessarily work. We have described the 60s as a moment in which the enlargement of capitalism on a global scale simultaneously produced an immense freeing or unbinding of social energies, a prodigious release of untheorized new forces: the ethnic forces of black and "minority" or third world movements everywhere, regionalisms, the development of new and militant bearers of "surplus consciousness" in the student and women's movements, as well as in a host of struggles of other kinds. Such newly released forces do not only not seem to compute in the dichotomous class model of traditional Marxism; they also seem to offer a realm of freedom and voluntarist possibility beyond the classical constraints of the economic infrastructure. Yet this sense of freedom and possibility—which is for the course of the 60s a momentarily objective reality, as well as (from the hindsight of the 80s) a historical illusion—may perhaps best be explained in terms of the superstructural movement and play enabled by the transition from one infrastructural or systemic stage of capitalism to another. The 60s were in that sense an immense and inflationary issuing of superstructural credit; a universal abandonment of the referential gold standard; an extraordinary printing up of ever more devalued signifiers. With the end of the 60s, with the world economic crisis, all the old infrastructural bills then slowly come due once more; and the 80s will be characterized by an effort, on a world scale, to proletarianize all those unbound social forces which gave the 60s their energy, by an extension of class struggle, in other words, into the farthest reaches of the globe as well as the most minute configurations of local institutions (such as the university system). The unifying force here is the new vocation of a henceforth global capitalism, which may also be expected to

unify the unequal, fragmented, or local resistances to the process. And this is finally also the solution to the so-called “crisis” of Marxism and to the widely noted inapplicability of its forms of class analysis to the new social realities with which the 60s confronted us: “traditional” Marxism, if “untrue” during this period of a proliferation of new subjects of history, must necessarily become true again when the dreary realities of exploitation, extraction of surplus value, proletarianization and the resistance to it in the form of class struggle, all slowly reassert themselves on a new and expanded world scale, as they seem currently in the process of doing.