

Université de Montréal

The Appeal to Immediacy of the *Erfahrungshunger* Decades:
A Socio-Historical Clarification and Diagnosis.

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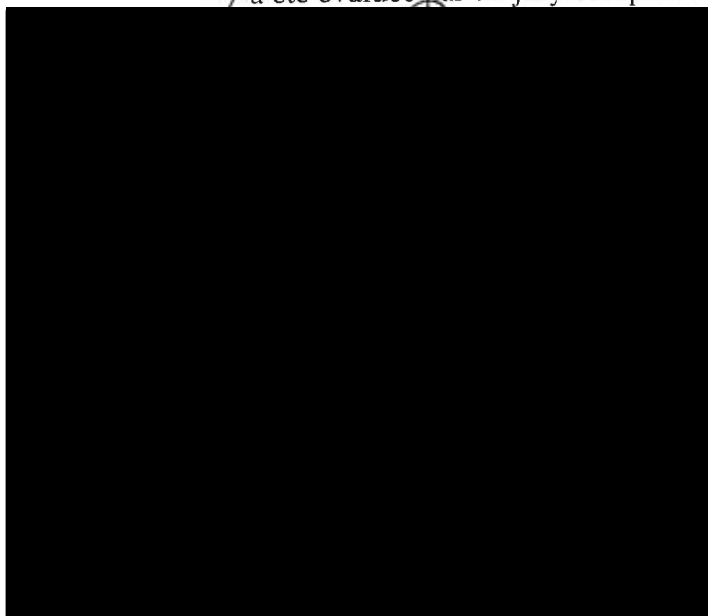
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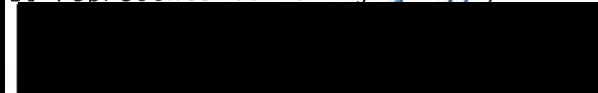
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Abstract.

Since the 1960s, certain currents in subaltern cultural theory and various oppositional social movements have appealed to what lies beyond ideological or discursive mediation, to immediacy in other words, in their attempts to delineate the specificity of subaltern identity, or in the hope of fostering counter-hegemonic historiography. One of the more common terms conjured in such appeals has been experience. If this dissertation sets out to critique such a tendency, this is not in order to merely debunk it on epistemological or conceptual grounds—this has after all been emphatically and repeatedly done by various schools of thought, from Gadamerian hermeneutics to poststructuralism. Instead, this dissertation makes two claims: the first, in the spirit of Koselleck, stresses the importance of historicizing, instead of attacking on merely epistemological grounds, the central categories of modernity—in our case experience. Such categories are indeed not mere ideas unrelated to more general social concerns but on the contrary inform our self-understanding. But neither does this thesis propose a Koselleckian *Begriffsgeschichte*: its second claim, in more diagnostic spirit, argues that the very insistence with which appeals to experience have persisted since the 1960s, and this in spite of repeated and scathing critiques, testifies to a problem that must be diagnostically addressed—the problem of self-formation. To diagnostically address such an insistence has become all the more urgent now that many current social movements, in their appeals to the immediacy and specificity of a group's experience, leave the door as widely open to subaltern politicking as to neo-ethnic tribalism. By returning to how experience came to historically assume an accentuated role in self-formation, it may be possible to diagnose whether current appeals to experience testify to the persistence or the demise of how a sense of self has been construed over the last two centuries.

Résumé

Le concept d'expérience a beau avoir suscité l'intérêt de plusieurs disciplines académiques au cours des deux derniers siècles; ce n'est toutefois qu'à partir des années soixante que l'on peut parler des décennies d' *Erfahrungshunger*, pour emprunter l'expression de Michael Rutschky.¹ C'est en effet durant ces décennies que le concept d'expérience, auparavant limité à des problèmes philosophiques, esthétiques ou méthodologiques, devint l'objet de vives polémiques non seulement au sein de disputes académiques, mais aussi dans les manifestes programmatiques de divers mouvements identitaires soucieux d'établir leur spécificité socio-culturelle. Autant par les historiens de *Alltagsgeschichte* que par ce que Craig Calhoun nomme "les nouveaux mouvements sociaux,"² l'expérience fut considérée comme ce qui, en tant qu'immédiateté préservée de toute pénétration idéologique, pouvait servir de base pour la construction et consolidation d'identités subalternes. Il s'agissait, en somme, comme le dit Richard Evans, d'un "quest to recapture the subjective experience of everyday life in the past at a regional, local or even individual level."³

D'autres échanges sur l'expérience ont bien entendu ponctué le paysage intellectuel des décennies d'*Erfahrungshunger*: ne manquent pas, par exemple, de maintes spéculations sur le potentiel perturbant de l'expérience, et cela non seulement de la part d'une poignée de *Rezeptionsästhetiker* ou d'herméneutes tels que Hans-Robert Jauss ou Hans-Georg Gadamer, mais également de la part de théoriciens provenant de

¹ *Erfahrungshunger: Ein Essay über die siebziger Jahre* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1982)

² "Social Theory and the Public Sphere," in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*, ed. Brian S. Turner (London: Blackwell, 1996), p.468, n.64.

³ "The New Nationalism and the Old History: Perspectives on the West German *Historikerstreit*," *Journal of Modern History* 59, 4 (Décembre 1987): p. 763. Cité dans Martin Jay, "Songs of Experience: Reflections on the Debate over *Alltagsgeschichte*," *Salmagundi* 81 (Hiver 1989): p. 31.

disciplines divergentes, tels que Victor Turner, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe et même Foucault. Il n'en reste pas moins que le plus notoire des débats sur l'expérience reste celui inauguré par la publication en 1978 du livre de E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*, dans lequel est attaquée la pertinence du structuralisme althusserien pour l'histoire de la classe ouvrière anglaise.⁴ En effet, ce qui semblait n'être qu'une altercation entre Althusser et Thompson ne tarda pas à enfanter une prolifération de débats académiques et non-académiques— débats dont le dénominateur commun est la notion selon laquelle l'identité des sans-voix et des exclus pouvait être soutenue par la spécificité de leurs expériences concrètes. Non seulement ces débats sur l'expérience et la spécificité subalterne continuent-ils à ce jour, mais le concept d'expérience est entretemps devenu le mot-clé de revendications identitaires, allant jusqu'à servir de cri de ralliement de ces "nouveaux mouvements sociaux" dont parle Craig Calhoun. Ce qui intrigue dans tout ceci est qu'un concept qui jadis relevait de l'ésoterisme philosophique soit récemment devenu un slogan en vogue. En débordant ainsi le domaine académique pour pénétrer la sphère publique, l'appel à l'expérience par les revendications culturelles et identitaires semble relever d'un problème autre que purement académique. De quoi serait donc symptomatique une telle insistance sur l'expérience?

Cette étude tente justement d'explorer ce problème. Le premier chapitre, "Erfahrungshunger," examine ces théories de l'expérience qui ont le plus pénétré la sphère publique et qui, ce faisant, permettent mieux d'identifier ce dont l'appel à l'expérience peut bien être un symptôme. À cette fin seront examinés certains courants des *Cultural Studies*, mais c'est l'oeuvre de Thompson qui occupera l'avant-scène. De nombreuses théories sur l'expérience provenant de certaines tendances culturelles et historiographiques n'ont certes été que des variations sur un thème Thompsonien— un thème dans lequel, comme nous le rappelle Joan W. Scott, "[Thompson's] kind of use of experience has the same foundational status if we substitute 'women's' or 'black' or

⁴*The Poverty of Theory* (London: Merlin, 1978).

'lesbian' or 'homosexual' for 'working class'... ."⁵ Il ne s'agit toutefois pas ici de simplement discréditer certaines tendances en théorie et historiographie culturelles, ni de présenter une histoire d'opinions sur un problème encore vivement débattu; il s'agit plutôt de montrer que certains courants académiques et mouvements identitaires se tournent vers l'expérience pour des raisons similaires. Puisque de tels appels à l'expérience peuvent avoir des conséquences politiques douteuses, comme le montrera ce premier chapitre, et puisque l'usage théorique de l'expérience a été si sévèrement critiqué par de si nombreuses écoles de pensée, l'expérience semble faire preuve d'une certaine résilience qu'il nous importe de diagnostiquer. Ce qui importe ici n'est donc pas une critique de l'insistance *sur* l'expérience mais plutôt un diagnostic de l'insistance *de* l'expérience.

On ne peut simplement rejeter l'expérience comme un concept moderniste désuet. L'insistance même avec laquelle l'expérience est évoquée *en dépit* des attaques qu'elle subit pourrait en dernière analyse receler ce qu'Adorno appellerait un contenu de vérité. Le deuxième chapitre, "*Experience Investigated*" propose ainsi un survol de l'histoire étymologique et conceptuelle du concept d'expérience. Ce chapitre montre comment l'appel Thompsonien à l'expérience ne s'éloigne guère de la façon dont l'expérience a été généralement entendue non seulement par le discours philosophique mais aussi par la praxis quotidienne. Dans la mesure où sont impliquées des questions de formation de soi plutôt que des problèmes épistémologiques ou méthodologiques, les différents usages de l'expérience ont en effet comme dénominateur commun une préoccupation avec la façon dont l'aspect perturbant de l'inattendu doit être géré. Les appels Thompsoniens à l'expérience ne sont autrement dit pas une anomalie mais au contraire la perpétuation d'une notion commune.

⁵ "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Summer 1991): p.786.

Une telle notion commune n'est toutefois pas divorcée de tout contexte socio-historique. Le troisième chapitre, "Experience Historicized," propose donc dans un premier mouvement de montrer que l'expérience fait référence non seulement à des problèmes d'ordre philosophique ou esthétique, mais aussi à un problème très réel, à savoir, la manière dont sont coordonnés le passé, présent et futur suite à une confrontation avec l'inattendu. Dans un deuxième mouvement, ce chapitre propose une historicisation du rôle de l'expérience dans la formation de ce que Anthony Giddens appelle *modern self-identity*. En effet, le rôle de l'expérience dans l'économie du soi n'est guère à l'abri des changements historiques. Ce n'est que lorsque le futur se distingue du passé que l'inattendu peut déranger un horizon donné de sorte à ce que l'expérience puisse y jouer un rôle central dans sa constitution. Mais une telle temporalité, comme le maintient à raison Reinhart Koselleck, ne s'est dessinée qu'à la fin du XVIIIe siècle: contrairement à l'eschatologie prémoderne, où le futur est engouffré en un présent éternel, et à l'opposé de la temporalité de l'*historia magistra vitae*, où le futur demeure sous la tutelle du passé, une temporalité de divergence entre passé, présent et futur—temporalité de laquelle dépend un rôle prononcé de l'expérience dans la formation du soi—est un phénomène récent qui ne date pas plus de deux siècles. Bien que l'histoire étymologique et conceptuelle de l'expérience semble témoigner transhistoriquement du problème de l'inattendu et de la coordination temporelle, ce n'est qu'à la fin du XVIIIe siècle qu'une telle dynamique devient un phénomène explicitement thématique, et que l'expérience est envisagée comme étant centrale plutôt que périphérique à la formation de soi.

Le quatrième chapitre, "The Consequences of a Divergent Temporality," aborde l'enjeu du rôle de l'expérience dans l'économie du soi moderne. Est démontré ici que le plus urgent problème que confronte le soi moderne est la prolifération du nouveau, de l'inattendu-- de la complexité, en somme--contre laquelle le passé et la tradition de la prémodernité n'offrent plus de sanctuaire. Suite à l'ouverture du futur dès la fin du XVIIIe siècle, le soi moderne a dû concevoir des stratégies pour contrer et contenir la

complexité temporelle, à moins que disparaisse son sens de la différence entre lui-même et son environnement-- à moins que s'ensuive, autrement dit, une dissolution du sentiment de soi. C'est à cette conjoncture que l'expérience, qui intègre le nouveau dans un passé révisable et un présent provisoire, entre en jeu. Et c'est aussi ici que se trouve la clé pour comprendre l'insistance Thompsonienne sur l'expérience.

Afin de diagnostiquer l'insistance de l'expérience, le dernier chapitre se penche sur l'état actuel d'une des conditions de possibilité du rôle de l'expérience dans le maintien du soi moderne, à savoir, la temporalité. Mais au lieu d'évoquer quelque *deus ex machina*, telle que la notion post-moderniste d'une quelconque rupture cataclysmique, ce chapitre examine un problème interne à la dynamique de la modernité en général, et de l'expérience en particulier: la prolifération du nouveau ainsi que l'exacerbation de l'inattendu encouragées par l'ouverture du futur du XVIIIe siècle. Est démontré ici que durant les décennies d'*Erfahrungshunger*, "le présent orienté vers l'innovation accélérée commence à dévorer le futur," comme l'exprime Helga Nowotny, car "on dispose du futur comme s'il était présent, et de cette manière on produit le présent étendu." Dans un tel contexte temporel, où le passé et le futur ne peuvent se différencier clairement d'un présent omniprésent, et où la médiation temporelle donne ainsi voie à ce que Michel Freitag appelle une nouvelle "culture de l'immédiat,"⁶ le segment diagnostique de ce chapitre montre comment l'appel Thompsonien à l'expérience immédiate s'avère être plutôt un symptôme de *l'incapacité croissante, aujourd'hui, d'être autrement qu'immédiat*. Et l'insistance de l'expérience témoigne de ce que Andreas Huyssen appelle "an expression of the basic human need to live in extended structures of time, however they may be organised."⁷

⁶ *Le naufrage de l'université* (Paris: La Découverte, 1995), p. 156

⁷ *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 9.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.	xi.
Introduction.	1
CHAPTER I	
<i>Erfahrungshunger</i>	15
1. The Irreducibility of Experience	16
2. The Ontologisation of Experience, the Naturalization of Difference and the Spectre of Neo-ethnic Tribalism	32
3. The Insistence of Experience	48
CHAPTER II	
<i>Experience Investigated</i>	59
1. The Disruptiveness of the Unexpected.	60
2. Two General Meanings of Experience	71
3. Experience: A Dialectic of Continuity and Discontinuity.	84
4. <i>Erlebnis</i> : a Para-Academic Variant of Dialectical Experience.	95
5. Beyond Academic Squabbling	105
CHAPTER III	
<i>Experience historicized</i>	115
1. The Specificity of Modern Experience	116
2. Experience as a Temporal Issue.	134
3. The Historicity of Future Orientedness and Experience: A Parenthetical Caveat.	152
4. A Panoramic Socio-Historical Synopsis	161

CHAPTER IV

<i>The Consequences of a Divergent Temporality</i>	173
1. The Complexity and Reflexivity of Modernity	174
2. Reflexivity and the Need for Continuity: a Dialectic of Continuity and Discontinuity.	195
3. The Reflexivity of Modern Self-identity.	211
4. Experience, Complexity Reduction and <i>Bildung</i>	228

CHAPTER V

<i>Experience Diagnosed</i>	246
1. Swallowing the Pill of Historicity	247
2. The Extended Present.	253
3. The Ubiquity of Immediacy and the Punctualisation of Experience	272
4. Towards a Diagnosis of the Insistence on Experience	285
5. Swallowing the Pill of Historicity– Reprise.	297
6. O Tempora! O Mores!	306
 Bibliography	 321

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For Robert

INTRODUCTION.

Der Mann, dem die Erfahrung abhanden kommt, fühlt sich aus dem Kalender herausgesetzt.

--Walter Benjamin⁸

While it is true that the concept of experience has elicited the interest of various academic disciplines for at least the last two centuries, it is the late 1960s through the 1980s that can rightly be characterized, to borrow Michael Rutschky's expression, as decades of *Erfahrungshunger*.⁹ Unlike earlier decades, where it had remained largely within the confines of academia, the concept of experience by the 1970s frequently became the stuff of programmatic manifestos and was enlisted as the ground from which it was (and often still is) believed could be erected micro-strategies of resistance, subaltern counter-histories and a politics of identity. Experience spilled over into the streets, so to speak. Within Germany, historians of *Alltagsgeschichte*, many of whom were peripheral to

⁸ *Illuminationen*, ed., Siegfried Unseld (Frankfurt a. M. :Suhrkamp, 1961), p.231.

⁹ *Erfahrungshunger: Ein Essay über die siebziger Jahre* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1982).

academic settings (and for which reason were often derisively dubbed “barefoot historians”) reacted against the dominant historiographical emphasis on the political history of the nation state by embarking, Richard Evans explains, “on a quest to recapture the subjective experience of everyday life in the past at a regional, local or even individual level.”¹⁰ And the budding interest in the genesis and prospects of *Gegenöffentlichkeit*, inaugurated by Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge’s influential 1972 study, did much, “for better or for worse,” as Miriam Hansen notes, “to turn an esoteric concept [*Erfahrung*] into a keyword for cultural practices, such as non-academic research projects on everyday life in the History Workshops, the revival of the gay and lesbian movement, or environmental and anti-nuclear campaigns (leading to the formation of the Green Party).”¹¹ In the Anglo-American world, the excessive zeal with which a handful of Marxist strands dichotomized social structures into an infra- supra- structural opposition, along with Soviet misbehaviour in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, helped foster a Gramscian turn where economic determinism was overshadowed by issues of hegemony, and counter-hegemony— precisely those concerns which, as Ioan Davies tells us, were to encourage such questions as: “if culture was essentially that which was experienced, then a central issue was who did the experiencing and how was the

¹⁰ “The New Nationalism and the Old History: Perspectives on the West German *Historikerstreit*,” *Journal of Modern History* 59, 4 (December 1987): p. 763. Cited in Martin Jay, “Songs of Experience: Reflections on the Debate over *Alltagsgeschichte*,” *Salmagundi* 81 (Winter 1989): p. 31.

¹¹ Foreword to Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience. Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, trans. Peter Labanyi et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p.xix.

experiencing in part masterminded by those who claimed a more lofty experience than others.”¹²

Such a line of questioning was eventually to culminate by the late 1970s and early 1980s into a series of debates on the perceived opposition of concrete experience to abstract structure, on the possibility of local resistance to dominant ideological or cultural formations. Of these debates, the most notorious one was initiated by the publication of E.P. Thompson’s *The Poverty of Theory*, which questioned the relevance of Althusserian structuralism for a history of the English working class. But what started as an altercation between Thompson and Althusser was later to spawn a proliferation of academic and para-academic “histories from below” and subaltern cultural inquiries which, although they had little else in common, had as their common denominator the notion that the identities and counter-histories of the voiceless and disenfranchised could be buttressed by the specificity of a group’s concrete experiences. Whether these disparate theories and new social movements justify such a move by invoking the need to resist the cultural logic of late capitalism or the phallogocentric structure of language, the market place or cyberspace, a common thread nevertheless runs through what might otherwise appear to be unrelated trends in historiography and cultural theory, namely, the

¹² *Cultural Studies and Beyond: Fragments of an Empire* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 121.

axiom according to which, as Martin Jay puts it, “lived experience is pitted against the imposition of a theoretical scheme allegedly alien to it.”¹³

These latter debates, which Thompson’s skirmish with Althusser played a great part in fomenting, have not only been the most strident, but have continued unabated to this day. Other exchanges on experience have of course punctuated the intellectual landscape of the *Erfahrungshunger* decades: there has for example been considerable speculation on the disruptive potential of experience, whether aesthetic or aestheticized, and this not just by a handful of German *Rezeptionsästhetiker* and hermeneuts such as Hans- Robert Jauss and Hans-Georg Gadamer, but also by theorists from divergent disciplines and stances such as Christoph Menke-Eggers, Martin Seel, Victor Turner, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Gianni Vattimo¹⁴ and even Foucault.¹⁵ But questions regarding the status of aesthetic experience and whether it is to be reinserted into daily praxis or, conversely, preserved from external contamination, and issues dealing with the

¹³ “Songs of Experience: Reflections on the Debate over *Alltagsgeschichte*,” *Salmagundi* 81 (Winter 1989): p. 38.

¹⁴ Christoph Menke-Eggers, *Die Souveränität der Kunst: Ästhetische Erfahrung nach Adorno und Derrida* (Frankfurt: Athenäum, 1988); Martin Seel, *Die Kunst der Entzweiung. Zum Begriff der ästhetischen Rationalität* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1985); Victor Turner, “Dewey, Dilthey, and Drama: an Essay in the Anthropology of experience,” *The Anthropology of Experience* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986) Lacoue-Labarthe, *La poésie comme expérience* (Paris, 1986); Vattimo, *La società trasparente* (Garzanti Editore, 1989).

¹⁵ For more on the extent to which experience has been of central concern to Foucault, see Martin Jay’s “The Limits of Limit Experience: Bataille and Foucault,” *Constellations* 2, 2 (1995).

subversive potential of experience as an “intensity” beyond assimilation by, say, generalized instrumentality, an Oedipal libidinal economy or ontotheology, while they have certainly helped bring to the fore arguably important issues and while they have contributed their share of colloquia and studies, they have not exactly sparked vitriolic debates—something that cannot be said of that series of heated exchanges initiated by Thompson and the History Workshops. Not only have these debates on experience, agency and resistance continued to rage, but experience has also become the core concept or keyword of groupuscules and the rallying call of the “new social movements” for which, as Craig Calhoun notes, “experience is made the pure ground of knowledge, the basis of an essentialized standpoint of critical awareness.”¹⁶ What is peculiar, in other words, about the *Erfahrungshunger* decades of which we are still part is the manner by which *a once arcane philosophical term has now become a generalized buzz word*. By thus spilling over from academia into the public sphere, the appeal to experience as a ground for cultural and political action seems to testify to a problem that is more than academic. Of what is such an insistence on experience symptomatic?

It is just such a problem that this study sets out to explore. The opening chapter, “Erfahrungshunger,” turns to those experience-oriented theories which have penetrated the public sphere and which, in so doing, best help identify that of which the appeal to experience may well be a symptom. Suited for this purpose are certain strains of

¹⁶ “Social Theory and the Public Sphere,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*, ed. Brian S. Turner (London: Blackwell, 1996), p.468, n.64.

subaltern studies, gay studies, North American feminist epistemologies as well as that branch of social history known as “histories of difference” and *Alltagsgeschichte*. The manner by which these currents in theory appeal to experience as the “ground” or, as Joan W. Scott puts it, the “evidence” from which agency and a politics of identity can be constructed, mustered and deployed, has indeed been duplicated in various grass-roots social movements.¹⁷ But rather than consider these various theoretical currents individually, a common denominator will instead be distilled— their particular notion of experience and the presuppositions subtending it— and in this regard, Thompson will occupy the foreground. Much theorizing on experience by certain cultural and historiographical trends, as many have already pointed out, has indeed been but a variation on a Thompsonian theme— a theme in which, as Joan W. Scott reminds us, Thompson’s “kind of use of experience has the same foundational status if we substitute ‘women’s’ or ‘black’ or ‘lesbian’ or ‘homosexual’ for ‘working class’... .”¹⁸ The point

¹⁷ Such a concern for experience in certain social movements can be seen in what both Charles Taylor and Axel Honneth have diagnosed as the politics of recognition. It has also arguably been implemented and institutionalized, albeit in diluted form, by Canada’s official federal policy of multiculturalism. For more on the link between recognition and issues of identity formation, see Taylor’s *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), and Honneth’s *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996).

¹⁸ “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Summer 1991): p.786. Jay also reminds us that the opposition of concrete, lived experience to abstract structures and theoretical schemes “has been no less evident in the running controversy between American feminists, who often seek to recapture women’s experience, and their French counterparts, who theoretically question the putative subject of that experience. And it is currently being rehearsed in the spirited debate over the relationship between black literature, the experience of its authors and readers, and a literary theory that is imported

here, however, is not to debunk a trend in historiographical and cultural theory, nor to present a survey or a history of opinions on an issue still highly charged; the point is instead to show, first of all, that certain experience-oriented theories and grass roots social movements, by naturalizing or ontologizing what they had initially hoped to historicize, unwittingly harbor dangerous implications—implications which, while not directly intended or thematized by such theories or social movements, have also found their concrete embodiment in the recent resurgence and proliferation of xenophobic fundamentalisms and tribalistic convulsions. The point here is also to suggest that although motivations widely diverge, certain academic currents and social movements both turn to experience for similar reasons. Because such appeals to experience can have dubious political consequences, and because the use of experience in theory has been—rightly or wrongly—so scathingly critiqued over the last few decades by a wide spectrum of schools of thought, then the persistent appeal to experience testifies to a certain insistence. As such, what is most needed here is not so much that the *insistence on experience* be critiqued, than that the *insistence of experience* be diagnosed.

form the outside, which has set scholars like Joyce A. Joyce and Barbara Christian against Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Houston Baker.” (“Songs of Experience...”, p.38). Little has changed in the ten years since Jay wrote this essay, as can be seen in the recent altercations between Louise Tilly and Joan W. Scott (for a *compte rendu*, see Eleni Varikas, “Gender, Experience and Subjectivity: The Tilly- Scott Disagreement,” *New Left Review* 211 (May/June 1995): pp. 89-101), as well as between Barbara Smith and Deborah G. Jay, (their heated exchanges appeared in *New Literary History* 24 (1993): pp. 635-656).

A somewhat tortuous path must be followed, however, before such a diagnosis can be attempted. It is indeed not sufficient to merely debunk the concept of experience as relic of misguided modernist theorizing—the very insistence with which experience is conjured *in spite* of sustained attacks from various quarters, may after all harbour what Adorno would call a truth content. The second chapter, “Experience Investigated,” thus proposes a preliminary examination of the term itself of experience. It shows how the appeal to experience *à la* Thompson indeed does not stray far from how experience, as can be gathered from its etymological and conceptual history, has been generally understood not only by philosophy, but also by daily praxis. Insofar as issues of self-formation, rather than epistemological or methodological imperatives, are concerned, various uses of experience, whether by Anglo-Saxon historiography and empiricism or German dialectics from Hegel to Gadamer, whether by Luhmanian systems theory or by popular expressions and maxims, and in spite of the distinction, made famous by Walter Benjamin, between “experience” (*Erfahrung*) and “lived experience” (*Erlebnis*), all have as a minimal common denominator a concern with how the disruptiveness of the unexpected is to be managed, and how the new occasions a change in past and present horizons or orientations. Thompsonian appeals to experience are in other words not an isolated anomaly—they on the contrary merely perpetuate an understanding of experience which has been around for quite some time: it is indeed on just such a disruptive aspect of experience that such appeals hope to capitalize in order to disrupt prevailing ideology and devise counter-histories for the formation of the subaltern self.

But because such a notion of experience no less informs academic squabbling than it does certain social movements, experience cannot be considered a mere concept confined to philosophical issues or academic debates. The third chapter, “Experience Historicized,” argues that experience on the contrary has a very real referent: the manner by which the past present and future, following confrontations with unexpectedness, are to be coordinated within economies of self-formation. This raises a more important question, however: just as “human memory may well be an anthropological given,” as Andreas Huyssen has shown, “but closely tied as it is to the ways a culture constructs and lives its temporality, the forms memory will take are invariably contingent and subject to change,”¹⁹ likewise is the role of experience in issues of self-formation not exempt from the vicissitudes of historical change. Indeed, it is only when the future opens by sufficiently diverging from the past rather than remain under its sway, that the unexpected can so disrupt a given horizon so as to allow for experience to play a central role in self-formation. Yet such a temporality, as Koselleck and others have shown, can be traced back only to the last two centuries: unlike the premodern temporality of eschatology, where the future was engulfed in an eternal present, and unlike the temporality of *Historia magistra vitae*, where the future remained tethered by the past, a divergent temporality, which many who agree on little else nevertheless agree to call modern, emerged only by the late 18th century—in fact, it initially manifested itself only within the budding bourgeoisie. Although the etymological and conceptual history of

¹⁹ *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 2.

experience does indeed point to what seems to be a transhistorical problem of unexpectedness and temporal coordination, it is nevertheless only by the late 18th century that such a dynamic becomes an explicitly thematised phenomenon, and that experience is considered central, rather than peripheral, to self-formation.

Chapter 3, however, only explains *how* experience became possible for, not *why* experience came to be perceived as central in, the economy of modern self-formation. Chapter 4, “The Consequences of a Divergent Temporality,” addresses this latter issue. This is the most theoretical of the chapters, and its argument can only be touched upon here. Yet this chapter is also one of the most crucial: by addressing what is at stake in the role of experience in self-formation, it lays the groundwork for the next chapter which addresses the question as to why experience has been so insisted upon since the late 1960s. It shows how the most pressing problem faced by the modern self has been the proliferation of the new, of unexpectedness—of complexity, in other words—against which the weight of tradition or a divinely sanctioned order of things no longer offer a protective buffer. Because the opening of the future by the late 18th century fostered unbridled unexpectedness, the modern self, no longer always already defined in terms of caste or fate, had to devise strategies for countering and containing an overwhelming increase in temporal complexity, lest it lose a sense of difference between itself and its environment—lest in other words it altogether dissolve. This is where experience, which involves the integration of the new within a revisable past and a provisional present, comes into play. The key to understanding the insistence—Thompsonian or otherwise—on

experience lies in how the modern self *not only allowed for but also required* experience in order to maintain a temporally extended sense of its own continuity in the midst of temporal discontinuity and increased temporalized complexity.

After the lengthy but necessary preliminary work of the preceding chapters, Chapter 5, “Experience Diagnosed,” argues in a variation on a Benjaminian theme that before the role of experience in self-formation can be dismissed or confirmed, let alone diagnosed, the status of its socio-historical conditions of possibility—of which temporality is perhaps the most important one—must first be ascertained. The last few decades have indeed witnessed considerable systemic socio-economic and cultural transformations, and death certificates have been, rightly or wrongly, meted out to most modernist leitmotifs, of which experience is but one. Yet at hand in much theorizing on experience in the *Erfahrungshunger* decades to this day has precisely been the tendency to posit as anthropologically innate, or as trans-historically given, that which is on the contrary socio-culturally specific and historically contingent. The point here, however, is not to settle such a historical issue by either celebrating or lamenting the persistence or the erosion of experience as a constitutive element of modern self-formation; the point here is instead to merely *shift the burden of proof*. Rather than *presume* the centrality of experience in matters of self-formation, those who would appeal to experience must instead first consider whether still subsist, today, the *socio-historical conditions of possibility* for such a role for experience. It may be beyond the scope of this study to determine whether experience still does, or indeed even should, continue to occupy a

central role in issues of self-formation, or whether the future oriented temporality upon which it is predicated has been as operative over the last two decades as it has been over the last two centuries; such questions must nevertheless be raised and, in order to do so, it is legitimate to have as working hypothesis that what may have held sway for the better part of modernity may no longer be prevalent today.

Based on such a working hypothesis, this chapter proceeds by considering the status of current temporality. But rather than conjure some *deus ex machina*, such as the postmodern notion of some cataclysmic “rupture,” this chapter considers a problem internal to the dynamic of modernity in general and experience in particular: the proliferation of the new and the exacerbation of unexpectedness following the late 18th century opening of the future. It is argued here that so unbridled have become innovation and unexpectedness that “a present geared to accelerated innovation is beginning to devour the future,” as Helga Nowotny puts it, for “the future is disposed of as if it were present, and an extended present is thereby produced.”²⁰ Unexpectedness becomes what is most expected, and the new is no longer new. In such a temporal context, where the past and future fail to diverge from an ubiquitous present, and where temporal mediation thus gives way to what Michel Freitag has called a new “culture of immediacy,”²¹ the diagnostic section of this chapter shows how the Thompsonian appeal to immediate

²⁰ *Time: The Modern and Postmodern Experience*, trans. Neville Plaice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), pp. 11, 52-53.

²¹ *Le naufrage de l'université* (Paris: La Découverte, 1995), p. 156

experience is not merely an attempt to bypass ideological mediation through recourse to the perceived resiliency of the immediate; it is also a symptom of the growing incapacity, today, to be *otherwise* than immediate. And the experience to be had in such a state of affairs is not of the sort which the Thompsonian appeal had in mind—it instead bears a resemblance to those brute punctual shocks bereft of lasting meaning which Benjamin calls *Erlebnis*—except that such punctual experiences are not to be seen, as Benjamin would have it, as coterminous with modernity as such; they are instead the recent result of the last few decades—the *Erfahrungshunger* decades—in which modernity, much in the manner suggested by Fredric Jameson regarding the cultural logic of late capitalism, has been exacerbated beyond the capacity for being coped with.

If there has been a hunger for experience, it is not because experience is a given—it is because it has become a problem. The very accelerated tempo with which are produced endless disparate images and units of information reduces the time at one's disposal for reacting to them and, in so doing, narrows the gap between past, present and future required for processing the disparate into temporally extended meaningfulness—in other words into experience. In the insistence of experience can be seen, in short, what Huyssen calls in a different but related context “an expression of the basic human need to live in extended structures of time, however they may be organised.”²²

²² *Twilight Memories*, p. 9.

CHAPTER I.

Erfahrungshunger

1. The Irreducibility of Experience

If Thompson focused on experience and its relation to culture it was, as he himself made clear, in order both to allow for the subject to re-enter history¹—agency was indeed being considerably manhandled at the time by semiology and structuralism— and to rehistoricize class rather than to write it off, as Marxist structuralism was wont to do, as the mere hapless “effect of an ulterior structure.”² By the time Thompson set out to write his history of the English working class, Althusser’s particular version of structuralism had indeed turned ideology into so tentacular an entity that the very possibility of agency, resistance, let alone concerted political action, became wishful thinking at best. It was no longer sufficient to clamour for counter-histories and local cultures, readily penetrable as these appeared to be by ideology and which, as such, were unable to guarantee the specificity of group identity without which such groups would hardly be in a position to differentiate themselves from other groups (such as those

¹ *The Poverty of Theory*, (London: Merlin, 1978), p. 238.

² *Ibid.*, p. 238. By the late 1960s, the New Left and what has retrospectively been dubbed “cultural studies” had splintered into what Stuart Hall calls the two paradigms of ‘culturalism’ (initiated in Great Britain by Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams and Thompson) and of ‘structuralism’ (fostered by Lévi-Strauss and Althusser). The resulting situation was one in which, as Jim McGuigan notes “Culturalism can be aligned with Karl Marx’s ‘men [sic] make their own history’, and structuralism with ‘not in conditions of their own making.’” *Cultural Populism* (London: Routledge, 1992), cited in Ioan Davies, *Cultural Studies and Beyond* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 119.

of the ruling class), let alone articulate their own socio-economic interests. Counter-histories, moreover, had yet to be written, and subaltern cultures, when present, were in need of re-invigoration. Group or class specificity, in other words, needed to be delineated *beforehand* so that counter-histories might then be *retrospectively* constructed. This is what Thompson tried to do when, in order to avoid what he perceived to be the structuralist reduction of class to the passive effect of an ulterior structure, while at the same time conceding that the pervasiveness of hegemonic cultural and linguistic domination was not to be sneezed at, he contended that class specificity (which is a necessary prelude to the articulation of class interests) resides in the specificity of their daily immediate experiences—experiences which are determined by the position of a class within a mode of production, and which are mediated or “handled” (as he himself repeatedly puts it in his preface to *The Making of the English Working Class*) within the local or regionalized culture of a particular class. It is by means of such a localized sharing and articulation of experience, so Thompson tells us, that a class can achieve self-consciousness, come to discern its socio-economic interests, and thus galvanize itself into concerted political action. By this, Thompson hopes to allow for the possibility of agency and class consciousness which is neither naïvely voluntarist nor sabotaged by strong structural determinism. As he himself describes what his work attempted to achieve: “We have explored, both in theory and in practice, those junction concepts

(such as ‘need, ‘class’, and ‘determine’) by which , through the missing term ‘experience,’ structure is transmuted into process, and the subject re-enters history.”³

The expectations tied to the anti-hegemonic potential of experience, then, were sanguine—to say the least: echoing Thompson’s position, Peter Fuller tells us that “...courageous, empirical fidelity to experience can, under certain circumstances at least, cut through ideology. Experience is not wholly determined by ideology: it is very often at odds with it, causing constant ruptures and fissures within the ideological ice flows.”⁴ And Thompson’s wager on experience was hardly an isolated anomaly, reinforced as it was by the culturalist current of British Marxism (with names such as Raymond Williams and John Berger) and, later, by strands of feminism, of subaltern and gay studies and of historians of difference. Just as for Thompson the immediacy of experience, that “raw material” which consciousness elaborates in “class ways” within a specific culture, need but be inserted within a counter history in order for class consciousness to arise and agency to materialize, likewise have certain feminist and subaltern endeavours called for a politics of experience, telling us for example as Messer-Davidow does that “we come to recognize that agencies and perspectives are centred in our selves...by grounding ourselves in our experiences, politicising them, and together

³ *The Poverty of Theory*, p. 170 (cited in Scott, “the Evidence of Experience,” p. 784.)

⁴ *Beyond the Crisis in Art* (London: Writers and Readers, 1980), p.235.

constructing a collective reality.”⁵ Much rides on experience, in other words, and because it is perceived precisely as that one element which allows for a flaw or fissure in what might otherwise be an unassailable and all-pervading hegemonic order, it is imperative that it not be subjected to ideological mediation. Ioan Davies in fact goes so far as to characterize Thompson’s life work as a “search for experience that has not been mediated.”⁶

But if this search for unmediated experience was eventually to become frenetic, it was because after Althusser, experience itself was increasingly considered as the last vestige of an antiquated philosophy of consciousness, as so much claptrap, in other words, which was hardly exempt from ideological determination. Since the linguistic turn, the relation of experience to language has indeed been seen in a different light: *Parole* was no longer that which carries to verbal expression the pre-discursive unsaid of experience, and meaning was considered as appearing only with the signifier. Meaning was in other words not so much the meaning *of* experience—it was not, to phrase it differently, the meaning experience would have had before its expression—than it was instead the meaning experience *can receive* in a discourse which articulates it within a

⁵ Cited in Elizabeth J. Bellamy and Artemis Leontis, “A Genealogy of Experience: From Epistemology to Politics,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 6, 1 (1993): p. 172.

⁶ *Cultural Studies and Beyond*, p. 100.

system of signifying oppositions.⁷ No longer conflated with its expression, experience alone was no longer in a position to convey one's status as exploiter or exploitee, as elite or subaltern, by the mere fact of belonging to someone so positioned in the structural whole of society. Because the very consciousness of one's position is always already mediated by ideology, discourse and language, mechanisms of domination and repression are no longer to be deduced from one's structural position as such: "By bringing to light the *heterogeneity* of the signifier to lived experience [*expérience vécue*]," Vincent Descombes reminds us, "semiology involved a political lesson. It showed how the hold of institutions over individuals amounted to the domination of a language."⁸ And it is of course precisely on such a *décalage* between experience and knowledge that rests Althusser's notion of ideology—a notion according to which the rapport of lived experience to the real conditions of existence is at best imaginary, and certainly not an epistemological access to the real. If it is true, as it is according to Althusser, that ideology is the "imaginary relationship of individuals to the real conditions in which they live,"⁹ and that this ideology is "identical with the 'lived'

⁷ A concise presentation of this issue, which deals specifically with the problematization of experience following developments in semiology from the 1950s through the 1970s, can be found in chapter 3 of Vincent Descombes, *Le même et l'autre: Quarante-cinq ans de philosophie française (1933-1978)*, (Paris: Minuit, 1979).

⁸ *Le même et l'autre*, p.129. My emphasis and translation. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

⁹ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1971), p.165.

experience of human existence itself,”¹⁰ then ideology is indeed not to be bypassed by appeals to experience. All of this of course spelled considerable trouble for those who had staked the condition of possibility of agency on a dialectic of class conflict which presupposed consciousness, or at least the possibility of consciousness, of one’s class position within a mode of production. In fact, things did not fare well for *any* approach which hoped that the mere fact of being positioned in the larger social whole, say, as woman, subaltern or differently abled, was a sufficient condition of possibility for a certain form of consciousness. Unlike phenomenology (such as Merleau-Ponty’s), which endowed subjectivity with a certain *Spielraum*, or room for manoeuvre, by allowing for the *cogito* to be derived from the *percipio*, or at least by considering as equiprimordial both understanding and affective situatedness (in the manner of *pre-kehre* Heidegger’s *Verstehen*, *Befindlichkeit* and *Stimmung*, as well as post-Gadamerian renderings of *applicatio*), structuralism on the contrary underscored the *disjunction* between experience and knowledge and, as a result, it doomed to failure any theory advocating that experiences specific to a group could lead to individual or collective consciousness and, in so doing, allow for the articulation of one’s interests in terms of which political action might be concerted.

It was precisely in response to this epistemological turn of events that the culturalist strain in British Marxism, as well subsequent strands in feminism and

¹⁰ Cited in “A Genealogy of Experience: From Epistemology to Politics,” p. 173.

subaltern studies, came to see experience as that which, by virtue of its pre-discursive material immediacy, radically demarcates itself from and therefore evades discursive or ideological mediation and determination. Because, as Thompson saw it, the imposition of state ideology “cannot succeed unless there is congruence between the imposed rules and view of life and the necessary business of living in a given mode of production,”¹¹ something was indeed needed which might sabotage such a congruence and, in so doing, bypass mediation and strong structural determination. Of the possible candidates, the perceived non-mediatedness, or immediacy, of experience proved to be particularly seductive: because of its seemingly pristine, that is, its non-mediated or immediate and therefore non-discursive or non-ideological contact with environing social being, experience represented just that sort of ideologically untainted “raw material” (to use Thompson’s expression) which, in order to precipitate (in the chemical sense of the term) into class or group self-consciousness and agency, needed but be articulated by a regionalized culture sufficiently specific to those sharing particular experiences. Experience, in short, represented the stuff (in the sense of its Germanic cognate, *Stoff*, that is, resistant material) which, impervious as it appeared to be to discursive or ideological penetration, might furnish the material building blocks from which counter-histories could be constructed and subaltern cultures reinforced. Such perceptions of the counter-hegemonic potential of experience were of course encouraged by the connotations the word had acquired in the Anglo-American world: from a term which

¹¹ *The Poverty of Theory*, p. 367

from the 17th to the early 18th century implied knowledge gained through both a reliance on the past as well as through observation untainted, as Francis Bacon would say, by church dogma, superstition and other obscurantist idols, the concept of experience semantically shifted by the mid 18th century not only to that which opposed reason, but also to that which is “full and active awareness” of both feeling and thought and which, as such, assumed an aura of authenticity with which reasoning and ideas could not dispense.¹² As we shall see in the next chapter, the German equivalents of experience, whether as *Erfahrung* or as the early 19th century neologism *Erlebnis*, are likewise informed by a conceptual and etymological history which could but encourage the association of experience with notions of counter-hegemonic resistance, as can be seen in the recourse, by certain members of the Frankfurt School and by certain phenomenologists, to *Erfahrung* as a means of countering given or dominant horizons of understanding, and as can also be seen in the recourse by *Lebensphilosophie* to *Erlebnis* as a means of opposing the mediacy of abstract reason with the immediacy of the concretely lived.

¹² Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed. (New York, 1985), p. 126. If the semantic history of the concept of experience has been a long one in the Anglo-American world, where empiricism itself has travelled a long journey, it follows a more convoluted trajectory in Germany: not only does it fork into *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* by the end of the 18th century, but it enjoys an intermittent vogue (in either of these two guises) which fluctuates in tandem with larger social and political (and not just philosophical) developments. This will be dealt with at length in subsequent chapters.

Thompson's notion of experience, however, does not seek to rehabilitate the "other" of reason in the manner that *Erlebnis* had in certain popularizations of late 19th and early 20th century *Lebensphilosophie*; it instead wagers on the "other" of what is perceived as the immateriality of signification-- an immateriality which, bereft as it is of non-malleable resistance to external meddling, readily and pliantly lends itself to ideological mediation, contamination and appropriation. Althusser in particular and theorists in general were for Thompson but so many "idealists" (as he himself put it) whose ethereal theorizing has always had a penchant for manhandling the concrete and the real, those "real men and real women" to whom Thompson frequently refers with vituperative pathos. If experience plays a central role, then, in certain theories hoping to vindicate agency, it is because of its assumed unmediated proximity with materiality-- a materiality which, by the fact that it lends itself to touch, somehow appears as less mediated and thus less open to ideological tampering, much as for Locke the qualities of material spatial extension, lending themselves as they do to palpable verification and thus less prone as they are to perceptual distortion, are considered as qualities more primary than the more fickle and secondary qualities of sight or sound which are more susceptible to meddlesome and distorting external interference. It is true that, in order to avoid both empirical positivism (and the naively voluntarist notion of agency it implies) as well as Althusser's strong structural determinism, Thompson proposed that experience be understood less as binarily opposed to structure than as a mediating third term inserted in the "dialogue between social being and social consciousness" (where social being is the material reality of social structure) and in the interaction between

“conditioning” and “agency” and at the “intersection between determination and self activity;”¹³ it nevertheless remains that his notion of experience, by virtue of its non-mediated contact with the real (social being), is itself imbued with material properties: “Thus change takes place in social being which then gives rise to change in experience,” Thompson explains, “...and this experience *exerts pressure* on existent social consciousness, raises questions, and *furnishes the material* for intellectual elaboration.”¹⁴ As “raw material” and in the manner of a *Gegenstand*, Thompson’s notion of experience stands against, presses and impinges upon consciousness, and although dependent on its retrospective mediation and articulation within a local culture, this experience nevertheless has all the makings of the spatially extended solidity of matter–matter which can presumably, by virtue of its material immediacy, circumvent ideological mediation (and thus ideological determination) and which, in so doing, can serve as the ground from which resistance can be mustered, sociability constructed and political action coordinated.

This Thompsonian notion of experience, as Scott and others have already pointed out, has found its way in numerous strains of feminist epistemologies, histories of difference and subaltern studies, and rooted as it is in pre-discursive materiality, it is hardly surprising that it should have lately migrated to what is considered by many to be

¹³ *The Poverty of Theory*, pp. 224, 225, 228.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.200. My emphasis

the last enclave of resistance against ideological contamination— the perceived non-discursive material immediacy of the body itself. As Elizabeth Bellamy and Artemis Leontis have shown, some feminist strands indeed go so far as to “offer experience, *qua* women’s experience of alienation from their own bodies, as the evidence of difference,”¹⁵ while others, by contending that the very materiality of social practice somehow institutes a disruptive fissure within the hegemony of dominant discursive practices, if not within language itself (which not a few consider to be permeated by patriarchal structures), have retreated, as Scott has noted, to “the biological or physical ‘experience’ of the body” itself.¹⁶ Others still propose that resistance to dominant ideology or “discursive regimes” is to be mustered by the bodily (and therefore immediate) experiences of oppression --experiences which can be retrospectively articulated by counter histories and then harnessed into political awareness, as if the experience of oppression were itself somehow the source of resistance to it.¹⁷ But Fredric Jameson

¹⁵ “A Genealogy of Experience,” p. 167.

¹⁶ “The Evidence of Experience”, pp. 787-788. Scott has noted that such a shift to immediate bodily experience follows (for example) from Christine Stansell’s “insistence that ‘social practices’, in all their ‘immediacy and entirety’ constitute a domain of ‘sensuous experience’ (a pre-discursive reality directly felt, seen and known) that cannot be subsumed by language.”

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 27. As Rita Felski likewise observes, various attempts to establish a feminist epistemology have argued that “women’s access to truth is less a result of distinctive psycho-sexual characteristics than of their social experience of subordination.” The problem with such an approach, Felski further notes, is in “assuming some kind of necessary relationship between subordination and critical opposition to it”—after all, “being oppressed is no guarantee of clarity of vision or possession of truth.” To this Felski adds that attempts to ground a specifically feminine epistemology in the specificity of women’s experience is condemned to failure, for in “assuming some

soberly reminds us that “we must be very suspicious of the reference to the body as an appeal to immediacy (the warning goes back to the very first chapter of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*); even Foucault’s medical and penal work can be read as an account of the construction of the body which *rebukes premature immediacy*.”¹⁸ Furthermore, the recent obsession with the body, following the earlier infatuation with space¹⁹ and with “power,” although it might yield some occasional insights, is of course hardly in a position to vindicate the historical materialism with which, as if to appease Bourdieu, it often fancies itself allied: “Materialism,” Jameson points out, “is scarcely achieved by a litany of the body...” and the materialism of the body “... should not be confused with a historical materialism that turns on praxis and on the mode of production.”²⁰ But at stake here in the recent obsession with the materiality of non-mediated bodily experience is not just an attempt to redeem historical, let alone dialectical, materialism—something which an exclusive reliance on immediate material experience, bodily or otherwise, is hardly in a position to accomplish anyway; at stake is instead the condition of possibility of an active

common denominator of female experience as an authenticating foundation of feminist politics, they fail to recognize that the relationship between female subordination and feminist resistance is a contingent one, that there is no *a priori* antagonism of masculinity and femininity through which women are constituted as appositional political subjects.” “Feminism, Postmodernism and the Critique of Modernity,” *Cultural Critique* (Fall 1989): pp. 39-41.

¹⁸ “On ‘Cultural Studies’ ” *Social Text* 34 (Winter 1993): p. 44. My emphasis.

¹⁹ Although the “rehabilitation” of space in response to too exclusive an emphasis on time began of course with Henri Lefèbvre’s 1974 study, *La production de l’espace*, it was not until the mid- 1980s that space was appropriated by postmodernist theorists.

²⁰ “On ‘Cultural Studies,’ ” p. 44.

subject and of a ground from which can be erected strategies of resistance (to use the jargon of the 1980s) and a politics of identity (to use the slogan of the 1990s) that can evade the hegemony of ideology or, to use one of the numerous expressions currently in vogue, the dominant “discursive formations.” Indeed, the centrality of immediate and materially grounded experience as a buttress to agency and identity continues to this day in those currents in feminism and subaltern studies which presuppose a non-mediated homology or correlation between one’s structural position²¹ one’s socioeconomic interests, one’s propensity for certain types of experiences and certain forms of consciousness or awareness.

That Thompson would endorse some of the uses to which has been put his notion of experience is of course unlikely, but that is beside the point. Regardless of Thompson’s motivations, this turn to the material immediacy of bodily experiences is but the logical unfolding of the tenor of his argument which, after all, attempts to *ground group specificity and sociability in the non-discursive*. Since within Thompson’s history of the English working class, as well as in certain strains of social histories of difference, of feminist epistemologies and other subaltern endeavours, all forms of mediation and discursivity are considered fair game for ideological penetration, the turn to the immediate and the non-discursive is to be expected, and the migration towards if

²¹ Such a position can be proletarian, subaltern, physically challenged, gyno- or andro-centric— the list is as endless as are the groups and micro-groups currently competing amongst one another for recognition.

not the fetishization of material immediacy is but an extrapolation of such a turn. Such an argument, however, represents more than a mere theoretical blunder or *faux pas*. In their bid to circumvent ideological or discursive mediation by predicating class or group specificity, sociability and agency on the non-discursive immediacy of experience, such experience-oriented theories advance an argument which is not so much specious as it is dangerous: there is indeed nothing within the logic of such an argument that precludes the hypostatization of *other* non-discursive bases for group membership and specificity—bases which can as readily be those of immediate experiences as they can be those, say, of the perceived non-discursive materiality of biological characteristics, or of the physical markers of ethnicity and sexuality which, by virtue of just such a perceived non-negotiable material immediacy, appear as less penetrable by ideology. If indeed the criterion for the perceived disruptive anti-hegemonic potential, if not the authenticity, of experience is its non-mediatedness and if, as we saw earlier, such a criterion can readily lead to a fetishization of the material if not of the body itself (which not a few perceive as the last enclave of resistance where the non-mediated specificity of experience is “registered” or “inscribed,” in the manner of Kafka’s penal colony, as so many tattoos and body piercings testifying to the irreducibly singular and irrecuperable),²² then what

²²As Sylvain Houde noted in his review of a recent feminist colloquium held in Montreal, “it is Chantal Maille, director of the Simone de Beauvoir Institute at Concordia University, feminist *de la première heure*, who most unsettled public certitudes by making the body into the locus of the next revolution. Invoking the ‘modern primitive movement,’ she affirmed that ‘our body is becoming a new locus of struggle, which lays claim to its difference through actions such as body piercing.’” “Les booms et l’echo,” *Voir* 12, 7 (19-25 Feb, 1998): p. 6. My translation.

starts out as an attempt to account for a non-mediated locus of “resistance” and agency can end up as a *surenchère* of immediacy which but a nudge by a cluster of circumstances can propel towards what Michael Piore has termed “biologism”²³— an increasingly common trend whereby “a person’s entire identity resides in a single physical characteristic, whether it be of blackness, of deafness or of homosexuality.”²⁴ *Blut und Boden* can then be but a step away, and not a few tribalisms have taken just that step. But the step from an appeal to the immediacy of experience, whether from certain theories hoping to account for the possibility of agency, or from new social movements struggling for the recognition of group specificity, to rabid tribalistic convulsions and neo-ethnic fundamentalisms is of course only a possible step and not a necessary one; and the link between these two trends is certainly not one of affinity, and still less one of causality. What the parallelism between the two does suggest, however, is that in spite of their divergent motivations and means, they both nevertheless attempt to ground group specificity by appealing to immediacy—by appealing, in other words, to something which is less a historical product or construct than it is a given and natural entity, whether it be of the essence of a *Volk*, as in current tribalisms, or the essence of material experiences specific to groups, as in certain strains of *Alltagsgeschichte*, of North American feminist epistemologies and other experience-oriented theories and new social

²³ *Beyond Individualism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

²⁴ Todd Gitlin, “La droite américaine manipule le sentiment national,” *Le Monde Diplomatique* (November 1995): p.6.

movements.²⁵ But as shall become clearer in the next section, if a potential for biologism and the spectre of neo-ethnic tribalism are close at hand in some current cultural theorising and new social movements, it is because the reliance on immediate experience opens the back door to what was booted out the front door, namely, *the naturalization and ontologisation precisely of that which one had initially set out to historicize.*

²⁵ The tendency to naturalize what is historically contingent and culturally constructed is of course not limited to the aforementioned trends, but on the contrary has found its way in neo-liberal or monetarist economic policy (where the laws of the Market have now assumed the trans-temporal stature of natural law), in politics (where the Market represents a natural *telos* or fate to which one can but submit, and against which defiance is as silly as would be defiance against, say, the law of thermodynamics), and of course in the increasing trend toward the naturalization and justification of social inequities through a new form of social Darwinism thinly disguised as genetics, but as ideologically charged as and only slightly less coarse than 19th century phrenology which, by naturalizing socio-pathology and social standing in terms of cranial protuberances, did much to legitimize each individual's economic lot, thereby buttressing that very liberal economic policy which has resurfaced over the last two decades.

2. The Ontologisation of Experience, the Naturalization of Difference and the Spectre of Neo-ethnic Tribalism

Theories which hope to account for agency and group specificity by invoking the immediacy of experience have of course incurred scathing critiques, and these have come not only from Althusserians, who have always had a healthy distrust towards premature or bad immediacy, but also from poststructuralists, for whom the term “experience,” like so many other modernist categories, is but a “nostalgic yearning for presence,”²⁶ as well as from postgadamerian hermeneutics, according to which the anticipatory structure of understanding precludes any recourse to immediacy, let alone to the immediacy of experience. But of import here is not the viability of certain experience-oriented theories, which can be readily debunked on various epistemological grounds, whether Kantian, phenomenological, Althusserian, Marxist or Luhmanian, and which can likewise be easily rebuked for political irresponsibility; of import instead are the repercussions entailed by the misuse of categories such as experience—repercussions which beyond polite theoretical inquiry reverberate within the social and which, as such, suggest that there is indeed a certain urgency to examining the category of experience. To wager on the immediacy of experience (or of anything else, for that matter) in a bid to

²⁶ As Derrida put it in *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976): “‘experience’ has always designated the relationship with a presence, whether that relationship had the form of consciousness or not.” Cited in “A Genealogy of Experience,” p. 182.

outsmart ideology (or commodification or “discursive regimes”), is indeed to give rise to a series of problems, not least of which is the tendency noted by Scott towards naturalising or ontologising those very attributes, whether of class, gender or ethnicity, which if anything are more in need of historical analysis.

Although such a tendency within experience-oriented theories is of course rarely thematized, and rarer still is it intended, it nevertheless logically follows from the argument according to which group identity, specificity and concerted political action have as their condition of possibility the non-mediated experiences which bind or are shared by their members. While it is true that this argument admits that the “raw material” of experience must be “handled” within a culture in order for it to materialize into class (or subaltern, or woman’s) consciousness, it nevertheless maintains that the specificity of class resides in experience understood as that *non-mediated interstice* which, in Thompson’s words, is located “between social consciousness and social being” or at “the intersection between determination and self-activity.” And as Scott has argued, it is precisely by predicating identity and agency on shared non-mediated experiences, that certain historians of difference and cultural theorists in fact “locate resistance outside its discursive construction and reify agency as an inherent attribute of individuals...”—a move which, when pushed to its logical conclusion, “naturalizes categories such as woman, black, white, heterosexual and homosexual by treating them as given

characteristics of individuals.”²⁷ From such a stance, which is usually more implicitly present than explicitly embraced, it is hardly surprising that currents of gay-identity politics (to take but one of the more recent examples) should treat homosexuality, as Nancy Fraser has noted, “as a substantive, cultural, identificatory positivity, much like an ethnicity.”²⁸ It may seem unfair to impute to certain experience-oriented theories an argument which, when carried to its logical conclusion, can as readily foster an “emancipatory” politics of identity as it can neo-ethnic tribalism.²⁹ The potential for

²⁷ “The Evidence of Experience,” p. 777.

²⁸ “From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a ‘Post-Socialist’ Age,” *New Left Review* 212 (July-August 1995): p. 83.

²⁹The scare quotes around “emancipatory” are not intended as derisive, but rather as a reminder that, demographically speaking, few have been liberated by a tinkering with language and culture alone. Certain experience-oriented theories have indeed increasingly divorced themselves from the social phenomena they presume to analyse, and the disconcerting result has been that the very notions they concocted, in their initially laudable attempt, in the 1960s and 1970s, to ‘give a voice’ to the oppressed, have since the 1980s (and particularly glaringly in the 1990s) become little more than academic and middle class *chic*: self-proclaimed subversive theoretical concepts such as ‘subaltern studies,’ ‘post-colonialism’ and ‘multi-culturalism’ are indeed, as Masao Miyoshi rightly tells us, but “a luxury largely irrelevant to those who live under the most wretched conditions,” for “neither nativism, nor pluralism are in their thoughts, only survival.” (“A Borderless World? From Colonialism to Transnationalism and the Decline of the Nation-State” *Critical Inquiry* (Summer 1993): p.748.) If anything has been emancipated by some recent trends in cultural theory, it has largely been the guilty conscience of the educated middle-class, a handful of professors and their graduate students who can materially afford, for the time being at least, to quibble over group specificity and culture, of difference and “nomadic thought,” and this under the guise of subversiveness, while those in whose name they presume to speak concern themselves with such mundane issues as, say, minimal economic security. But it is true that as current economic policies have been belatedly reverberating within the corridors of academia itself and have turned the over-production of graduate students into so many structurally unemployable subjects, claims of subversiveness and euphoric celebrations of difference have been considerably tamed in the last few years.

biologism is hardly representative of the intentions of experience-oriented theories which, after all, focused on the immediacy of experience, rather than on the essence of a group, in order both to avoid strong structural determination on the one hand, and the essentializing or naturalizing of class (or of any other subaltern groups) on the other. But if there cannot be a discursive differentiation of one experience from another— the counter-hegemonic potential of experience is after all predicated upon its immediacy, and narrative mediation is thus to be avoided and constructed instead *after the fact* (of irreducible experience)— and if a non-discursive common ground uncontaminated by external tampering is that which provides a guarantee of group authenticity, then the logical criterion for group specificity can but be those elements which unite groups in non-discursive ways— elements that can as readily be those of a group’s shared non-mediated experience, say, of oppression, as they can be those of a group’s biological characteristics, if not its perceived *völkisch* manifest destiny.

But if there is a tendency towards naturalizing, or an “essentializing impulse” (to use Bellamy’s and Leontis’ apt phrase) at work in experience-oriented theories, it is to be found not in any *intended* attempt to establish the essence, as such, of any particular group or groupuscule; it is instead the *consequence* of a displacement of this essentializing impulse from groups to the *experiences* of those groups—a move which, by merely displacing the problem it was supposed to address, not only reproduces this problem elsewhere without solving it but which also, by the very fact of such a displacement, renders naturalization less visible and therefore all the more insidiously

seductive. Such a shift was due in large part, as we saw earlier, to the linguistic turn: before this turn, agency could be and frequently was accounted for by reference to experience precisely because experience could still be considered as conflated with or as an extension of consciousness—such was the case, for instance (and there are many more such instances) with existentialist Marxism, according to which the voluntarist agency needed for concerted political action, as Vincent Descombes has pointed out, was predicated to a considerable extent on experience.³⁰ After the linguistic turn, however, such manoeuvring lost its credibility, and the culturalist current of British Marxism therefore sought to ground class specificity in those shared immediate experiences situated *between* consciousness and social being (instead of simply “in” consciousness); as a result, class affiliation and group membership becomes less the product, *as such*, of a structurally preordained position within a mode of production, than it instead becomes a “happening”, as Thompson himself put it, which follows from the cultural handling of those shared immediate experiences to which one is *predisposed* by virtue of one’s structural position within a mode of production. Although retrospectively handled according to a regionalized culture, these shared experiences are endowed with a certain material immediacy which, by thus evading ideological mediation and strong structural determination, help provide a modicum of class specificity and agency. When Thompson tells us, then, that “class experiences are determined by the productive relations into

³⁰ As Descombes puts it in reference to existentialist Marxism, “the truth of Marxist theses about class struggle and the necessity of revolution rested on the experience of the individual who was conscious of existing as either exploited or exploiting.” *Le Même et l’Autre...*, p.141.

which men are born—or enter involuntarily,” and that “class consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms,”³¹ he is not appealing to an essence of the working class which alone allows for certain forms of experience, nor is he proposing an essence of the working class lurking in some shadowy recess and in need of but a nudge for it to blossom into self-awareness; he is instead claiming that a class is so structurally positioned so as to be exposed to specific material and pre-discursive experiences, and that as a result of the judicious retrospective mediation of these experiences within a class culture, these experiences become explicitly shared. Class, in other words, “happens”. The “essentializing impulse” at work in Thompson’s argument, then, is at the service not of the nature of a given structural position, but rather of the material experiences to which one is predisposed by being placed in such a structural position. And what is naturalized is not so much the “experiencers” than it is the *experiences*—experiences which instead of being culturally constructed and historically contingent are considered unmediated and given. The very category of experience by means of which Thompson hoped to re-historicize class and, in so doing, counter both the ahistorical reduction of class to a synchronically and structurally determined variable as well as what he perceived to be the orthodox Marxist essentializing of class, turns out to be that category through which the ahistorical naturalisation he sought to avoid re-enters through the back door. Although less visible than when couched in the more traditional terms of a philosophy of consciousness, the de-historicized ontologisation and

³¹ *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Gollancz, 1963), p.10

naturalisation of class are shifted about only in order to resurface elsewhere, and what started as a historicization of the English working class ends up instead as its naturalisation, except that what is naturalised is not the inherent essence of a class, but rather the material experiences on the basis of which class can happen. As Scott puts it in her assessment of the Thompsonian appeal to experience: “Working-class experience is now the ontological foundation of working-class identity, politics, and identity.”³²

While Scott has rightly diagnosed the naturalizing tendency in theories and social movements appealing to the immediacy of experience, she is amiss, however, both with regard to Thompson and, more important, with regard to the implications of how experience has subsequently been used by various theories of agency and identity, when she attributes to Thompson’s cultural theory the will to hegemonically unify “diverse people into that coherent (totalizing) whole which is distinctive of class.”³³ Aside from the fact that class as such is hardly a “totalizing whole,”³⁴ what has been overlooked is

³² “The Evidence of Experience,” p. 786.

³³ “The Evidence of Experience,” pp. 184-185. Such a charge can of course likewise apply to other experience-oriented theories. In the case for example of North American feminism, Rita Felski notes that “Black women have criticized the tendency of white middle-class females to deduce a generalized notion of female experience from their own lives, and both they and Marxist feminists have challenged attempts to deduce a distinctive common denominator which unites the experiences of all women across historical, class, racial, and national boundaries.” *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics. Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 26.

³⁴ For a recent healthy corrective to hastily concocted notions of class, see Jameson’s “Marx’s Purloined Letter,” *New Left Review* 209 (Jan/Feb. 1995): pp. 75-109.

that the cultural model proposed by Thompson and other subsequent experience-oriented theories entails *less that differences be dissolved*, so as to insure their hegemonic inclusion within a group, *than that they be evacuated* or cleansed so as to prevent the contamination of group specificity. While it is true that Thompson advanced his notion of immediate experience, as we saw earlier, because the imbrication of cultural mediation within discursive processes was perceived as that which made culture vulnerable to ideological penetration, and because in contrast experience, when endowed with an element of immediacy in its contact with reality—even if only in the form of punctual brute feeling or bodily sensation—seemed less prone to such ideological contamination, his notion of experience nevertheless depended on a retrospective and *regionalised* cultural “handling” in order for it to consolidate into group self-awareness and to channel itself into concerted political action. Since it is upon a culture’s proximity to or affinity with a group (as opposed to a culture either imposed from above or imported from elsewhere) that is predicated the efficiency with which a local culture can both do justice to a group’s non-mediated experiences (and in so doing demarcate the group’s specificity) as well as articulate these experiences in terms of the group’s local *mores* and interests (and in so doing circumvent the always already of ideology while harnessing group experiences for counter-hegemonic political action), then a group’s “difference” is sustainable only if it *both* bypasses its absorption into dominant ideology (lest appropriation ensue) *and* avoids its dissipation into groups and cultures different from itself (lest there follow entropy and therefore a weakening of resistance). The very fact of a group’s difference, after all, is predicated on its differentiation from and not its

fusion with or dissolution into other adjoining groups, however subaltern and peripheral these themselves might also be. Thompson indeed repeatedly emphasizes that the materialisation of class consciousness hinges upon a culture specific to it where values and norms are shared and consolidated rather than dispersed, and as he himself tells us, “...class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared) , feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and *as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs.*”³⁵ That Thompson here should define a group’s identity and interests as necessarily *different* from (and only as “usually,” not necessarily, opposed to) those of other groups is no mere happenstance but on the contrary a consequence of the “local culture” argument: indeed, although Thompson meant “as against other men” in the Hegelian sense that there cannot be slaves without masters, or, as he put it, “nor deference without squires and labourers,”³⁶ there is nevertheless nothing within the logic of his argument that guarantees that there cannot also be whites without blacks, ethnic Serbs without ethnic Albanians, and the differentiation of which he speaks can as well apply horizontally to neighbouring or adjacent groups as it can apply vertically to dominant ideology. The logic inherent to such a position, then, leads less to a “dissolving” of difference than it does to a *surenchère* or exacerbation of difference; and just as there is nothing in

³⁵ *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 9. My emphasis.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9. It is of course ironic that Thompson, who shuns anything remotely smacking of idealism, should actually refer, if obliquely, to the Hegelian master-slave dialectic in order to buttress his claim to cultural differentiation.

Thompson's theory of experience or its subsequent incarnations that precludes a migration towards biologism, likewise is there nothing in the complementary "local culture" argument that prevents a group from shifting to neo-ethnic entrenchment in the name of its specificity instead of inciting to broad inter-group coalitions à la Mouffe/Laclau.³⁷ While the "local culture" argument of course does not intend nor necessarily lead to neo-ethnic tribalistic entrenchment where differences are to be evacuated, purged and cleansed as so many foreign bodies, neither is it necessarily (if at all-- if current events in certain regions are any indicator) conducive to the peaceful dialogical co-existence of tolerant micro-groups within some playfully pluralistic carnival.

It is true that by stripping the concept of class of all teleological, structural and universalizing elements, Thompson helped steer critical thought and historiography from the temptation of both economic and structural determinism and, in so doing, he has bequeathed what has been rightly regarded as a brilliant study of the English working class; but by predicating class specificity upon its perceived ideologically irreducible experiences and local cultural "handling" of those experiences, Thompson unwittingly ends up with an entity whose *raison d'être* risks becoming the fact of its difference. Thompson, *malgré lui*, makes class (as strands of subaltern studies, along with certain new social movements, were later to do with their own respective constituencies) into

³⁷ Their position on this matter can be found in their *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985).

but one among many other claims to difference competing amongst one another both for recognition and for the general population's dwindling access to material resources.³⁸ If pushed to its limits while remaining within the terms of its own logic, Thompson's use of experience assists not so much in the making of the English working class, or of any other class for that matter, than it does in the unmaking of that class into a proliferation of microgroups bent not on dissolving but on exacerbating difference.³⁹ And it is not without a certain ironical twist of fate that the very concept of experience deployed by Thompson to re-historicize class and to re-endow it with a modicum of agency should come back to haunt him and turn against him: in the current wave of what Jameson calls "the immense movement of demarxification," where scare quotes have indeed become *de rigueur* when economic issues, let alone class issues, are so much as mentioned, the resurrection of class issues is certainly not *de bon ton*, and particularly so for those very experience-oriented theories and social movements directly or indirectly spawned by the work of the History Workshops of the 1970s – those very movements, in other words, to

³⁸ That problems of recognition and re-distribution should be mentioned here in the same breath is no timid attempt to appease, or syncretic attempt to reconcile, the generally polarized opposition between, on the one hand, the social democratic concern with minimally equitable economic distribution, and on the other, the purely cultural concern with identity, specificity and recognition. Rather, in the spirit of Nancy Fraser, these two opposing schemes are to be seen as interdependent. See her "From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Post-socialist' Age."

³⁹ This is not, however, to imply that class is not a viable sociologico-cultural category as such—in this regard, see Jameson's "On Cultural Studies" and "Marx's Purloined Letter." When it deals with the socio-historical constitution of subjectivity, culture and interests, class is indeed far more useful a category than are the regressive ones of neo-ethnicity.

which are attributed or which frequently lay claim to a Marxist lineage yet for which, as Jameson put it, "...the denunciation of the concept of class has become an obligatory gesture today, as though we all know that race, gender and ethnicity were more satisfactory concepts or more fundamental, prior, concrete, existential experiences."⁴⁰

Since it is just such an entrenchment of groups within their difference that harbors the spectre of neo-ethnic tribalism, there is a certain irony, then, to the frequent invocation, to this day, of the "local culture" argument as an antidote to the very neo-ethnic tribalism it implicitly fosters. This argument indeed tells us that the spectre of neo-ethnic tribalism, while admittedly present, can nonetheless be contained insofar as group experience is articulated and consolidated within the *micro-récit* of a local or regionalized culture.⁴¹ Because of its proximity to those sharing experiences specific or "natural" to a particular subaltern group, such a local culture—so the argument runs— not

⁴⁰ "Marx's Purloined Letter", p. 92.

⁴¹ One need but attend conferences on cultural issues or eavesdrop on the exchanges in humanities graduate seminars to see this argument sporadically but persistently surface. But if this argument has become so common, it is not because it has been advocated by any particular theorist of repute (in fact, it has not—not even by Lyotard himself whose frequently misappropriated position is not to be dismissed along such lines, although it can certainly be dismissed as such), but rather because it has within both the media and academia become something of an *idée reçue* whose critical potential, like words such difference, nomadic thought, specificity, power and a whole litany of other concepts (which Jameson amusingly suggests ought to be collected in a sequel to Flaubert's dictionary of commonplaces), has maintained as much preciseness and critical acumen (if it was ever there to begin with, as not a few would question) as have the features of the effigies erased from those *tessera* outworn from over-circulation of which spoke Nietzsche.

only retrospectively helps articulate and consolidate subaltern experience in terms *other* than those established in advance by the dominant hegemonic cultural order, but its regional or local character also immunizes it against the sombre totalitarian machinations of meta-narratives and other pretensions to universality and, as such, it is somehow less prone towards the “repression of difference.” While it is true that theories appealing to the evidence or immediacy of experience do indeed aim less at the universalization than at the sharp demarcation and differentiation of a group’s experiences and that, in so doing, they do in fact “cultivate difference” rather than smother it, such a move nevertheless does not of itself *necessarily* entail a course of political action, or even a politics of identity, any kinder and gentler than those mean metanarratives it hoped to supplant: mechanisms of exclusion are indeed no less present just because they have been regionalised. Furthermore, the very professed political goal of experience oriented theories—to resist Capital (or phallocracy, or albinocracy)—is beset by serious problems which are not just theoretical: as Bellamy and Leontis remind us, “a conventional politics of experience relies on the *premise* that its celebration of pluralism leads to a politics of alliance that can produce at least momentary stability as the essentializing ground of political action”—yet this very premise is hardly guaranteed by the immediacy of untainted group experience, no matter how local the culture retrospectively mediating and consolidating it, for not only is there “no ‘necessary’ (no logical) leap from experience to politics,” and not only is it true that “the pursuit by experience of any genuine moment of collective truth must inevitably have dubious political consequences because the essence of the “people” can be so readily appropriated by either the left or the

right,"⁴² but also, to go further than Bellamy and Leontis, because the very notion of immediate experience requires a complementary notion of localised culture which can as readily foster inter-group alliances as it can exacerbate the division and competition amongst micro-groups for ever scarcer cultural and material resources.⁴³ It is with good reason that Hansen has pointed out how the "proliferation of subaltern counter-publics' (Nancy Fraser) does not necessarily lead to a multiplication of forces" for "the oppositional energy of individual groups and subcultures is more often neutralized in the marketplace of multicultural pluralism or *polarized in a reductive competition of victimizations.*"⁴⁴ In other words—to doctor the slogan of what parades itself as the New Left—to "think locally" does not necessarily entail that one will "act globally."

While an appeal to the specificity of a particular group's experience, then, may give a sense of irreducible immediacy untainted by ideology, such an appeal to the non-discursive and immediate fosters the ontologisation and naturalization of what is on the contrary constructed, mediated and historically contingent. Although such a project, as

⁴² "A Genealogy of Experience," p 179-180.

⁴³ Although this issue cannot be dealt with here, it is important to add—if only not to perpetuate the current anti-deficit ideology which legitimizes the disengagement of the state from social policy—that material (and thus cultural) resources are of course *not so much scarcer today than they are concentrated within fewer (and trans-national) hands* than was the case under the redistributive ethos of the *trente glorieuses* of Keynesianism or welfare capitalism.

⁴⁴ Foreword to Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience*, p.xxxvii. My emphasis.

Scott and others have rightly shown, may aim at devising counter-histories of difference, it in fact but "reproduces rather than contests given ideological systems—those that assume that the facts of history speak for themselves and those that rest on notions of a natural or established opposition between, say, sexual practices and social conventions, or between homosexuality and heterosexuality."⁴⁵ At best, "the evidence of experience then becomes the evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how differences are established;"⁴⁶ at its worst, the wager on the immediacy of experience fosters tribalistic reflexes which need but a little prodding before turning into those rabid neo-ethnic "micro fascisms" against which Félix Guattari warned in his last essay before his death.⁴⁷ True, some have tried to counter this charge by appealing to the heuristic or "strategic" use of essentialism in the manner advocated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who tells us:

I think we have to choose again strategically, not universal discourse, but essentialist discourse.... Since the moment of essentializing, universalizing, saying yes to the ontophenomenological question, is irreducible, let us at least situate it at the moment, let us become vigilant

⁴⁵ "The Evidence of Experience," p. 778. It is precisely because of such abuses to which essentialism, strategic or otherwise, has led and because, as she put it, it has served more often than not as a "certain alibi to essentialism," that Spivak herself was later to revise her position (if not recant altogether) regarding the benefits to be reaped from strategic essentialism. See the discussion on this issue in Deborah G. Chay, "Re-reading Barbara Smith: Black Feminist Criticism and the Category of Experience," *New Literary History* (1993): p. 642.

⁴⁶ "The Evidence of Experience," p. 796.

⁴⁷ "Pour une refondation des pratiques sociales," *Le Monde Diplomatique* (October 1992).

about our own practice and use it as much as we can rather than make the totally counter-productive gesture of repudiating it.⁴⁸

Because, as Scott put it, Spivak's statements "raise the question of whether historians can do other than construct subjects by describing their experience in terms of an essentialised identity,"⁴⁹ it is felt that the mere fact of self-consciously or "vigilantly" resorting to naturalization or "essentialist discourse" is a sufficient immunization against its abuse, and that a naturalized subaltern consciousness and "subject position" can in fact prove to be provisionally emancipatory if, so Spivak argues, "knowing that such an emphasis is theoretically non-viable, the historian then breaks this theory in a scrupulously delineated political interest."⁵⁰ But not only does this position imply that such potentially dangerous "strategic" tools be kept away from the uncouth hands of the academically untrained, but it also forgets that if the back door is left as widely open to an "emancipatory" politics of identity as it is to any demagogic *premier venu*, then the very political justification for, let alone the usefulness of, the alibi of strategic

⁴⁸ "In a Word. Interview," *Differences* 1,2 (Summer 1989): 127-128, cited in Deborah G. Chay, "Re-reading Barbara Smith: Black Feminist Criticism and the Category of Experience," p.650. What Spivak essentially advocated in her defence of "essentialist discourse" was that such discourse can hardly be rejected *in toto*, and this for the simple reason that it is in the nature of signification itself; the best one could do would not be merely to deconstruct *ad infinitum* but rather to use the "always already" essentializing tendency inherent to signification and discourse for strategic purposes, while at the same time remaining aware both of one's manoeuvring as well as of the necessary provisional nature of one's strategy.

⁴⁹"The Evidence of Experience," p.791.

⁵⁰ "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," in *In Other Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 207.

essentialism becomes questionable, to say the least. With good reason Jameson tells us that "the ideology of groups and difference does not really strike a blow, either philosophically or politically, against tyranny."⁵¹

3. The Insistence of Experience

All of this is not to suggest that determinism is to have the last word, that agency is unlikely and ought not to be theorized, that passive resignation is our preassigned lot or, in a gloomier Adornian mood, that hibernation is the best and only policy. The question is not whether agency is or is not to be had, or that attempts to endow the subject with a modicum of agency are misguided;⁵² nor does the above critique of certain experience oriented theories aim at panoramically reviewing paradigms of experience throughout the ages, only then to unceremoniously dismiss them and to conjure, not without some

⁵¹*Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 340.

⁵² Yet it ought to be added here that such attempts are better carried out less by appealing to some naturalized material immediacy untainted by dominant discourse than by considering, say, the performative aspects of language and daily praxis in the manner of Voloshinov's critique of Saussure. In this regard, see his *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. L. Matejka and I.R. Titunik (Cambridge, Mass. and London : Harvard University Press, 1982) which, frequently attributed to Bakhtin, has been unjustly overshadowed by those studies of Bakhtin which stress "dialogism" and "heteroglossia" and other terms which have lent themselves to appropriation by poststructuralist thought.

sleight of hand, a rabbit out of a hat, or a *deus ex machina*, as either a mascot or a saviour to whose fold it would behoove us to return after years of aimless wandering amongst spurious substitutes to the Real Thing. What *is* suggested in this admittedly vituperative argument, however, is that because the most common academic and para-academic recourse to experience, along with its corollary, the local cultural articulation of subaltern experience, as readily lend themselves to the dangerous *dérapages* exposed above as they do to what some deem to be an emancipatory politics, then a more sober consideration of experience warrants our attention with a certain urgency, and this all the more so that too precipitous an appeal to experience not only leads certain theories astray, if it does not lure them to an impasse, but also, *or rather*, because there are very real social consequences, as we have seen, to such an appeal.

While it is true that appeals to immediate experience leave strains of subaltern and cultural theory open to easy attack, the Thompsonian appeal to experience is not alone in incurring the charge of being politically dangerous or philosophically suspect. Such ambiguity no less besets the other uses to which experience has been put: Experience as *Erlebnis*, or *expérience vécue* (lived experience), imbued as it has frequently been with a sense of immediacy and prediscursive irrationalism, has for example been rightly decried by the Frankfurt School and others as a regressive aesthetic category, if not as a forerunner of the late 19th century vitalist neoromantic

anticapitalism that was to inspire National Socialist and fascist ideology.⁵³ Yet the very notion of experience proposed as a corrective to such a vitalist and irrationalist *Erlebnis*—the mediated, temporally extended and critically worked-through *Erfahrung* advanced by various *Rezeptionsästhetiker*, phenomenologists and critical theorists—has itself come under poststructuralist scrutiny and been critiqued as but a perpetuation of a "metaphysics of presence" which disqualifies *Erfahrung* from its presumed role as the negator of instrumental reason or the subverter of given horizons of understanding. If punctual and immediate experience has been decried as naively empiricist or irrationally vitalist, temporally extended and mediated experience has been charged with participating in ontotheology. The semantic and political ambiguity surrounding the

⁵³ This latter position is of course best exemplified by the later Lukács, who saw romanticism as the soil from which would germinate the infamous German *Sonderweg* that would culminate in National Socialism. A concise outline of this issue can be found in Peter Uwe Hohendahl's "Neoromantic Anticapitalism: Georg Lukács's Search for an Authentic Culture," in *Reappraisals: Shifting Alignments in Postwar Theory* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991). For a counterargument which contends that the *Frühromantiker* on the contrary harbored progressive socio-political ramifications that would only later yield to irrationalist vitalism, see Jochen Schulte-Sasse's "The Concept of Literary Criticism in German Romanticism, 1795-1810," in *A History of German Literary Criticism, 1730-1980*, ed. Peter Uwe Hohendahl (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988). It ought to be noted here, however, that just as certain strains in cultural and subaltern studies can as much foster progressive agendas as they can lead to neoethnic tribalism, likewise can the late 19th century German cultural criticism which appropriated romanticism, as Hohendahl points out, be considered "politically ambivalent. Its critique of society can settle on either the right or the left side of the political spectrum. It can articulate itself in nationalistic or egalitarian terms" ("Neoromantic Anticapitalism," p. 30).

concept of experience is, to say the least, notorious. As Gadamer sums it up, "the concept of experience seems to me one of the most obscure we have."⁵⁴

What is most striking, then, about the category of experience is that notoriously beset as it is by ambivalent political ramifications and semantic ambiguity, by an oscillation between rejection and embrace, it should continue to be used in the first place. Yet used it persistently continues to be, and this not only by currents in Anglo-American cultural, feminist and subaltern studies, but also by sociocultural analyses from Rosalind Krauss on the cultural logic of the late capitalist museum⁵⁵ to Fredric Jameson on the cultural logic of late capitalism *tout court*, and by the revived interest both in the Benjaminian distinction between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*⁵⁶ and in the belatedly translated work of Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge on the interaction between *Erfahrung* and *Öffentlichkeit*.⁵⁷ Jay has furthermore uncovered the subterranean

⁵⁴ Cited in Martin Jay, "Experience without a Subject: Walter Benjamin and the Novel," *New Formations* 20 (Summer 1993): p.145.

⁵⁵ "The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum," *October* 54 (1991): pp.8-17.

⁵⁶ The literature on Walter Benjamin's notion of experience is vast and growing. For a sample of the debates, see some of the texts in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, ed. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London: Routledge, 1994); *The Problems of Modernity*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (London: Routledge, 1989); For a general synopsis of the Benjaminian distinction between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*, see Rainer Rochlitz, *Le désenchantement de l'art: La philosophie de Walter Benjamin* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), pp. 211-254, and Torsten Meiffert, *Die enteignete Erfahrung: Zu Walter Benjamins Konzept einer 'Dialektik im Stillstand'* (Bielefeld, 1986).

⁵⁷ *Public Sphere and Experience. Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, trans. Peter Labanyi et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press,

persistence of the problem of experience in some of the emblematic figures of those very schools of thought which consider as but a perpetuation of logocentrism the notion of experience, whether as immediate, in the empiricist vein, or as mediated,⁵⁸ say, in the Gadamerian (and thus implicitly Hegelian) vein.⁵⁹ Even when the notion of experience is subjected to sustained critical inquiry, as it was for example in the attempt since the mid 1980s to marshal that concept for a new anthropology,⁶⁰ Clifford Geertz, himself known for advocating a return to experience within an essentially Diltheyian framework,⁶¹ acknowledges in his afterword to an anthology specifically dedicated to this

1993).

⁵⁸The next chapter will deal with the opposition between the immediacy and mediateness of experience which of course informs the Benjaminian distinction between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*, if not the opposition between Locke's Anglo-Saxon empiricist paradigm of experience and the Hegelian -inspired dialectical notion of experience.

⁵⁹ That collection of French and Anglo-American thinkers whom one can tentatively group, as has Jay, for example, under the umbrella term of "poststructuralism," (if not under the term neo-structuralism—in this latter regard, see Manfred Frank's study, *What is Neostructuralism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989)), indeed faults the notion of experience not only when used (as it is by subaltern historiography) as a form of immediacy, as is to be expected, but also when experience is used in a more dialectical manner (as it is by Gadamer in particular, and hermeneutics and phenomenology in general). As Jay sums it up, poststucturalism rejects experience in this latter sense because of its "its reliance on a strong notion of subjectivity, a subject present to itself after a process of apparent alienation, and its pivotal role in mediating consciousness and science." "The Limits of Limit Experience : Bataille and Foucault," *Constellations* 2, 2 (1995): p.170, n. 10.

⁶⁰ A representative collection of such attempts can be found in *The Anthropology of Experience*, ed. Victor W. Turner and Edward M. Bruner (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986).

⁶¹ See for example his "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (N.Y.: Basic Books, 1972), pp. 412-453.

matter that the “elusive master concept of experience” is “one that none of the authors seems entirely happy with, and none feels able to do without.”⁶²

This ambivalence is nowhere more flagrant than in the work of those very critics who run roughshod over the Thompsonian concept of experience. Most striking in this regard is that such staunch critics—the historian Scott and the neoalthusserian Bellamy and Leontis can stand here as exemplars—should falter in their otherwise relentless critiques precisely at that point when is raised the matter of whether the very notion of experience ought to be retained or jettisoned. In an unexpected *volte-face* whose inconclusiveness stands in stark contrast with the resolve of her rigorously constructed case against experience, Scott indeed adds as an afterthought that:

Experience is a word that we cannot do without, although, given its usage to essentialize identity and reify the subject, it is tempting to abandon it altogether. But experience is so much a part of our everyday language, so imbricated in our narratives that it seems futile to argue for its expulsion.⁶³

True, these are epistemologically timid times, and Scott’s reservations (which not a few have reiterated—Bellamy and Leontis actually do so verbatim⁶⁴) may be but precautionary measures, or perhaps a concession either to some logophobic distaste for “closure” or to some other methodological imperative. But at hand here is not so much a lapse in

⁶²“Making Experiences, Authoring Selves,” in *The Anthropology of Experience*, p. 374.

⁶³ “The Evidence of Experience,” p. 797.

⁶⁴ “A Genealogy of Experience,” p.84, note 48.

fortitude than it is a Freudian slip—a slip which, uttered only in passing by Scott and relegated to an inconspicuous footnote by Bellamy and Leontis, is symptomatic, as is also the very virulence with which the notion of experience persists in other schools of thought, of a problem which goes beyond some obsessive concern with semantic or conceptual rectitude: indeed, that Scott's reservations about dismissing experience should have been formulated on the shoddiest of grounds (the retention of a concept can hardly be justified by the mere fact of its ubiquity within "everyday language"), that this afterthought should be the only vague element marring an otherwise rigorous and influential study,⁶⁵ that this argument in other words should waver precisely when by its own logic it renders imminent the rejection of experience— all this indicates the extent to which experience testifies to a certain *insistence* that is more than merely semantic or conceptual, that experience is in other words more than a mere concept or, to use Bellamy and Leontis phrase, "a series of interpretations that have accrued erratically and even contradictorily."⁶⁶ If experience were indeed merely a "word" (as Scott puts it), a concept or even the organizing principle of some *Zeitgeist*, it could hardly be worthy of retention on the basis of its ubiquity alone: the terminological repertoire, say, of geocentric theories of the solar system was indeed no less ubiquitous in the "everyday language" of their time, yet their retention as valid categories was hardly defensible on this basis alone—lest of course in the face of growing counter-evidence one be willing, as

⁶⁵ Her study has indeed been profusely cited and continues to arouse debates.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.164

many indeed were after Copernicus, to resort to a system of Ptolomian cycles and epicycles so arcane and complex so as to make geocentric cosmology appear comical even to its contemporaries. Furthermore, if experience were merely a concept or theoretical construct whose deconstruction might dispel false problems, then the problem of the very stridency of academic and para-academic debates on experience remains itself unaddressed, as do also the questions raised (yet tellingly left unanswered) by Bellamy and Leontis: “Why the temptation to retain experience as a valid referent lingers in this postmodern era” and why the “privileging of experience thrives in a climate otherwise hostile to such essentializing impulses”?⁶⁷

That heated debates on experience, on a term in other words whose political and epistemological ineffectiveness is now no mystery, should persist to this day in certain academic and para-academic inquiries into agency and identity, that this term should even still be deployed, as it indeed continues to be, by various strands in aesthetics and socio-cultural critique, and that the very critics who most castigated hasty appeals to this ambiguous term should falter and recoil, as we have seen, at the very prospect of altogether dispensing with it— all this indeed suggests that the insistence of experience cannot be entirely due to the ubiquity of a mere concept among others within a history of ideas. The question that needs most to be addressed, then, is not whether the concept of experience, under its various guises, is or is not an antiquated trinket to be

⁶⁷ Ibid., p.163-164.

unceremoniously escorted to the proverbial trash can of history, nor whether it has been blessed with a somewhat resilient *Wirkungsgeschichte* which ought to be dispassionately reviewed, nor even whether it has somehow been implicated in a reprehensible history of metaphysics and ought to be accordingly deconstructed in order to "expose the status of 'experience'", as Bellamy and Leontis have suggested, "as a vastly over-determined concept within politics;"⁶⁸ of import, rather, is that of which appeals to experience, Thompsonian or otherwise, are themselves a symptom, and that to which the *Erfahrungshunger* decades themselves are a response. *And to this end is required not only that the insistence on experience be critiqued, but also that the insistence of experience itself be diagnosed*—an insistence which is not limited to the experience oriented theories and new social movements discussed above but which is on the contrary echoed, albeit with different emphases and results, in a multitude of currents in theory and artistic movements of the *Erfahrungshunger* decades and which, as such, suggests that the concern with experience is less the idiosyncratic obsession of an isolated trend than it is the expression of a generalised malaise. Such a malaise can best be diagnosed if experience is reconsidered not so much in terms of a history of its theorization than in terms of a socio-historical recontextualisation. And if it is the Thompsonian notion of experience that has so far been privileged, it is because as the focal point of the most strident of debates on the issue of experience, it seems to have struck a sensitive chord which reverberates to this day and, as such, it best provides a

⁶⁸ "A Genealogy of Experience," p. 168

point of departure for attempting to diagnose that to which symptomatically points both the insistence on and the insistence of experience .

CHAPTER II

Experience Investigated

1. The Disruptiveness of the Unexpected.

In their bid to preserve agency or at least a means of resistance against strong structural determination, strands in cultural and subaltern theory, then, have turned to the perceived counter-hegemonic immediacy of experience. As to why immediate experience should appear so seductive in such a venture, poststructuralist critiques of presence in general and of immediate experience in particular tell us little that has not already been told by Adorno if not by Hegel:

In schools of philosophy that make emphatic use of the concept of experience, in the tradition of Hume, the character of immediacy—immediacy in relation to the subject— is itself the criterion of that concept. Experience is supposed to be something immediately present, immediately given, free, as it were, of any admixture of thought and therefore indubitable. Hegel's philosophy, however, challenges this concept of immediacy, and with it the customary concept of experience. 'What is unmediated is often held to be superior, the mediated being thought of as dependent.'¹

The insistence on immediate experience examined earlier, with its retreat to the non-mediateness of the material, seems to paint itself into an empiricist and positivist corner and, in so doing, it leaves itself open to easy attack; but such a retreat to material immediacy, as we have seen, is less a premise than it is a *consequence* of the Thompsonian notion of experience— in fact, as we shall later see, it is a symptom of a

¹ Theodor Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber-Nicholson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), p. 57.

more encompassing problem to which certain cultural and subaltern theories try to respond. The immediacy at hand in the Thompsonian notion of experience is not that of the Lockean variety whereby stimuli impinging upon a *tabula rasa*, after exhibiting minimal regularity, might in Humean fashion lead to a constellation of habits from which might be extrapolated the specificity of the worker, the subaltern, the feminine, or the physically challenged. After all, as Thompson himself repeatedly made clear in *The Poverty of Theory*, he had no intention of trading in the determinism of structuralism for the yet more pernicious determinism of empiricism or positivism, and he hardly needed to be reminded of the pitfalls besetting those who would inductively construct consciousness, let alone class consciousness, from the immediate brute data of sense-perception. The problem of horizon, of how consciousness is always already imbricated within structures of signification, on the contrary looms large in cultural and subaltern inquiry— hegemonic *métra-récits* are indeed to be combatted with counter hegemonic *micro-récits*, not with neuro-physiological stimuli. Moreover, since the whole point of experience-oriented theories of the Thompsonian vein is to provide the hapless subject with a modicum of agency, it is unlikely that they should turn to Locke or Hume, who after all propose a “concept of experience of empiricism, of receptivity, of the recognition of the given, of ‘merely contemplative materialism,’ ” as Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge put it, which “attempts to *dispose* of the subject as a distorting intermediary.”²

² *Public Sphere and Experience*, p. 5. My emphasis.

With their insistence on countering the abstract with the concrete and the mediate with the immediate, experience oriented theories of the *Erfahrungshunger* decades from ethnically based literary theory to *Alltagsgeschichte* might appear as but a crude version of Bergsonism or of *Lebensphilosophie*, and it is not without good reason that Jay has noted that they generally share the notion that “the lived is pitted against the imposition of a theoretical scheme allegedly alien to it.”³ The counter-hegemonic or “subversive” component of experience wagered upon by such theories, however, does not actually lie in some vitalist opposition of lived, immediate experience to the machinations of conceptuality or to the schemes of discursive mediation *as such*: if anything, the second part of the Thompsonian equation, the local culture argument examined earlier, actually reinforces the need for conceptualisation and mediation, emphasizing as it does the importance of retrospectively articulating the subaltern experience within a local culture—a crucial second move without which experience, subaltern or otherwise, could hardly be expected to consolidate into anything beyond a rhapsody of disparate perceptions, let alone into class consciousness or subaltern specificity. So while the Thompsonian notion of experience undeniably tends towards the idea that mediation is always already ideologically laden and can best be circumvented by recourse to immediate, or rather, to not yet mediated, experience, at hand in such an argument is not a quest for a true reality untainted by ideological penetration or beyond the reach of distorting mediation, and still less is it a quest for the “other” of conceptuality as such;

³ “Songs of Experience,” p. 38.

instead, it is a hope that the prediscursive of experience, by *disrupting* the dominant ideological or discursive construction of reality, or as Peter Fuller put it, by “causing constant ruptures and fissures within the ideological ice flows,”⁴ might incite to the reinforcing if not to the outright forging of oppositional ideology and history.

Thompsonian experience, then, cannot be entirely subsumed within prior discursive or mediating schemes, but neither is it the “other” of mediation. At hand in the insistence on immediate experience is instead a *dialectic of disruption* (of dominant discursive formations) *and reintegration* (via local cultural articulation). And it is just such a dialectic which Thompson tries to evoke when, as we saw earlier, he vaguely refers to experience as less binarily opposed to structure than as a third term inserted between “agency” and “conditioning,” although it is true that this is a dialectic which he and those of his ilk in fact tend to gloss over in favour of an insistence on immediacy—their targeted enemy, strong structural determination, was after all considered so ubiquitous a mechanism so as to warrant a retreat to the perceived unassailable and impregnable ramparts of the prediscursive.

More is involved in the appeal to immediate experience, then, than a mere attempt to wrest from corrupt or distorting mediation the irreducible certainty of either empiricist or vitalist immediacy: it is the idea of *disruption and reintegration*, and not some predilection for prediscursive reality as such, which actually *informs* the insistence

⁴ *Beyond the Crisis in Art*, p. 235.

on immediate experience. Thompsonian-inspired notions of experience, wager as they may on the prediscursive materiality of experience, are indeed predicated upon the *disjunction* between 1) the expectations informed and fostered by dominant discursive practices or ideology, and 2) that to which is exposed the subaltern by virtue of his (or hers, or its) structural position in the social whole⁵—a disjunction to which Thompson obliquely alludes (but quickly displaces with his appeals to immediate experience) when he tells us that dominant ideology “cannot succeed unless there is *congruence* between the imposed rules and view of life and the necessary business of living in a given mode of production.”⁶ The appeal to immediate experience actually capitalizes less on the assumed proximity of experience with prediscursive materiality than it capitalizes instead on the *disruption of a congruence*, on the incongruence in other words, between the expectations fostered by dominant ideology and the subaltern’s “necessary business of living.” As Axel Honneth reminds us in his recent work on the politics of recognition, expectations indeed play a crucial role in Thompson’s influential work on the English working class:

Thompson took his lead from the idea that social rebellion can never be merely a direct expression of experiences of economic hardship and

⁵ The neutral pronoun here is intended as a reminder that if, in the name of fairness, abstract nouns are to be qualified by references to their equal applicability to both the masculine and feminine (the “he or she” routine), then it is no less unfair to exclude or under-represent the smothered voices, say, of the eunuch or of the hermaphrodite. But for the sake of brevity, possessive pronouns of abstract nouns, although henceforth restricted to the masculine case, must be understood as referring no less emphatically to the feminine and to the neutral.

⁶ *The Poverty of Theory*, p. 367. My emphasis.

deprivation. Rather, what counts as an unbearable level of economic provision is to be measured in terms of the moral expectations that people consensually bring to the organization of the community. Hence, practical protest and resistance typically arise when a change in the economic situation is experienced as a violation of this tacit but effective consensus.⁷

It is as a result of an encounter with the incongruent or unexpected, and not with some prediscursive material reality, that the subaltern, who is not left unchanged or unaffected, is prodded into constructing and consolidating alternate (and presumably subversive) modes of cultural mediation in terms of which the incongruent can be re-integrated, and by means of which the unexpected might be articulated into experience. So although it is true that the insistence on immediate experience, in an excessive reaction to structuralism and, later, to neo-structuralist pantextualism, has tended to impute the disruptive aspect of experience to its perceived affinity with non-discursive materiality (a manoeuvre, as we have seen, which is fraught with dangerous implications), and although these theories adopt an explicit stance against the evils of bourgeois (or albinocratic, or phallocratic) dominated discursive mediation, the disruptive potential of experience upon which they hope to capitalise nevertheless stems from a different source, namely, the manner by which subaltern experience results from the unexpected, from a *violation of expectations where something turns out to be different than had originally been supposed, and as a result of which one is not left unchanged*. In the

⁷ Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, trans. Joel Anderson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT press, 1996), pp. 166-167. Within his own theory of recognition, Honneth goes so far as to trace *all* “motives for social resistance and rebellion” to “the violation of deeply rooted expectations regarding recognition.” (p. 163).

appeal to immediate experience is in other words involved the *unexpected*— that which, precisely because it cannot be accommodated by or accounted for by prevalent or dominant discursive or mediating schemes, disruptively and egregiously stands out like a sore thumb (or, as Victor Turner put it, "like a rock in a Zen sand garden"⁸), draws attention to itself, thereby underscoring the need for its thematization and its working-through (as opposed to its absorption within ready made schemes and routinised perceptions), and thereby potentially giving rise to alternate modes of mediation (such as those of "local cultural articulation" and counter histories). And the result of this process is that one's orientation and perspective are not left unchanged.

This implied reliance on experience as the unexpected or incongruent which induces a change of orientation or perspective, however, is not specific to those who would appeal to immediate experience in the name of agency or "subversive resistance": it is also a common denominator of those theories, whether partial to immediate or mediated experience, whether anthropological or aesthetic, whether hailing from Popperian critical rationalism, systems theory, hermeneutics or a general critique of metaphysics, which consider experience in terms other than those, more narrow or specialised, of empiricist methodology⁹. If strains of anthropological theory in the 1980s

⁸ Victor Turner, "Dewey, Dilthey, and Drama: An Essay in the Anthropology of Experience," in *The Anthropology of Experience*, ed. Victor W. Turner and Edward M. Bruner (Urbana and Chicago; University of Illinois Press, 1986), p. 35.

⁹ Regarding empiricist methodology, it could actually be argued, (as it has been by Habermas for example) that it too relies on unexpectedness in its notion of experience.

sought to make experience a central category, it was not at the behest of the mid-twentieth century conflation of anthropological theory and ethnographic fieldwork, or of what James Clifford describes as the fusion of “general theory and empirical research” whereby is sanctioned “an authority both scientifically validated and based on an unique personal experience.”¹⁰ For Victor Turner and others, experience is instead a transformative process dialogically imbricated within cultural mediation: experiences “erupt from or disrupt routinized, repetitive behaviour,” induce an “anxious need to find meaning in what has disconcerted us” and, in so doing, “urge toward expression.”¹¹ Within the aesthetic inquiry, say, of the *Rezeptionästhetiker* of the 1970s and 1980s, aesthetic experience is not a revisitation of late 19th century *Erlebnisästhetik* but instead represents that which, as a result of a violation of a literary horizon of expectations, “can liberate one from adaptations, prejudices and predicaments of a lived praxis in that it compels one to a new perception of things.”¹² Karl Popper himself, although (unfairly)

As David Held puts it in his paraphrase of Habermas’ critique of Pierce in *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy Shapiro (London: Heimemann, 1971): “Empirical-analytical science is the necessary outcome of disturbances or disruptions in routinized discourse with nature; it aims to eliminate problematic situations which emerge from disappointed expectations.” *Introduction to Critical Theory: Horkheimer to Habermas*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 305.

¹⁰ “On Ethnographic Authority,” in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 26.

¹¹ “Dewey, Dilthey, and Drama,” pp. 35, 37.

¹² Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p.41

labelled a positivist following his infamous dispute with Adorno in the 1960s,¹³ discusses the “prescientific experience of daily praxis” in terms of a “disappointment of expectations”, comparing it to “the experience of a blind person, who runs into an obstacle and thereby experiences its existence,” adding that “through the falsification of our assumptions we actually make contact with ‘reality.’”¹⁴ In a similar vein, but from the standpoint of systems theory, Niklas Luhmann tells us that “experience [*Erfahrung*] is an ongoing reconstruction of meaningfully constituted reality brought about by dealing with unfulfilled expectations, by the normalizing processing of information.”¹⁵ And from an entirely different philosophical stance, Gadamer likewise considers experience (*Erfahrung*) as that which, by conflicting with, or rather, by disappointing or violating expectations, “does not leave unchanged he who undergoes it ”¹⁶—a view earlier expounded (although with a different purpose in mind) by Heidegger, who tells us that

¹³ The debates themselves can be found in Adorno *et al.*, *The Positivist Dispute in Germany*, trans. by B. Adey and D. Frisby. (New York: Harper and Row, 1976). A recent concise survey of these issues is offered by Robert Holub, *Jürgen Habermas: Critic in the Public Sphere* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 20-48.

¹⁴ *Theorie und Realität*, ed. H. Albert (Tübingen, 1964), p.102, cited in Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, p. 41.

¹⁵ “Meaning as Sociology’s Basic Concept,” in *Essays on Self-Reference* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p. 31.

¹⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke, Bd 1. Hermeneutik: Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: J.B.C. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1986), p. 106.

“to undergo an experience with something—be it a thing, a person, or a god—means that this something befalls us, strikes us, comes over us, overwhelms us and transforms us.”¹⁷

The Thompsonian insistence on experience as a recalcitrant process which perturbs the given and incites to changed orientations rather than to accommodation is not, then, an aberrant anomaly but on the contrary a persistent theme which runs through an array of theoretical positions with little else in common. It is indeed precisely upon the transformative, restructuring potential of experience that various cultural, historiographical, aesthetic and literary theories have tried to capitalise in order to account for and cultivate the possibility of agency, of subaltern specificity, or of expanding literary or cultural horizons. Where strains of subaltern and cultural inquiry do demarcate themselves from other experience-oriented theories, however, is in their hasty conflation of the recalcitrance of experience with its supposed immediacy, in their transposition of a problem of counter-hegemony into an issue of pre-discursivity (which they ambiguously try to temper, as we saw earlier, with the potentially dangerous “local culture” argument), and in their naturalisation, paradoxically enough, of precisely that subaltern specificity or difference which they had originally set out to historicize. Nevertheless, their insistence on immediate experience is informed by *a disruptive aspect imputed to experience* upon which they are not alone in trying to capitalise and, as such, more is at stake here, contrary to what Scott, Bellamy and others would have us

¹⁷ *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 57.

believe, than a mere opposition of “immediacy *versus* mediation,” of “lived *versus* the abstract,” of “nostalgic yearning for presence *versus* Nietzschean Yea-saying to the Heraclitean.” That which informs the Thompsonian insistence on immediate experience indeed subtends not only the various theoretical endeavours of the *Erfahrungshunger* decades, whether these regard experience as an aesthetic process or as an anthropological constant, as immediate or as always already mediated; as can be gathered (as we shall see shortly) from the etymological and conceptual history of the term experience, it also does not stray far from the semantic sedimentations of the term experience, of its German equivalent, *Erfahrung*, and of the early 19th century neologism *Erlebnis*. But more important still, this notion of experience as the unexpected which does not leave us unchanged concords with what, as Heidegger put it, “*experience [Erfahrung] means generally*, prior to its terminological use in philosophy.”¹⁸ As but a particular embodiment of what “*experience means generally*,”¹⁹ Thompsonian experience-oriented theories may well turn out to be more than a case of sloppy theorising or wishful thinking—they may in fact harbor, as Adorno would put it, a truth content, for at hand in certain strains in subaltern and cultural inquiry may not so much be the insistence *on* experience than it is the insistence *of* experience. So before verdicts can be reached or

¹⁸ *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1988), p. 19. My emphasis.

¹⁹ Note that by “general use,” Heidegger means that which is prior to or prevalent in spite of specific philosophical appropriations. It is in this sense that “general use” or “general understanding” is henceforth used.

diagnoses pronounced with regard to that of which the insistence on experience may be a symptom, a more sustained consideration of experience is in order.

2. *Two General Meanings of Experience*

Heidegger has shown how in spite of the “nuances, gradations, and interrelations of meaning in the term experience [*Erfahrung*],”²⁰ the various ways by which experience is understood, both in philosophy and in general, fall into two groups. In the first group, “experience means the immediate demonstration of an opinion or a knowledge by way of returning to things in the broadest sense of the term, i.e., by seeking recourse in the intuition of some thing as the means of its confirmation.”²¹ It is to this group, where experience involves “experimenting in the sense of demonstrating and proving an opinion

²⁰ *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 19.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 19. Although such an intuition or apprehension of things is most recognizable, as Heidegger is of course aware, and as Martin Seel has further noted, in the “classical paradigm of the meaning of the term experience” which is “that of the perception of objects and events in external nature,” such an apprehending need not be merely sensory or empirical; it can also extend to interpretative activity in a more general sense. See Martin Seel, *Die Kunst der Entzweiung. Zum Begriff der ästhetischen Rationalität* (Frankfurt A.-M.: Suhrkamp, 1985), pp. 76-77.

about something with recourse to sense -perception of that thing itself,"²² that Heidegger consigns the *Naturwissenschaftliche* notion of experience, as well as Husserl's particular version of phenomenological experience.²³ On the other hand, the second group of meanings of experience, Heidegger points out, "does not focus exclusively on the element of seeing for oneself or on taking a view of one's own in order to confirm an opinion and be guided by it;" instead, experience here denotes, "both negatively and positively, undergoing experience with something in such a way that this something is verified, *experiencing it as not being what it first seemed to be, but being truly otherwise*"²⁴ It is to this second group that belong "expressions such as 'to undergo experiences with something,' ... 'to have become richer by certain

²² Ibid., p. 20.

²³ Even though Husserl's notion of horizon, retention and protention may seem to have paved the way for Gadamerian and post-Gadamerian hermeneutics, where experience is dialectical rather than empiricist, and even though, as Gadamer has shown, Husserl had hoped for a "genealogy of experience which, as an experience of the life world (*Lebenswelt*), remains anterior to the idealisation operated by the sciences," Husserl nevertheless projects the empiricist and scientific notion of experience onto the very originary experience of the world he tried to elaborate, for he "makes perception, as the exterior perception oriented towards corporeality alone, the basis of all experience" (*Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 353). To cite the Husserl cited by Gadamer: "Even if, on the basis of sensible presence, it [*Erfahrung*] immediately captures our practical or spiritual interest, even if it immediately gives itself as that which can serve us, attract us or repulse us—all of this is founded on the fact that it is a substrate whose qualities can simply be grasped by the senses and towards which the path of a possible interpretation always leads." (*Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 353). It is with good reason that Heidegger likewise points out that such a notion of experience is in keeping with Husserl's conviction that "phenomenology represents empiricism and positivism, properly understood." (*Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 20).

²⁴ *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. 19-20. My emphasis.

experiences,”—expressions which, Heidegger adds, “always convey two senses: First, they indicate a certain sense of *having been disappointed and surprised because things turned out otherwise than expected*. Second, they suggest an additional learning of something new that is increasingly verified.”²⁵ And Heidegger is not alone in dividing the various uses of experience into these two general groups: along similar lines, Negt and Kluge maintain that experience [*Erfahrung*] can be divided into two camps, each of which has received its respective paradigmatic formulation by Hume and Hegel.²⁶ Likewise, Jay distinguishes between, on the one hand, experience understood as in opposition to all mediating or discursive operations and, on the other hand, experience understood as a dialectical process whereby the unexpected leads to a rectification of earlier perspectives.²⁷ Martin Seel, who has written perhaps the most comprehensive study since Dewey on experience and its relation to aesthetic practices, also resorts to such a distinction: “As opposed to a concept of experience centred on the direct ascertaining of facts, I defend ... an alternative notion, which to me seems more productive, according to which to undergo an experience refers to the realisation, always singular, of a changed orientation in given domains of comportment [*Verhaltensbereichen*].”²⁸

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 19-20. My emphasis.

²⁶ *Public Sphere and Experience*, p. 5.

²⁷ “Songs of Experience,” pp. 38-39.

²⁸ Martin Seel, *Die Kunst der Entzweiung. Zum Begriff der ästhetischen Rationalität* (Frankfurt A.-M.: Suhrkamp, 1985), pp. 77-78.

Such a division of experience into two general groups of meanings is of course not without some occasional overlapping. Insofar as Dilthey's concept of *Erlebnis* (for example) involves a connection of disparate events into a unit of meaning which *unexpectedly stands out* from (rather than dissolve itself into) the otherwise undifferentiated flux of life, and insofar as it is not passively received but instead actively transforms he who undergoes it by spurring him to objectifying it through creative expression, it is to the second group outlined by Heidegger that this concept belongs. But Dilthey's concept of *Erlebnis* also has an apparent affinity with the first group insofar as it becomes for the *Geisteswissenschaften*, as Gadamer rightly suggests, what the sense-datum is for the *Naturwissenschaften*, namely, the indubitably given from which knowledge can be inductively erected.²⁹ A similar ambiguity can be seen in Victor Turner, who invokes Dilthey and Dewey in order to champion experience as the unexpected which formatively re-orient, yet who in passing describes experience in

²⁹ *Wahrheit und Methode*, pp. 68-71. While it is true that Dilthey invokes experience (*Erlebnis*) in order to justify the objective validity of the *Geisteswissenschaften* by emulating the *Naturwissenschaften*, he nevertheless demarcates the former's specificity—a specificity based on the manner by which it's notion of *Erlebnis*, as a non-decomposable minimal unit of intelligibility and signification, puts a halt to any positivist retreat to the brute sense-datum. Will not be dealt with here, however, such questions as to whether Dilthey oscillates between a pantheistic and positivist tendency (Gadamer's contention), whether Dilthey is a precursor to Heideggerian and Gadamerian hermeneutics (Richard Palmer's position; See his *Hermeneutics* (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1969) pp.121-123) or whether Dilthey is but a crypto-hegelian who differs from Hegel only because for "Dilthey the spirit (Geist) is embraced by life, whereas for Hegel life is a deficient mode of spirit" (Herbert Schnädelbach's position. See his *Philosophy in Germany, 1831-1933*, trans. Eric Mathews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p56).

behaviorist metaphors, referring to the “shocks of pain or pleasure” by which experience conjures past associations and conditions future behaviour, much in the manner of a salivating Pavlovian dog.³⁰ And we earlier saw a similar situation in various strains of cultural and subaltern studies where, on the one hand, the thrust of the argument is predicated upon a disjunction or incongruence between prevalent ideology and that to which the subaltern is exposed, yet where on the other hand the logic of their argument occasions a quasi-empiricist retreat, as Thompson put it, to the “raw material” of immediate experience. In each of these cases however (and there are others), experience in the first general sense outlined by Heidegger, as a recourse to the intuition of the objectively given, whether as Dilthey’s datum of minimal intelligibility, or as Thompson’s “raw material,” neither constitutes nor is that upon which are predicated their arguments, but is instead either the byproduct of a response to an external concern (such as Dilthey’s defensive justification of the objective validity of the *Geisteswissenschaften*, or the Thompsonian rejection of Althusserian strong structural determination), or a careless *non sequitur* to the main argument (as is the case with the isolated incident of Turner’s odd behaviorist metaphor). And this is in strong contrast, as we saw earlier (for example) in subaltern theories of the Thompsonian vein, with the manner by which the second general sense of experience, that is, experience as the unexpected which entails a re-orientation, is *presupposed* by their central arguments—and

³⁰ “Dewey, Dilthey and Drama,” pp.35-36.

this regardless of whether this presupposition is explicitly thematized or implicitly endorsed.

It could also be argued that experience in this second sense in fact turns out to be experience's more fundamental way of being, that it is in other words ontologically prior to, or rather, the condition of possibility of, the other notion of experience which has recourse to the intuition of the objective. To put it in the Heideggerian terms of *Sein und Zeit*, experience as the intuition of things may be to experience as the unexpected what *Vorhandenheit* is to *Zuhandenheit*: the derivative of a more fundamental way of how things present themselves to us. A thing or event must indeed first stand out from or unexpectedly disrupt the otherwise seamlessly integrated totality of one's horizon of possible signification *before* it can become the actual object of further inquiry, empiricist, positivist or otherwise. It is in this vein that Popper argues, as we have seen and as Jauss reminds us, when he discusses the manner by which science itself is anchored in the "pre-scientific experience of lived praxis":

Each hypothesis, like each observation, presupposes expectations, 'namely those that constitute the horizon of expectations which first make those observations significant and thereby grants them the status of observations.' For progress in science as for that in the experience of life, the most important moment is the 'disappointment of expectations.'³¹

Luhmann likewise argues that "experience (*Erfahrung*) is never the pure unmodified arrival of what was expected," and that even when thematized as a scientific or

³¹ Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, p. 40 (citing Karl Popper, *Theorie und Realität*, ed. H. Albert (Tübingen, 1964), p.91).

methodological confirmation of hypotheses through an intuition of the things or situations themselves, experience is nevertheless “made scientific by increasing its information value, in particular by making its relevance more abstract and by multiplying the number of possibilities it chooses from—and *not by the confirmation of existing expectations or opinions.*”³² It is also in this vein that Gadamer argues when he reminds us that Bacon’s notion of experience, which various histories of ideas tend to consider as a forerunner of empiricist and inductive methodology and thus as an early philosophical articulation of experience in the first sense outlined by Heidegger, must be re-considered in the more general manner by which experience presents itself to us:

Experience in this sense on the contrary necessarily presupposes the manifold disappointment of expectations (*Enttäuschung von Erwartungen*), for it is only in this way that experience is acquired... . As Bacon well knew, it is only through negative instances that experience is to be had.³³

In a further genealogical backtracking to the origins of our notions of experience, that is, to experience before it began to play, as Gadamer put it, so “determining a role in the logic of induction for the natural sciences that it has been subdued by the theory of knowledge to a schematisation which, to me, seems to mutilate the original content (*ursprünglichen Gehalt*) [of experience],”³⁴ Gadamer furthermore adds in his reading of Aristotle’s *Analytica posteriora* that although experience for Aristotle is of interest only

³² “Meaning as Sociology’s Basic Concept,” pp. 31-32. My emphasis.

³³ *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 362.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 352 .

insofar as it inductively leads from singular observations to the universality of the concept, the metaphors used in this text nevertheless stress experience *as the disruption of a prior stable state* and, in so doing, “illustrates the decisive moment in the essence of experience”—a decisive moment that is often overlooked, according to Gadamer, because experience is usually considered in terms of its results and as a *fait accompli*, rather than in terms of how it is acquired to begin with.³⁵ So while it is true, as Scott notes, that “experience can both confirm what is already known (we see what we have learned to see) and upset what has been taken for granted (when different meanings are in conflict we readjust our vision to take account of the conflict or to resolve it),”³⁶ the difference here is not between two tendencies within experience itself, but instead between experience as a process whereby the *unexpected leads to a re-orientation*, and experience as an acquired product of this process whereby *the unexpected is contained within the bounds of verifiability and corroboration*.

Such questions, however, as to which of the two senses of experience outlined by Heidegger is the condition of possibility of the other, or as to whether they are instead altogether unrelated, shall not detain us here; what shall instead be retained is that although there is indeed a difference between having experience and having (or undergoing) *an* experience, it is the latter sense that tends to prevail when experience is

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 359-359.

³⁶ “The Evidence of Experience,” p. 793

linked to issues gravitating less around methodological imperatives than around problems of self-identity (whether cultural, individual, collective or otherwise), of the constitution of subjectivity (whether as a psychic subsystem in relation to its environment, as Luhmann would have it, or as a temporally ek-static extendendess within a *Welt*, in the manner of Heidegger's *Dasein*), or of the transgressive status of aesthetics within daily praxis (whether because experience is seen as always already aesthetic, or because it is seen as in need of aestheticization). Uses of experience within such lines of inquiry indeed stress precisely that which is *not* seamlessly integrated within or assimilated by prevalent discursive schemes, routinized practices or expectations, that which in other words disruptively stands out from and thus perturbs the current processes of signification, the structure of subjectivity, daily practices, or the dominant modes of organizing reality, and this in such a way so as to induce a change of orientation or perspective. As such, experience here refers less to the result of having undergone experience, at which point the issue would revolve around confirming the given through acquired experience, than it refers to a process one undergoes, at which point the problem becomes one of disrupting the given through experience as a process.

As Martin Seel explains,

Unlike that which happens when one *has* experience (*Erfahrung*), one *undergoes* experience when the presupposed hierarchies of relevance upon which one has heretofore relied lose their orienting value. To "undergo an experience" means to discover an anticipatory attitude in the face of problematic circumstances due to a transformation of the original attitude which these circumstances put into question--circumstances whose

disturbing character alone is capable of imposing a situation as a situation of *experience*.³⁷

It is on such a dialectic of disruptive unexpectedness and its re-integration within a changed perspective that various theories try to capitalise in order to vindicate, say, class consciousness, subaltern agency, the active role of the aesthetic upon environing social practices, or the active role of understanding within a *Wirkungsgeschichte*. Unlike the first sense of experience, which essentially amounts to a passive submission to external sense-perception, or to a resigned endurance of the given within narrow and predetermined parameters, the experience that one undergoes in contrast stresses the active engagement of those whom it befalls. If indeed experience in this latter sense disrupts prior meaning, this negativity, as Gadamer has shown, also harbors a “particularly productive meaning:”³⁸ for the negation of the given is not just left at that but on the contrary incites to the active production of new meaning, of new orientations or perspectives which, by thus trying to account for the unexpected, entail a restructuration of one’s earlier disposition. Experience in this sense, Seel adds, is both destructive *and* productive of meaning, for what distinguishes experience from the inconsequential is that those “engaged by it [experience] position themselves towards the state of affairs that has astonished them, and this in such a way that their earlier established comportment and expectations are replaced by a different projection which

³⁷ *Die Kunst der Entzweiung*, pp. 88-89.

³⁸ *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 359.

takes into account new realities.”³⁹ And it is this latter sense of experience, then, which shall henceforth be used, for of interest here is not the dispassionate recourse to experience for procedural or methodological purposes, but rather that of which the insistence on experience, since the 1970s, may be a symptom—an insistence at work precisely in those theories which, insofar as they reckon with issues of agency, identity and self-constitution, presuppose the second sense of experience as outlined by Heidegger.

Beyond various sectarian definitions, then, experience can be (and for our purposes shall henceforth be) generalized not so much as an accumulation of cognitively processed information, as the consolidation of dispositions, practices or attitudes, or even as normatively thematized problems—these are instead some of the potential products or results of experience—than as that which, by not lending itself to seamless integration within prior expectations or horizons of signification, perturbs or problematizes routinized perceptions, actions and attitudes and which, in so doing, induces a change in one’s the orientation. But although it is true, as Seel puts it, that we “undergo experience when the expected confirmation is lacking, when what was once self-evident becomes problematic, and when the familiar becomes strange,”⁴⁰ a sensation of strangeness following a confrontation with the unexpected is in itself only a necessary, and not a

³⁹ *Die Kunst der Entzweiung*, pp. 73-74, 83.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

sufficient, condition of possibility of experience. I may very well be seized by a sense of strangeness when confronted, say, by the unexpected bankruptcy sign plastered on the boarded windows of my favorite café which I had last visited just the day before; but should this unexpected event merely be shrugged off and forgotten (I could merely choose without further ado to frequent a different café), then no experience has actually materialised. But should this event represent more than a quickly forgotten inconvenience, should this event instead leave a lasting imprint upon my routine activities by arousing, say, a new and prolonged awareness of the macro-economic factors behind the demise of this café, then this unexpected event has incited me into a reaction which has not left me unchanged and, as such, an experience can be said to have taken place. As Seel explains, “to undergo or have an experience does not mean to merely accept something that we hadn’t acknowledged earlier, but to integrate it in the framework which until then defined for us the real and the possible,” for involved in experience is “a transformation of the vision of things, or of certain things, on which had been founded the comportment of he who undergoes experience.”⁴¹ Furthermore, this reorientation or “transformation of the vision of things, or of certain things” entails more than a mere cumulative addition of new perspectives to prior opinions or projects, or a mere switching among attitudes or dispositions within a repertoire that is ready at hand— to switch (for example) from a conciliating to an authoritarian tone because one’s interlocutor proves to be more refractory than expected does not as such constitute an experience.

⁴¹ Ibid., p.83, 79.

Experience instead entails that the unexpected *transform or revise* prior opinions, dispositions or attitudes rather than propose dispositions that are merely to be added to those already at one's disposal. As Wolfgang Iser explains, "experiences do not come about merely through the recognition of the familiar," but on the contrary they "arise only when the familiar is transcended or undermined; they grow out of the alteration or falsification of *that which is already ours*," for "...the acquisition of experience is not a matter of adding on— *it is a restructuring of what we already possess*"⁴²—or, as Luhmann puts it, "experience (*Erfahrung*) is surprising information that is structurally relevant and leads to a *restructuring of the meaningful premises* of experience processing within both concrete and abstract (depending on the circumstances) functional contexts."⁴³ But although experience, by transforming or restructuring that which informs, motivates and orients a particular comportment, would seem to confirm, say, Victor Turners' suggestion that experience be equated with personal as well as collective rites of passage (such as "going to school, first job, joining the army, entering the marital status"),⁴⁴ such transformations need not be so fundamental or revolutionary; they can also be—and usually tend to be— but a weakening or strengthening of a particular position or disposition, or an accentuating *mise en relief* of what otherwise might remain automated or routinised. In short, the essential matter at hand in experience is that, as a result of it,

⁴² *The Act of Reading* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1978), pp. 131-132. My emphasis.

⁴³ "Meaning as Sociology's Basic Concept," p.31. My emphasis.

⁴⁴ "Dewey, Dilthey and Drama," p. 35.

one is not left unchanged, much in the manner of the Lyotardian notion of event as concisely defined by Bill Readings—provided that this definition be amended from “the fact or case that something happens after which *nothing will ever be the same again*”⁴⁵ to the more tame “the fact or case that something happens after which *one is not left unchanged.*”

3. Experience : A dialectic of Continuity and Discontinuity.

Whereas routinized perceptions and practices remain seamlessly imbricated within the continuity of a horizon and thus remain on the threshold of experience, experience itself on the contrary unexpectedly institutes a disruptive discontinuity within and, in so doing, incites to the restructuration of one’s orientation and horizon. It would seem, then, that at hand in experience is a predisposition for the innovative as opposed to the habitual, for discontinuity at the expense of continuity, for the contingency of an uncertain open future as opposed to the stability of a hermetically self-contained past. Experience in short appears imbued, as Seel put it, with “a specific temporality, that is, the existence of a discontinuous process” which perturbs “perceptual events and continuous perceptual schemas (with their reflexive results) which take place and are carried out within a non-

⁴⁵ Bill Readings, *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1991), p.xxxi. My emphasis.

problematic order and continuity."⁴⁶ But although it is true, as we shall later see, that experience is decisively imbricated within an open future which allows for the new, the surprising and the unexpected to occasion a discontinuous *remue ménage* within the continuity past practices and perspectives, more is involved in experience than the rejection, *in toto*, of an earlier horizon of possible signification. Indeed, if experience is not the inconsequentiality of the routine, neither is it the inconsequentiality of unadulterated discontinuity: unless they are reworked within the continuity of the horizon they perturb, the brute traumatisms of the discontinuous remain just that—mere shocks which, by failing to enter the purview of a horizon, are hardly in a position to disturb its economy beyond a fleeting unsettling, let alone lead to consequential changes in one's orientation.

We have indeed already seen how experience involves a reintegration of the unexpected within those very practices and horizons it perturbed—in fact it is precisely as a result of such a reintegration that can take place a restructuration of one's horizon as a result of which one is not left unchanged, and as a result of which subaltern counter-histories can be constructed, *Rezeptionsästhetiker* literary horizons rearranged, Luhmanian social and psychic systems sustained, or Gadamerian *Wirkungsgeschichte* assured. If Thompsonian experience-oriented theories appeal to the disruptive potential of experience, they appeal no less to the coordination of these experiences within a

⁴⁶ *Die Kunst der Entzweiung*, pp. 82, 79.

counter history or a subaltern culture— the whole point of appealing to experience is after all not in order to jettison the past, but rather in order to return to it in order to reconstruct it differently, in order to salvage the subaltern, woman or worker, as Thompson phrased it, “from the condescension of posterity.” Since, as John Berger put it, “a people or a class which is cut off from its own past is far less free to choose and act as a people or class than one that has been able to situate itself in history,”⁴⁷ agency is to be salvaged by consolidating experiences into a counter-history, not by dispersing them into a multiplicity of fickle and ephemeral micro-narratives from which one constantly shifts following each unexpected event. And subaltern historiography is not alone in stressing that be reconnected the continuity of a horizon following its disruption by the unexpected—this manoeuvre is indeed no less present in those theories examined earlier which have little else in common save a notion of experience as the unexpected, as can be seen, say, in Jauss’s transposition of the dynamic of experience into a theory and history of literary canon formations and transformations:

The new work of art—even when, as in the modern era, it provocatively negates all previous art—still presupposes the horizon of tradition as the instance of understanding that has been negated and, far from simply doing away with the past, realigns the art of the past within the newly opened horizon, reclassifying it in contemporary terms, and often even finding in it previously unrecognised significance.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ *Ways of Seeing* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 33.

⁴⁸ *Question and Answer: Forms of Dialogic Understanding*, trans. Michael Hays (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 204.

It is not just the disruption of the unexpected as such, then, which constitutes experience, but rather that this disruption be addressed, taken into account by, and reworked within the horizon it disrupts, for the unexpected leads to experience only insofar as it provokes a further reaction whereby it is neither dismissed, nor entirely assimilated by the familiar, but is instead reintegrated in such a way that one's earlier horizon itself changes in the process of accommodating it. This is what Seel means when he says that experience itself comes about "only after an event-full [*ereignisreich*⁴⁹] constraint forces one to enter into a reinterpretative process of one's experience and perceptual schemas."⁵⁰ As a process which involves both the disruption of continuity and the re-establishment of continuity, experience is hardly an ontologisation of the discontinuous, but instead what Seel calls a dialectic or "oppositional play between confrontation and assimilation,"⁵¹ a dialectic of disruption and reintegration— a dialectic which, if are bracketed the specific variables involved in different formulations (such as experience as a dialectic of innovation *versus* the habitual, of hegemony *versus* counter-history, of mediacy *versus* immediacy), can be generalized as a dialectic of continuity and discontinuity.

⁴⁹ "Eventful" (*ereignisreich*) should be understood here in the Lyotardian sense of *événementiel*, that is to say, as Readings put it, that which "disrupts any pre-existing referential frame within which it might be represented or understood" . *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics*, p.xxxi.

⁵⁰ *Die Kunst der Entzweiung*, p. 82.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

Such a dialectic of continuity and discontinuity can of course hardly take place if the unexpected, without further ado, merely galvanizes one into a reckless headlong rush towards the perpetually renewed advent of the unexpected and the new, or if it merely consecrates generalised discontinuity for its own sake. Required instead is a reflexive turning back upon, and not the outright displacement or complete overhaul of, precisely those horizons and orientations which the unexpected disrupts— it is after all within such horizons that the unexpected is worked upon, and not in their vacated seat that the unexpected is articulated anew and *ex nihilo*. Such a reflexive “returning to,” which Heidegger and Gadamer call an *Umkehrung*,⁵² and which Kristeva similarly calls a *retournement*,⁵³ is in fact presupposed by theories wagering on the counter-hegemonic or transgressive aspect of experience, for the disruptiveness of the unexpected resides not in the punctual intensity as such of the incommensurable (or of the sublime, or of non-identity, or of the immediate), as if discursive mediation were somehow inherently evil; it resides instead, as we earlier saw, in the juxtaposition of the unexpected with the familiar, in the salience of their incongruence, in the *tension*, in other words, between the disruptiveness of the unexpected and the assimilating or normalising function of the familiar and recognisable. As Michael Inwood points out in his discussion of Hegel, who gave the first and most systematic formulation of the dynamics involved in the second

⁵² See Heidegger’s “Hegels Begriff der Erfahrung,” in *Holzwege* (Frankfurt/Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1949), pp. 105-192, and pp. 359-65 of Gadamer’s *Wahrheit und Methode*.

⁵³ Julia Kristeva, *La révolution du langage poétique. L’avant-garde à la fin du XIXe siècle: Lautréamont at Mallarmé* (Paris: Seuil, 1974), pp.173-176.

sense of experience as outlined by Heidegger, “consciousness discovers the inadequacy of one of its forms and proceeds to the next, not by encountering some *other* object in its experience, but by experiencing the *internal incoherence* between its object and its conception of that object and the transformation of that conception into its next object.”⁵⁴ Such a reflexive “returning to” or *Umkehrung* furthermore becomes necessary since it is unlikely that any signifying structure or system (whether social or psychic, as Luhmann would have it), any economy of self-identity (to use Anthony Giddens’ terminology) or any human cognitive apperceptive apparatus (as Walter Benjamin puts it in reference to the historically contingent structure of subjectivity)⁵⁵ would sustain itself in the face of a perpetually renewed overhauling of its entire constitution following each contingent encounter with the unexpected. Although this will be dealt with at greater length in chapter 4, suffice it to say here that it is through such a reflexive “turning back,” or what Giddens and Luhmann call a “self-reflexive orientation,” that the onslaught of the new is kept within manageable proportions. As Luhmann puts it in the context of social and psychic systems, such a self-reflexive orientation “looks backward” and “reinforces the identity of the system so that it can survive novel choices and innovations by *reconstructing* its past history as a consistent series of intentions and actions.”⁵⁶ For

⁵⁴ *A Hegel Dictionary* (Oxford; Blackwell, 1992), p. 96. My emphasis.

⁵⁵ See Walter Benjamin’s unpublished working notes (Ms #1024), in *Gesammelte Werke*, I, 3: pp. 1039-1051.

⁵⁶ “The Differentiation of Society,” in *The Differentiation of Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 239. My emphasis. Chapter 4 will address the problem of such a reflexive *Umkehrung*, or “turning back upon,” as well as the reflexive

Giddens, who addresses this issue within the context of individual self-identity, this reflexive orientation “consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives” without which individual self-identity could not endure the onslaught of the disparate and the unexpected.⁵⁷ So while the unexpected does unsettle, it does not annihilate he who undergoes it; it instead leads to experience insofar as it fosters the *reconstructing* of one’s past history, or the *revising* of one’s biographical narratives.

Experience, then, neither entails a rush to the unexpected and the new of an open future at the complete expense of the predictability of the familiar of a foreclosed past (at which point we would have but a generalisation of disruptive discontinuity), nor does it involve, conversely, the complete assimilation of the new and the future by the familiar and the past (at which point the continuity of one’s horizon would not even be breached). At hand in experience is instead a process whereby the continuity of a horizon is interrupted only to resume again in such a way that the unexpected is included and worked into it, and this with the result that one emerges changed in more than a fleeting manner while at the same time maintaining a foothold into what one once was. This is why the results of having undergone experience are qualified, whether by the most

dynamic at hand in experience. As we shall see, reflexivity does *not* necessarily spell the revisitation of specular philosophies of reflection as critiqued by Rodolphe Gasché in *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).

⁵⁷ *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 5.

complex of philosophical treatises (such as Hegel's) or by everyday proverbs or maxims, not with superlatives boasting of radical metamorphoses and new beginnings, but instead with comparative adjectives indicating that the experience has made a difference that both constructs upon what happened before and that in turn will be constructed upon by what follows. Maxims indeed tell us that from experience one emerges wiser, richer, than before—one is taught lessons which one will not forget, as a result of which one is *plus averti*, and which will better prepare us for the possibility of further experiences. Experience consists less of an aggregation of the disparate, or of punctual shocks which leave no consequential traces behind, than it consists of a confrontation with the unexpected which induces a future oriented and developmental process. But if experience results in the consolidation, and not the dispersal, of those who undergo it, such a consolidation involves not a confirmation of the same, but rather the construction of something which, within a dialectic of continuity and discontinuity, emerges richer and augmented in its being following an encounter with the strange or unexpected. If to undergo an experience means that something turns out differently than originally supposed, Heidegger also reminds us in reference to his second meaning of how experience is “generally understood,” that “what proves to be different will not be thrown aside. Rather, the appearance in such and such a way (*das So-Scheinen*) belongs precisely to that which is experienced and is included in that which makes the experience richer.”⁵⁸ It is just this sort of dialectic which informs

⁵⁸ *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 21.

Thompsonian experience-oriented theories according to which the worker (or woman, or differently-abled, or “post-colonial other”) is to be saved from the condescension of posterity by consolidating, adding to and solidifying a counter-history, not by constantly (or “playfully”—as some like to put it) shifting among ephemeral collages or variegated “subject positions”. And within those trends in aesthetic inquiry which rely on experience, for which Jauss’s discussion of Bakhtine can serve here as an exemplar, “to experience art is an excellent way in which to experience the alien “you” in its otherness, and, thereby, in turn to have an enriched experience of one’s own ‘I’”⁵⁹—a position echoed by Albrecht Wellmer, for whom modern aesthetic experience is not so much the production of disruptive intensity for its own sake⁶⁰ than it is a dialectic between two moments which he calls energetic (non-meaning which disrupts) and semiotic (meaning made available to the subject)—a dialectic which “expands the boundaries of meaning—and ...in doing so it also expands the boundaries of the world and of the subject.”⁶¹ That experience should lead to expansion and enrichment is not a notion limited to certain philosophical stances, to everyday maxims or to issues of agency or aesthetic practices: it is even to be found, according to Dewey in his more speculative

⁵⁹ *Question and Answer*, p. 216.

⁶⁰ This in the manner (for example) of Lyotard’s “energetics” as outlined in his *Économie libidinale* (Paris: Minuit, 1974) and according to which intensity is the result of an the eventful presentification of the unrepresentable— a presumably subversive way of circumventing the evils of commodification and semiotics.

⁶¹ “The Dialectic of Modernism and Postmodernism: The Critique of Reason since Adorno,” in *The Persistence of Modernity; Essays on Aesthetics, Ethics and Postmodernism*, trans. Davis Midgley (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), p. 53.

moods, in biological processes, where he argues “that even at the pre-human biological level, the life of any organism is enriched by the state of disparity and resistance through which it has successfully passed.”⁶²

But regardless of the legitimacy of Dewey’s transposition into the biological of a notion of experience usually considered in terms of mediation and signification, the point here remains that when deployed in various theories reckoning with the relation of subjectivity with its environment (whether aesthetic or social), or even with the interaction of the biological organism with its physical surroundings, experience points to the notion of passing through states of disparity and resistance, of overcoming adversity, of undergoing an ordeal or passing a test, and of traversing a dangerous disruption only in the end to emerge changed and enriched within a re-established continuity. Victor Turner, Roger Munier, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and others have in fact pointed out that such a dynamic is to be found in the semantic sedimentations embedded in the etymological history of both experience and *Erfahrung*—semantic sedimentations which strikingly converge with the manner by which experience has been generally understood as well as appropriated by philosophy. As Turner observes, experience involves that idea of danger, deriving as it does “from the Indo-European base **per-*, ‘to attempt, venture, risk’ ...The German cognates of *per* relate experience to ‘fare,’ ‘fear,’ and ‘ferry,’ since *p* becomes *f* by Grimm’s Law. The Greek *perao* relates experience to ‘I

⁶² “Dewey, Dilthey and Drama,” p. 37.

pass through,' with implications of rites of passage."⁶³ Etymologically and semantically linked as they are to the notion of the unexpected as an ordeal, experience and *Erfahrung* entail not that one altogether annihilate earlier orientations, a former horizon or one's sense of individual or collective self-identity—to do so would be to suffer self-destruction and thus to fail an ordeal—but rather that one successfully negotiate and “pass through” the unexpected so as to receive confirmation, as in any test, while at the same time emerging wiser, enriched or otherwise fortified. The danger of undergoing ordeals and the risks involved in confronting the unexpected are sought not for their own sake, but rather as that through which one successfully passes *yet which one withstands*, for although one does not emerge unscathed or unchanged, neither is one entirely metamorphosed: earlier modes or “practices” of signification, of understanding, and earlier routinized perceptions are indeed not altogether jettisoned—they are merely interrupted, tested, and reorganised differently. Whether deployed by aesthetic theory, anthropology, subaltern historiography or post-Gadamerian hermeneutics, and whether it is explicitly addressed or implicitly relied upon, experience follows from the transformation, not the evacuation, of the familiar, the habitual and the past by the unexpected, the surprising and the new. Experience is a dialectical affair—so much so that

⁶³ “Dewey, Dilthey and Drama,” p.35. Roger Munier, whom Lacoue-Labarthe liberally cites in *La poésie comme expérience* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1986), p. 30, note 6, comes to essentially the same conclusions: experience derives from the Latin *experiri* (“to put to the test”), which stems from *periculum* (“danger,” “ordeal.”), the Indo-European root of which is *per-*, which connotes ideas of a journey and an ordeal that one undergoes—an etymology echoed in the Germanic languages, where *Erfahrung* can be retraced to the Old High German *fara* which means ordeal, and which gives rise to *Gefahr* and *gefährden*.

Giorgio Agamben points out with good reason that even contemporary dialectics, which has gone beyond a strictly Hegelian project, finds its roots in this conception of experience marked by negativity.⁶⁴

4. Erlebnis: a Para-academic Variant of Dialectical Experience.

If experience appears imbued with a dialectical dynamic throughout its rather long etymological and conceptual history, it is only with Hegel (as we shall later see) that such a dynamic receives its first systematic formulation—it is in fact from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* that both Heidegger and Gadamer glean the second general meaning of experience as “it is generally understood” (as Heidegger puts it). But just as the *Erfahrungshunger* decades were to later see duplicated within para-academic discourse that which would essentially seem to be but a debate among academics, likewise in the early 19th century does the dialectical aspect of experience go beyond strictly philosophical issues: under the guise of the early 19th century neologism *Erlebnis*—an initially non-academic term which had to wait for Dilthey before its codification as a philosophical and aesthetic concept—the dialectical aspect of experience

⁶⁴ See chapter 3 of his *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 1993).

indeed permeates certain forms of popular fiction and biographical literature of early 19th century Germany.

Erlebnis, usually translated as “lived experience,” of course hardly seems a likely term within which a dialectic of continuity and discontinuity is to be had. If by the late 19th century, *Erlebnis* was in vogue in such fields as aesthetics, anthropology, and psychology,⁶⁵ and if it became, as René Welleck put it, “the shibboleth of German poetic theory,”⁶⁶ by the 1920s on the other hand it became so broad a term so as to become essentially meaningless, vaguely retaining references to only one of its original aspects, namely, the manner by which the intense and lived immediacy of certain events dispenses with the need for external authentication, reasoned justification, mediating interpretations or other antics of “alienating” and “life-denying” reason. It is of course this latter vitalistic aspect of *Erlebnis* which has been rightly decried by Western Marxism, beginning with the Frankfurt school, as the potentially dangerous stuff of vitalist charlatanism or, to use Adorno’s apt phrase, as the “jargon of authenticity” deployed by mountebanks *de tout acabit*, the appeal of which can be gauged by the popularity of vulgarized *Lebensphilosophie* (for which Ernst Jünger’s *Kampf als innere Erlebnis* (1922) can stand as an emblematic and, for its time, premonitory exemplar), and

⁶⁵ Konrad Cramer, “Erleben, Erlebnis,” in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. Joachim Ritter (Basel/Stuttgart: Schwabe & Co, 1972), p. 708.

⁶⁶ “Genre Theory, the Lyric, and *Erlebnis*,” in *Discriminations: Further Concepts of Criticism* (NewHaven: Yale University Press, 1970), p.251.

whose later association with the more unpalatable of 20th century socio-political movements, now again on the rise in industrialised, non industrialised and de-industrialized nations alike, is hardly a mystery. Associated as it became by the 1920s with vitalist immediacy and prediscursive irrationalism, *Erlebnis* has of course also incurred the scathing critiques of those schools of thought which, from Voloshinov to post-Gadamerian hermeneutics, have always cast a suspicious eye on psychologism and romantic pantheism as a grounds for explaining processes of signification. With such a recent conceptual history, where vitalist *Einfühlung* and punctual immediacy are the order of the day, *Erlebnis* would hardly seem to have much affinity with—in fact, since the Frankfurt school in general and Walter Benjamin in particular, it would seem diametrically opposed to—the more dialectically oriented and temporally extended notion of *Erfahrung*.

A more sustained examination of the early conceptual history of *Erlebnis*, however, shows how this term was initially imbued with the same dialectical dimension that we saw at work in experience and *Erfahrung*. Indeed, although various hasty appropriations of Dilthey have encouraged the association of *Erlebnis* with vitalist immediacy, Dilthey's own notion of *Erlebnis* nevertheless points to a dialectic of continuity and discontinuity: this concept indeed involves not only the coalescing of disparate events and strands of meanings into a unit of intelligibility, nor does it merely intensely stand out from and starkly contrast with the otherwise morose undifferentiated flow of life; it is also reinserted in the very life course that it disrupts so as to occasion its

reinterpretation (or “rewriting” as current parlance likes to put it), and this in such a way that an *Erlebnis* leaves a lasting imprint on he who undergoes it. Such a dialectic of continuity and discontinuity becomes particularly evident in the manner by which Dilthey conjures the hermeneutic circle as an illustration of how a particular experience is circumscribed by yet also impinges upon the larger context of a life course: by disrupting a life course, but by also requiring that this life course accommodate rather than exclude or contain such a disruption, Dilthey’s *Erlebnis* transforms and restructures the whole upon which it depends for its articulation yet which it also assists in constituting.⁶⁷ But if Dilthey was the first to systematically formulate the concept of *Erlebnis* that would later be abused by various vitalist currents, it is important to remember, as Gadamer put it, that “the real phenomenon that took place in the very life of language merely deposited itself in the richness of the technical acceptance which the word [*Erlebnis*] receives with Dilthey.”⁶⁸ Karol Sauerland has indeed shown how a dialectic of continuity and discontinuity, and not a vitalist appeal to immediacy alone, no less informs the term *Erlebnis* as it was initially deployed in various forms of German popular fiction in the 1840s, and this before any specific appropriation of the term *Erlebnis* by philosophy,

⁶⁷ As Richard Palmer puts it: “Dilthey cites this example [of the hermeneutic circle] and then asserts that the same relationship exists between the parts and the whole of one’s life. ...An event or experience can so alter our lives that what was formerly meaningful becomes meaningless and an apparently unimportant past experience may take on meaning in retrospect.” *Hermeneutics* (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1969), p. 118.

⁶⁸ *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 67.

Lebensphilosophie, hermeneutics or academic discourse in general.⁶⁹ It is true that the association of *Erlebnis* with immediacy seems yet stronger in the pre-Diltheyian use of this term: after all, even as it began to consistently appear in biographical literature and popular fiction of mid-19th century Germany,⁷⁰ *Erlebnis* was already endowed, as Gadamer has shown, with “a striking immediacy which eschews all thinking of its signification.”⁷¹ And as that which thus disrupts the given, the posited or the mediated, the “striking immediacy” of *Erlebnis* has been seen, and this in an association which Sauerland traces back to Carl Rosenkranz’s *Skizze* of 1842 (yet which persists to this day) as that which surprises, disturbs, or is otherwise unsettling (*erschütternd*).⁷² But this undeniable link between *Erlebnis* and immediacy is only half of the story: if, from its initial appearance in early 19th century fiction to its later use and abuse by later 19th and 20th century aesthetic theory and aestheticised theorising, *Erlebnis* is characterised by an *Erschütterung* which follows from a confrontation with or immediate access to the prediscursive, such a *frisson* is nevertheless not limited to an ephemeral or punctual

⁶⁹ Karol Sauerland, *Diltheys Erlebnisbegriff: Entstehung, Glanzzeit und Verkümmern eines literaturhistorischen Begriffs* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1972) pp. 4-6.

⁷⁰ According to Gadamer, it is in only in biographical literature of the 1870s that *Erlebnis* gains currency; Sauerland’s more thorough study of the concept of *Erlebnis*, however, shows how although this term proliferated in book titles and enjoyed considerable popularity as early as the 1850s, it is to the 1840s that can be traced the meanings currently attributed to it. See Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, pp. 66-75, and Sauerland, *Diltheys Erlebnisbegriff*, pp. 3-7.

⁷¹ *Wahrheit und Methode*, p.72 .

⁷² *Diltheys Erlebnisbegriff*, p. 3, n. 17.

shock bereft of further consequences; the *frisson* of *Erlebnis* must on the contrary lend itself to a reintegration within the very totality (such as that of a particular *Leben*) that it disrupted, and this in such a manner that one is changed in a lasting manner. The conceptual history of *Erlebnis*, particularly as it began to appear with increasing frequency by the mid 19th century, but also persisting to this day, is indeed characterized by a double orientation, or what Gadamer calls a *Doppelseitigkeit*,⁷³ whereby *Erlebnis* refers both to the “immediacy prior to any interpretation, elaboration or mediation, . . . as well as to its import, the result which lasts.”⁷⁴ This double orientation can in fact already be traced, as Gadamer and Cramer have shown, to the semantic history of the two terms from which *Erlebnis* was coined in the early 19th century—*erleben*, which “stresses the immediacy with which one grasps something real,” and *das Erlebte*, which is the result of experience which has “obtained duration, weight and importance.”⁷⁵

⁷³ *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 73.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 66. Conrad Kramer likewise notes that *Erlebnis* stems from the fusion of two semantic strands—*erleben* (which by the 1850s shifted from the idea of “being alive when something happens” to connotations of the immediacy with which something happens), and *das Erlebte* (which designates that which, “in the flow of the immediately lived, and which as a product of this flow, gains enduring meaning for the whole context of a life.” (“Erleben, Erlebnis,” pp. 702-703.)

But it is the word “adventure” (*Abenteuer*), with which *Erlebnis*, from its initial popularisation in the 1840s⁷⁶ to Simmel’s work,⁷⁷ has been most often compared, which best shows how at work in *Erlebnis* is less a wager on immediacy than it is a dialectic of continuity and discontinuity. After sifting through literary sources of the 1840s where *Erlebnis* begins to assume a certain semantic consistency, Sauerland concludes that it is during this period that *Erlebnis* acquired the various meanings which persist to this day,⁷⁸ the most prevalent of which— and this in spite of the varied appropriations of this early 19th century neologism— is that of adventure. As Sauerland puts it:

Here *Erlebnis* has more the meaning of adventure [*Abenteuer*]. The habitual life course is interrupted, all connections with the familiar world are loosened, it is the unknown, the uncertain, that henceforth constitutes the element within which the hero must move. Should the hero not only merely succeed in withstanding the extra-ordinary, his adventure, but also return from it to the everyday more experienced and enriched, then will this interruption of the hero’s life course will be designated as an unforgettable *Erlebnis* which will not remain without influence on his later living.⁷⁹

Unlike the mere episode, which provisionally unsettles or delays the course of things only to be quickly glossed over as this course resumes, unchanged and only temporarily

⁷⁶ Diltheys *Erlebnisbegriff*, pp. 5-7.

⁷⁷ See for example Georg Simmel’s *Philosophische Kultur*, in: *Gesammelte Essays*, 1911, pp. 11-28.

⁷⁸ Indeed, Gadamer notes that such a dialectic of continuity and discontinuity can be seen in the manner by which *Erlebnis* was to operate in aesthetics a century later: here, aesthetic experience (*ästhetische Erlebnis*) is not merely something that is “extracted from any real context,” but means instead that “the power of the work of art tears he who experiences it from the context of his life and yet at the same time reconnects him to the totality of this existence.” *Wahrheit und Methode*, pp. 75-76.

⁷⁹ Diltheys *Erlebnisbegriff*, pp. 5-6.

inconvenienced by such a fleeting hiatus, adventure in contrast entails that such a hiatus leave behind a lasting imprint on the course it interrupts. If, as Gadamer observes, the adventure, like the episode, “undoubtedly interrupts the ordinary course of things,” the adventure, unlike the episode, is not confined to interruption for its own sake but instead requires that the disruption “relate itself in a positive and very significant manner to the continuity it interrupts.”⁸⁰ As Gadamer further explains,

adventure is aware that its characteristic is that of the exceptional— a characteristic which is specific to it, as adventure— and it thus *remains related to the return to the habitual into which it cannot be accommodated*. Thus adventure is something one passes, as one passes a test or a trial, out of which one emerges enriched and more mature.⁸¹

The distinctiveness of *Erlebnis* in other words stems not only from a rupturing of the continuity of the life flow, where nothing is truly experienced, but also from the durable traces or residues that such a rupture leaves behind as a result of not lending itself to seamless integration. By forcing a life course to accommodate something unexpectedly new or foreign to it, *Erlebnis* indeed effectively impinges upon and restructures this life course. If the hero (for example) of the 1866 short story “Ein Erlebnis in Texas” can claim to have undergone an experience, it is not only because the continuity of his horizon in Germany was perturbed by the unexpected harshness of a sojourn in Texas, but also because upon resuming his life in Germany he is prodded by this event into self-

⁸⁰ *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 75.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 75. My emphasis.

reflexively reworking this horizon in such a way that he “becomes a better citizen of everyday life.”⁸²

In spite of its eventual appropriation by certain vitalist currents after Dilthey, *Erlebnis*, then, does not stray far from the conceptual and semantic history of experience as examined earlier. Any unsettling dimension to *Erlebnis* following a confrontation with the unexpected or unmediated is indeed not valued for its own sake, nor does it foster a mere opposition between corrupted mediation and pristine unmediated reality, between the habitual and the unexpected; *Erlebnis* instead demands that the rupture and discontinuity of the unexpected, the new or the extraordinary be reintegrated and reworked into the very continuity it interrupted—and this much in the manner of the Thompsonian notion of experience which, as we have seen, strives not after immediacy as a prediscursive entity, but after that which, by violating expectations and by disrupting dominant mediated reality, unsettles one’s prior dispositions in such a way that one is not left unchanged.

The dialectic of continuity and discontinuity at hand in Thompsonian notions of experience is not, then, some aberrant phenomenon confined to certain strains of theorising, but refers instead to a problem explicitly thematised by both academic and para-academic uses of experience from the late 18th and early 19th centuries to the

⁸² In *Westermanns Monatshefte* (1866): pp. 519-543, cited in Sauerland, *Dilthey's Erlebnisbegriff*, pp. 5-6.

Erfahrungshunger decades. By capitalising on the incongruence which dialectical experience inserts between the given and the possible, between the routine and the unexpected, Thompsonian cultural, subaltern and historiographical theories merely perpetuate an understanding of experience which has been around for quite some time. The role expected of experience in the devising of counter-histories and subaltern specificity becomes clear at this point: if, as Jochen Schulte-Sasse puts it, "experience may contradict and undermine the prevalent ideology of a historical situation," but if "the modern culture industry robs individuals of 'languages' for interpreting self and world by denying them the media for organizing their own experiences,"⁸³ then it would seem that one need but encourage or help devise regionalized or particularized cultures or counter public spheres within which can be articulated the experiences of those who have been deprived of a voice. But however plausible this story and however noble its intentions, the historical status of experience today must first be ascertained before counter-hegemonic strategies based on experience can be devised, for the capacity itself for experience, and not just the manner by which these experiences are mediated and articulated, may after all not be some ahistorical faculty but on the contrary a product of history and thus subject to historical change. As such, experience would appear to be more encompassing a problem than can be rectified by conceptual rectitude alone, or than can be set aright by the admonishing interventions of a Scott or a Bellamy.

⁸³ "Theory of Modernism vs Theory of the Avant-Garde," introduction to Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984) p. xxvii.

5. *Beyond Academic Squabbling*

As can be gathered from the uses to which it has been put, from the manner by which it informs certain strains of theoretical inquiry, and from its etymological sedimentations and conceptual history, experience appears to be imbued with a dialectical structure suspiciously reminiscent of German idealism in general and Hegel in particular. With its dialectic of continuity and discontinuity following a confrontation with the unexpected, the strange or the new, with its apparent stress on both cancelling and preserving what is negated while at the same time yielding a higher synthesis, experience seems to be but a variant of Hegelian *Aufhebung*, or a German idealist notion of *Bildung*, whereby a confrontation with alterity leads to an unfolding and enriching process of self objectification and self-knowledge. This apparently Hegelian hue to experience becomes all the more flagrant when we recall that Hegel, who was the first to systematically formulate the dialectical structure of experience, actually provides the backdrop against which Heidegger expounds the second general meaning of experience. In fact, Hegel goes so far as to *equate* experience with the dialectic, telling us that “what one calls experience” is actually a “dialectical movement, which consciousness exercises on itself, on its knowledge as well as on its object, insofar as the new true object springs before

it.”⁸⁴ And it is with good reason that Heidegger notes how “Hegel does not conceive experience dialectically; he thinks the dialectic on the basis of the essence of experience.”⁸⁵ But to maintain that experience is a dialectical affair is not necessarily to subscribe to the general Hegelian project whereby experience assists in the self-objectification of *Geist* on its way to absolute self knowledge, nor does it entail, as Jay puts it in reference to the generic post-structuralist objection to experience, a “reliance on a strong notion of subjectivity, a subject present to itself after a process of apparent alienation, and its pivotal role in mediating between consciousness and science.”⁸⁶ One need but think of Luhmann’s systems theory, which is hardly Hegelian and where a “strong subject” is, if anything, quite absent.⁸⁷ Or, better yet, one need but think of Gadamer who, although very much under the sway of Hegel in several important respects which need not be addressed here, and which as such ought not to be a sin,⁸⁸

⁸⁴ *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Frankfurt -am- Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), p.79.

⁸⁵ *Holzwege*, p. 187.

⁸⁶ “The Limits of Limit Experience: Bataille and Foucault,” p. 170, n. 10.

⁸⁷ For a concise *compte rendu* of Luhmann’s position with regard to “the subject,” which he of course prefers to call a “psychic system,” see his “The Individuality of the Individual: Historical Meanings and Contemporary Problems,” in *Essays on Self-Reference*, pp. 107-122.

⁸⁸ Or if it does constitute a sin, then the burden of proof rests on the shoulders of the accusers and not the accused. As Duncan Forbes caustically reminds us in reference to what is perhaps Hegel’s most unread, most misunderstood yet most maligned of works: “[the *Philosophy of History*] contains the notorious phrases about the state being the divine Idea on earth, reason ruling the world and so on, which have been made to mean precisely the opposite of what Hegel intended. Even those who have spent years of suffering as well as enjoyment on this mountain can slip badly at times, and this should be sufficient warning to those critics and quick-reading, quick judging able men—from

proposes experience as a dialectic which, contrary to the march of *Geist* in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, merely loosens the grip of prevailing horizons and which, as Theodore Kisiel put it, "never ends in complete knowledge and perfect identity of consciousness and object, but continually opens unto ever new experiences though its unceasing questioning."⁸⁹ One need in other words no more subscribe to the Hegelian march of spirit when acknowledging the dialectical structure of experience than one needs to agree, say, with his political philosophy when taking the master-slave dialectic as a basis for a theory of recognition, as the recent work of Axel Honneth and Charles Taylor eloquently show.⁹⁰

whom God defend the history of ideas—who, taking a quick look through the telescope, usually someone else's, feel competent to lecture the crowd, always ready to enjoy the deflating of large balloons, on the iniquities of a system which they have not begun to understand properly. And there are the sly innuendoes of otherwise learned men, which are difficult to nail because the nature and depth of the ignorance involved cannot be properly established." Duncan Forbes, Introduction to Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of World Spirit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. vii-viii. As my colleague David Carvounas reminded me, it should be added here that whether Hegel himself proposed a closed system and a final state of reconciliation is itself a debatable matter—Hegel indeed repeatedly stressed in his *Philosophy of History* how he merely delineated the movement of freedom, and not the end of history. But this is an issue which cannot be addressed here.

⁸⁹ "The Happening of Tradition: the Hermeneutics of Gadamer and Heidegger," in Robert Hollinger (ed.), *Hermeneutics and Praxis* (Notre Dame, Indiana; University of Notre Dame, 1985), pp. 24-25. For a concise examination of Gadamer's notion of experience (*Erfarung*) as compared to both Hegel's and Jauss's, see Claude Piché's "Expérience esthétique et herméneutique philosophique," *Texte: Revue de critique et de théorie littéraire* 3 (1984): pp. 179-191.

⁹⁰ In this regard, see Axel Honneth's "Pluralisierung und Anerkennung. Zum Selbstmissverständnis postmoderner Sozialtheorien," *Merkur* 508 (January 1991): pp. 624-629, as well as his more recent study, *The Struggle for Recognition*, and Charles Taylor's *Multiculturalism and the 'politics of recognition'* (Princeton University Press,

The dialectical aspect of experience, as Jay has shown,⁹¹ in fact persists even in such self-consciously anti-hegelian thinkers as Foucault and Bataille: in spite of their attempts to stay clear of a dialectical notion of experience, which they equate respectively with phenomenology and Hegelianism, along with (horror of horrors) the evils of a repressive centred subjectivity, Foucault and Bataille in fact end up reproducing the dialectic they sought to oppose. In the case of Foucault, experience ought not (as he puts it) “to reaffirm the fundamental character of the subject, of the self” but ought instead to adhere to the Nietzschean task of “‘tearing’ the subject from itself in such a way that it is no longer the subject as such, or that it is completely ‘other’ than itself so that it may arrive at its annihilation, its dissociation.”⁹² But as we saw earlier, the very fact that, as Foucault himself put it, “an experience is something that you come out of changed,”⁹³ presupposes a reestablishing of the ruptured continuity and a reflexive *Umkehrung*: in sheer discontinuity, there would indeed no longer be a subject where change might be registered, there would be but disparate punctual shocks—in fact, it is *only* through a reflexive restructuring following a disruption that experience testifies to its own eventness, that is, to its having taken place in such a way that one does not emerge

1992).

⁹¹ See his recent “The Limits of Limit -Experience: Bataille and Foucault,” *Constellations* 2, 2 (1995): pp. 155-174.

⁹² Michel Foucault, “How an Experience -book is born,” in *Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori*, trans. R. James Goldstein and James Cascaito (New York, 1991), p.31. Cited in Jay, “The Limits of Limit-Experience,” p. 158.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 27. Cited in Jay, “The Limits of Limit-Experience,” p. 157.

unchanged. After all, as Luhmann reminds us, “events are happenings that make a difference between a ‘before’ and a ‘thereafter.’ Events can be identified and observed, anticipated and remembered only as such a difference. Their identity is difference. *Their presence is a copresence of the before and the hereafter.*”⁹⁴ This is why Foucault’s notion of experience involves not only a disruptive undermining of the continuity of the subject, a “‘tearing’ the subject away from itself in such a way that it is no longer the subject as such,” which Jay calls the pro-active moment of Foucault’s experience; it also involves a *mise en rapport* between the disruption with that which was disrupted, between “a ‘before’ and a ‘thereafter’”—a *mise en rapport* made possible by what Jay calls a reactive moment, a “*post facto* reconstruction,” a retrospective articulation of the disruption in terms of an auto-biographical narrative, which is actually that which allows for experience to be engendered in the first place : experience is indeed not an entity which is first present and then narrativised; it is instead in the narrativisation prompted by disruption that experience actually comes about. Experience for Foucault, in short, becomes both the occasion for and the result of reflexive restructuring, and not merely disruptiveness for its own sake and, as such, Foucault’s experience becomes a dialectic (as Jay puts it) of the “pro-active and reactive,” “of self-expansion and self annihilation, immediate, proactive spontaneity and fictional retrospection...”⁹⁵— or, in other words, of continuity and discontinuity. It is with good reason that Jay concludes that Foucault’s

⁹⁴ “The Autopoiesis of Social Systems,” in *Essays on Self-Reference*, pp. 10-11. My emphasis.

⁹⁵ “The Limits of Limit-Experience,” p. 159.

notion of experience ends up being no less dialectical than the very “dialectical account of phenomenological *Bildung* that Lyotard and other critics of Hegelian sublation find so troubling.”⁹⁶

The problem of experience, however, ought not to be addressed as if it were merely the persistence of hegelian-inspired terminology. True, it could be conceivably argued that although the etymological history of experience and *Erfahrung* testifies to a dialectal element, it is nevertheless only with Hegel that such a dialectical structure receives its first thorough formulation, and that, as such, it is essentially a pernicious co-conspirator in the most resilient of ontotheological systems, hegelianism—a system so resilient⁹⁷ that even a Bataille and a Foucault, regarded by many as the “precursors,” along with Nietzsche, of poststructuralism, remain *malgré eux* under its insidious sway. When considering the emergence of certain cultural paradigms or the inauguration of epistemological configurations, it is of course tempting to limit the socio-historical forces

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 160. To this it ought to be added that with regard to postmodern thought in general, it is important not to dismiss, as Habermas notes, “the suspicion that postmodern thought merely claims a transcendent status, while it remains in fact dependent on presuppositions of the modern self-understanding that were first brought to light by Hegel.” *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1987), pp. 4-5.

⁹⁷ Yet not so resilient a system, as certain Anglo-American appropriators of Derrida would of course have it, as could withstand a good dose of “deconstructive sobriety.” For a healthy corrective to and deflating critique of this sort of position which has assumed hegemonic proportions in North-American academia particularly since the 1980s, see Rodolph Gasché’s *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), chapters 1-9.

at work in such formations to the speculations of a few key thinkers and to consider these as catalytic agents within a *histoire des mentalités*. But if subjectivity was increasingly considered centered by the 17th century, or if the dialectical dynamic of everything from history to consciousness becomes an *idée reçue* by the 19th century, it is not because Descartes woke up one day and decided to oppose *res extensa* to *res cogitans*, or because Hegel decided to air his views on the vagaries of some *Geist*. It is indeed important not to forget, as Charles Taylor puts it, that “the temptation to give priority to the philosophical formulation comes from the fact that it *is* a formulation.”⁹⁸ And of this Heidegger and Gadamer remind us when they make it clear how Hegel’s concept of experiences as dialectical is but a particular formulation of how experience has generally been understood. It may well be, then, as Jay reminds us, that “contrary to the dominant Anglo-American reception of poststructuralist thought, experience is a term that cannot be effortlessly dissolved in a network of discursive relations;”⁹⁹ it may well be that dialectical experience in fact ought not even to be addressed as if it were a strictly philosophical concept, Hegelian or otherwise, in need of a demystifying deconstruction or, conversely, of a belated rehabilitation; it may well be that dialectical experience has instead as its referent something beyond a self-contained history of opinions exchanged amongst theorists. The dialectic of continuity and discontinuity which informs the etymological and (more pronouncedly still) the post-hegelian

⁹⁸ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 307.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

conceptual history of experience is indeed to be found not only in various philosophical appropriations, or within arcane academic debates; it is also for example duplicated, as we saw, within the early 19th century German neologism *Erlebnis* –an initially unacademic term which, unrelated before the late 19th century to philosophical, *geisteswissenschaftliche* or other theoretical inquiry, and as can be surmised from a survey of its conceptual use in German popular fiction of the 1840s, enjoyed considerable vogue precisely in those segments of the population very unlikely to be familiar with, say, Hegel or Dilthey, let alone with the implications of German idealism or hermeneutics. That a dialectic of continuity and discontinuity should appear not only in various philosophical uses of experience after Hegel, but that it should also find its way into an early 19th century neologism first consistently used in popular fiction, that late 18th to early 19th century academic and para-academic discourse should in other words simultaneously thematise such a dialectic—all this suggests that at stake here is more than a problem confined to the history of ideas.

Questions regarding experience ought therefore less to address the extent to which Hegel entralls us to this day and hoodwinks us into perpetuating our incorrigible and weak-kneed logophilia, or whether or not certain thinkers may or may not have had the fortitude to become *bona fide* Nietzschean yea-sayers. Pointing as it does to issues beyond the narrow parameters of academic squabbling, experience instead raises issues of a socio-historical order: indeed, why is it only by the early 19th century that the dialectical aspect of experience receives its first systematic exposition, and why does it

manifest itself with such force in the neologism *Erlebnis* that within popular fiction, as Gadamer observes, “its axiological character was so self-evident that many European languages adopted it without translating it” ?¹⁰⁰ Of import here, then, are neither Hegel’s concept of *Erfahrung* nor Dilthey’s particular concept of *Elebnis*, nor even the various subsequent philosophical appropriations of this term; of import instead are those socio-historical vectors which presided over the emergence, or at over least the increased prevalence, of a dialectic of continuity and discontinuity as registered in both academic and para-academic notions of experience. It is by addressing this issue that can later best be answered the question that started this entire inquiry—a question which revolves less around issues of whether experience ought to be retained , jettisoned or conceptually refined, than it instead concerns itself with that to which the insistence on experience may be a response. If it is at the end of the 18th century that experience , as a dialectic of continuity and discontinuity, first becomes insistent, it is to this period that we must first turn in order to consider what is at stake in the appeals to experience that were to follow some two centuries later. By thus situating experience historically, we can then consider whether the *Erfahrungshunger* decades are either a perpetuation or a mutation of that cluster of socio-historical vectors which by the late 18th century initially allowed for experience, as a dialectic of continuity and discontinuity, to become a thematised problem within both academic and para-academic discourse.

¹⁰⁰ *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 67.

CHAPTER III

Experience historicized

*1. The Specificity of Modern Experience*¹

As a term which gained currency in tandem with philosophical discourse yet in which the dynamic of continuity and discontinuity is no less present, the neologism *Erlebnis* of course testifies to a certain convergence between both academic and para-academic dealings with experience, and this in a manner similar to what was to happen, as we have seen, in the *Erfahrungshunger* decades where academic debates on experience were duplicated within what Craig Calhoun calls the “new social movements” or what Charles Taylor calls “the politics of recognition.” But what is striking here is not so much that the dialectic of continuity and discontinuity at hand in experience should almost simultaneously receive its first systematic philosophical formulation by Hegel and find

¹ The advent of modernity is understood here as coinciding with the emergence and consolidation of the temporality (such as the divergence of past and future noted by Koselleck), the structure of the self (such as Giddens’ “modern reflexive self-identity” or Taylor’s “modern expressive subject”), the dominant mode of social organisation (such as Luhmann’s “functional differentiation of social systems”), or concepts and “*pratiques du savoir*” (as Foucault would have it) *under the sway of which we still find ourselves or which have contemporary significance for us to this day*. It is to the last quarter of the 18th century that the above thinkers, who agree on little else, unanimously ascribe the advent of modernity – a rough chronological marker which will also serve us here. In spite of variations which oppose, say, the classical age to the middle ages, premodernity can on the other hand be understood, as Foucault puts it, as the prehistory of that which is contemporary for us. *Les mots et les choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), p. 315.

its way into popular fiction and biographical literature—after all, we have already seen how such a dialectic informs the etymological and semantic history of experience and can be traced as far back as Aristotle; what is striking here is instead that only by the early 19th century, and not before, does such a dialectic become foregrounded, *explicitly* thematised and, more striking still, valued as constitutive for the developmental unfolding of consciousness and for the building or fortification of self-identity. What is indeed characteristic of uses of experience after the late 18th century is not that they become imbued for the first time with a dialectical aspect, but rather that they testify to a shift in emphasis on the *implications* of such a dialectic: instead of being seen as an aberrant mishap to be contained, a temporary obstruction to be overcome, or an extraordinary event or a painful ordeal to be endured, the dialectical aspect of experience by the late 18th century is seen as a phenomenon imbricated within everyday reality, as a generalised and open process to be actively cultivated, and as “an acquisitive tendency,” as Franco Moretti put it, which “implies growth, the expansion of self.”²

We have already seen how the concept of experience was subtended by a dialectical dimension well before the late 18th century. But because the emphasis was typically placed not on the process but on the product of experience, any such dialectical dimension of experience tended to be obscured.³ Gadamer reminds us (for example) that

² *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, (London: Verso, 1987), p. 46.

³ For more on this, see *Wahrheit und Methode*, pp. 358-360.

if Aristotle resorts to metaphors comparing experience to the disruption of a prior stable state, it nevertheless remains that “what interests Aristotle in experience is only its contribution to the formation of the concept” – after all, “the universality of the concept is for him an ontological *prius*.”⁴ As Giorgio Agamben explains, experience came to be seen less as something which one can have than as something disruptive which one undergoes only when, following the Cartesian opposition of *res extensa* to *res cogitans*, the substantivisation of the *I*, from Berkeley to Locke, eventually fostered “the concept of a psychic consciousness replacing the soul of Christian psychology and the *voûs* of Greek metaphysics... .”⁵ Before experience could lend itself to the explicit thematisation of its dialectical aspect which transforms he who undergoes it, a notion of the self as the object of possible transformation had to first emerge. Such a self presupposes not only what is often referred to by some as the modern subject, or by others as bourgeois subjectivity – that is, a subject which no longer designates (as had been the case throughout pre-modernity) the substratum or bearer of accidental characteristics and attributes of *any* being, whether sentient or inanimate,⁶ but which instead (among other

⁴ Ibid., p. 358.

⁵ *Infancy and History*, p. 23.

⁶ As Gianni Vattimo reminds us, the Latin *substantia* and *subjectum* were in fact essentially synonymous for the better part of premodernity. See chapter 3 of his *Introduzione a Heidegger* (Rome: Gius, Laterza & Figli, 1971). Luhmann also notes that “until the late 18th century, human individuals were only a special kind of individual thing (*res*), characterized by their rational substance. And *res* meant simply a constraint on possible combinations of traits.” “The Individuality of the Individual: Historical Meanings and Contemporary Problems,” in *Essays on Self-Reference*, p. 119, n. 5.

things) refers specifically to the human self or “I” as the bearer of psychological states or processes and as the performer of actions;⁷ also presupposed, as we shall later see, is that such a subject forge its self-identity as a reflexive project (to use Giddens’ expression) which incorporates rather than smother the new and the unexpected. It is only when the perceived foundation of reality shifts from a transcendently anchored order of things (of which man is but a part) to the immanent activity of the human subject that identity and self, no longer static entities preordained according to caste or allotted according to fate, can instead become sufficiently open and negotiable an affair so as to allow for the dialectical and transformative aspect of experience to come to the fore. Only then do the sway of the past and the weight of tradition no longer suffice for their own self-legitimation; only then does the future beckon and allow for the unexpected to impinge upon and transform rather than submit to the given; only then do future experimentations, and not past wisdom or preordained fate, become the guarantor of self identity, if not of truth, which are no longer timelessly given but which instead

⁷ The well known story behind these developments is a long one which cannot detain us here; for a recent concise overview, see Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), chapters 4 and 5. What is of interest here is not the origin of such a modern notion of the subject, but rather the fact of its historical emergence by the late 18th century. See Luhmann, *Social Systems*, trans. John Bednarz and Dirk Baecker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. xxxviii-xxxix: “One can find many forerunners—in the concept of the soul and its cognitive parts, in the form of thought as reflexivity (*noesis noeseos*), or in the Cartesian concept of the “I think,” which designates a self-certainty given independently of whether one is in error or not. But not until the end of the eighteenth century was man understood to be a subject in the strict sense, and thereby unlinked from nature.”

become, at worse, provisional and, at best, asymptotically projected onto an indeterminate future.⁸

Before such changes took place, experience was couched more in terms of the relation of the one to the manifold rather than between the subject and the object.⁹ As such, the issue of experience was less one of how a subject's continuity is to be disrupted by something unexpectedly foreign to it, or of how one is to reflexively reorganise one's horizon of understanding or one's biographical itinerary in order to accommodate the new, than it was generally seen as seen as a problem of "*cognitio singularium*" whereby the retention in memory of singular perceptions allows universal knowledge to proceed

⁸ Helmut Plessner summarises the relation between temporality, change and truth before the late 18th century as follows: "The medieval world's relation to time was defined by the Church's transcendence of time, while that of the absolutist world of natural law was defined by the timeless validity of the principle of reason and the divinely ordained nature of the relations of social dependence. The associated forms of knowledge have corresponding properties. In both systems, truth is materially secure, as a store of supernatural revelation or as laws of being which are immanent to reason, the successive clarification of which in the course of enquiry is part of a closed order which is given once and for all. Incapable of either addition or diminution, the system of knowledge requires precise presentation and defense against objections. The problem of criteria is solved either by means of the principle that our understanding should conform to the teachings of the Church or by that of immanent necessity." "Zur Soziologie der modernen Forschung und ihrer Organisation in der deutschen Universität", in *Diesseits der Utopie* (Frankfurt, 1974), p. 122f., cited in Herbert Schnädelbach, *Philosophy in Germany 1831-1933*, trans. Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 69.

⁹ See chapter 3 of *Infancy and History*.

from the experience of the particular,¹⁰ At best, the new and unexpected involved in experience before the end of the 18th century was, generally speaking, a temporary obstruction on the way to higher universal knowledge, a painful situation to be avoided or an aberrant mishap to be managed.

This does not imply, however, that the unexpected or the disruptive as such had no place in premodern or traditional society. As Renaldo Rosaldo for example shows in his study of the cultural practices of the Northern Luzon Ilongot tribes in the Phillipines,¹¹ the oral recitation of hunting stories, “rather than emphasizing the routine...stress breaks from daily life” and revolve around the unexpected mishaps that beset hunting expeditions. But rather than lead to a reflexive integration of the new within the old so as to occasion a change in orientation, such mishaps (as Luhmann puts it) are “normalised,” i.e., “dealt with by being so interpreted that it accords with already existing or accepted meaning. The unknown is assimilated to the known, the new to the

¹⁰ Although it is true (as Gadamer notes in *Wahrheit und Methode*, p.356) that “the relation between experience, retention, and the unity of experience which proceeds from it remains remarkably unclear,” the idea that the emergence of universal knowledge from an experience of the particular proceeds from the retention in memory of persistent singular perceptions, the notion in other words of experience as *cognitio singularium*, is nevertheless a recurrent theme which *persists well into the 17th and 18th centuries*, where it can be seen (as Friedrich Kambartel shows) no less insistently in Thomas Aquinas, for whom “*experientia fit ex multis memoriis*,” than in the writings of Hobbes, which tell us that “*memoria multarum rerum experientia dicitur*,” or in the work of Christian Wolff. (Cited in Friedrich Kambartel, “Erfahrung”, in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. Joachim Ritter (Basel/Stuttgart: Schwabe & Co, 1972), p.610-611.

¹¹ See his “Hunting as Story and Experience,” in *The Anthropology of Experience*, pp. 97-138.

old, the surprising to the familiar.”¹² And even when change does actually take place as a result of a disruptive suspension of the routine, such a change in premodern society was considered as something exceptional, as the stuff of religious conversions or of initiation rites, and hardly as something imbricated within the reflexive restructuration and formation of self-identity in the manner, as we saw, of the dialectic of continuity and discontinuity at work in experience. As Giddens puts it:

Transitions in individuals' lives have always demanded psychic reorganisation, something which was often ritualised in traditional cultures in the shape of *rites de passage*. But in such cultures, where things stayed more or less the same from generation to generation on the level of the collectivity, the changed identity was clearly staked out—as when an individual moved from adolescence into adulthood. In the settings of modernity, by contrast, the altered self has to be explored and constructed as part of a reflexive process of connecting personal and social change.¹³

The notion of ordeal or trial—terms which are narrowly imbricated, as we saw, in the etymological and conceptual history of experience—indeed have strikingly different implications in their premodern usage, where they are associated with initiation, as opposed to their modern usage, where they are linked to the idea of self-formation. Whereas the notion of trial in premodernity designates an external obstacle to be overcome so as to re-establish an interrupted continuity, or an initiatory transmutation of social status during specific life stages, by the mid 18th century, as Moretti notes in his study of the *Bildungsroman*, it becomes linked to the construction of identity and

¹²“Meaning as Sociology’s Basic Concept,” p. 33.

¹³ *Modernity and Self-Identity*, pp. 32-33.

becomes “instead an opportunity: not an obstacle to be overcome while remaining ‘intact,’ but something that must be *incorporated*, for only by stringing together ‘experiences’ does one build a personality.”¹⁴

Such changes in the status of the unexpected and of the ordeal by the mid to late 18th century are also registered in the conceptual history of experience: just as the initiation rites of premodern society gave way to the modern idea of self-formation or *Bildung*,¹⁵ likewise did experience leave the confines of extra-ordinary events or aberrant occasions in order instead to permeate the everyday formation of self-identity. While comparing novelistic events to those in tragedy and epics, Moretti indeed notes that by the mid- to late 18th century, the transformative aspect of experience is less a matter of initiatory transmutations into new life stages than it is instead a matter of gradual

¹⁴ *The Way of the World*, p. 48.

¹⁵After the 18th century, the German *Bildung* can approximately be rendered in English by the term “self cultivation” (as Walter Bruford does in his *The German Tradition of Self-Cultivation. “Bildung” from Humboldt to Thomas Mann* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975)) or in French by *éducation de soi-même* (as Louis Dumont suggests in *Homo aequalis, II. L'idéologie allemande: France-Allemagne et retour* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991)). As is the case with most fundamental concepts in history, culture and philosophy (such as progress, the new, revolution, culture, the individual, personality), however, *Bildung* has a complex and convoluted conceptual history which cannot detain us here. Suffice it to say that it is by the late 18th century (which Koselleck has appropriately dubbed *Sattelzeit*) that *Bildung*, along with other central cultural and philosophical concepts, assumes the meanings attributed to it to this day. In this regard, see Koselleck's *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge: MIT press, 1985) and, of course, *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexicon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, ed. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze and Reinhart Koselleck (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1972).

growth and of incremental development. The transformative aspect of experience is halted “before personality becomes unilaterally and irrevocably modified” so as to assure “that one does not get in too ‘deep,’ for if no episode in itself is immune to meaning, no episode, on the other hand, can contain the entire meaning of existence.”¹⁶ No longer a prelude to the inductive formation of concepts, no longer an ordeal to be overcome or a mishap to be normalised, and no longer a privileged moment of complete transmutation (as in initiation rites or religious conversions), experience instead refers by the mid- to late 18th century to a dialectic of continuity and discontinuity where the everyday encounter with reality, and not with the extra-ordinary, where incremental growth, and not epiphanic metamorphosis, are the order of the day, and where the change one undergoes reflexively reintegrates itself within and expands upon rather than supplant or annihilate the life course or biographical itinerary it disrupts. By the mid- to late 18th century, Moretti explains, experience

...Refers to an acquisitive tendency. It implies growth, the expansion of self, and even a sort of ‘experiment’ performed with oneself. An experiment, and thus provisional: the episode becomes an experience if the individual manages to give it a meaning that expands or strengthens his personality.¹⁷

The change wrought by experience on a life course, horizon of understanding or biographical itinerary is no longer something to be feared as destructive for earlier life stages or to be avoided as an anomaly; it instead leads to the reflexive restructuring and

¹⁶ *The Way of the World*, p. 46

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

enrichment of the earlier orientations it disrupts, and it becomes an opportunity for rather than an obstruction to or an ordeal of self-formation. It is no coincidence that *Erfahrung* and *Bildung* should become so closely linked to one another in late 18th century Germany that, as Antoine Berman notes, “the most elevated concept created by German thought at the time to interpret this process [of *Bildung*] is experience....”¹⁸ It is indeed at this time that *Bildung*, earlier associated during the *Aufklärung* with goal-oriented *Erziehung*, where a final pedagogical product is to be had, and associated earlier still with the formation and shaping of matter and soul through the imitation of exemplars,¹⁹ semantically shifts instead to the notion of a *general open ended process of self cultivation, growth and development* (whether of individuals, of a *Volk* or, later, of a nation)²⁰—a development which, in spite of the varied uses to which it has been put, from Herder, Humboldt and Goethe to Thomas Mann if not to the underlying pedagogical philosophy of the university to this day,²¹ can be characterised, as Berman puts it, as “

¹⁸*L'épreuve de l'étranger: Culture et tradition dans l'Allemagne romantique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), p. 74. Likewise, Lyotard notes that “The idea of an experience presupposes the idea of an *I* which forms itself (*Bildung*)...” *Le différend* (Paris: Seuil, 1983), p. 75.

¹⁹Rudolf Vierhaus, “Bildung,” in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexicon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, ed. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze and Reinhart Koselleck (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1972). Vol. I, pp. 509-512.

²⁰For more on this see Louis Dumont, *Homo aequalis, II. L'idéologie allemande: France-Allemagne et retour*, p. 219 and Vierhaus’ “Bildung,” pp. 511-516.

²¹Such has indeed been the guiding pedagogical philosophy of the university— and this not only in Germany but throughout the western industrialised world— since Wilhelm Humboldt’s model for the University of Berlin prevailed (between 1809 and 1810) over Schleiermacher’s and Fichte’s. Following the trans-nationalisation of capital since the 1970s, however, which has been eroding the nation state upon which such a model is

the constitution of the self through the ordeal of the non-self, "or "the formation of the self through the trial of otherness."²² This late 18th century association between experience and *Bildung* or self-formation is to be found no less in Hegel's philosophical formulation of *Erfahrung* and its relation to the unfolding of consciousness than in the early 19th century neologism *Erlebnis* initially popularised by autobiographical and biographical literature. This link also persists in the *Erfahrungshunger* decades, as we saw earlier, where it is through the reflexive integration of the new and the unexpected within the very horizons they disrupt that Thompsonian inspired theories hope to develop subaltern consciousness and consolidate counter- histories, or that various theories of aesthetic experience, *Rezeptionsäthetiker* or otherwise, hope to "expand the boundaries of the world and of the subject."²³

If a dialectic of continuity and discontinuity informs the conceptual and etymological history of experience, it is only by the late 18th century, then, that it comes to the fore and lends itself to *explicit* thematisation, receiving by the early 19th century its first systematic elaboration by Hegel, and becoming popularised shortly thereafter in fictional and biographical literature. What is characteristic of the modern notion of

predicated (as Readings has recently shown), the pedagogical philosophy of the university is currently in limbo or, to use an overused expression, "in crisis." For more on this issue, see Readings' *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1996).

²² *L'Épreuve de l'étranger*, pp. 68, 75.

²³ Albrecht Wellmer, "The Dialectic of Modernism and Postmodernism," p. 53.

experience, however, is not only that such a dialectic should occupy the foreground, but also that it should become actively sought within the everyday encounter with reality as instrumental to the growth of self identity and to the unfolding of consciousness, rather than remain an extraordinary event to be ritualised, an event fraught with peril to be avoided, or a peripheral mishap to be dismissed as but a prelude to higher universal knowledge. Experience, in short, decisively shifts by the late 18th century to the interaction between the new or unexpected and the very structure of subjectivity, becoming for Hegel the very “dialectical movement which consciousness exercises on itself”²⁴ as it confronts the unexpected, becoming in the neologism *Erlebnis*, which first made itself felt within biographical literature,²⁵ the disruptive stimulus to self-formation, and persisting throughout modernity and well into the *Erfahrungshunger* decades, as Roger Abrahams put it, as “the ritualising of the construction of one’s self,” and as part of the more general modernist project of “celebrating the project of self-possession, self-fashioning, self-expression.”²⁶ Even when the term experience is not expressly used, the

²⁴*Phänomenologie des Geistes*, p. 79

²⁵It is indeed no coincidence, as Gadamer notes, that the introduction of *Erlebnis* “in the common use of language is, it seems, linked to its use in biographical literature.” *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 66.

²⁶Roger D. Abrahams, “Ordinary and Extraordinary Experience,” in *The Anthropology of Experience*, p. 46. Between the early popularisation of *Erlebnis* and the use of experience in the *Erfahrungshunger* decades, there has been little change—in fact there is almost a point to point correspondence. Abrahams indeed characterises the situation for contemporary Americans in terms no different than those used by Sauerland in her discussion of the early use of *Erlebnis* considered in the preceding chapter. Abrahams tells us that “as a nation of individualists, Americans have placed ever greater importance on experience, relating it to our notions of the person in constant

dialectic of continuity and discontinuity and its role in everyday self-formation can increasingly be seen at work in various literary genres by the late 18th century, where it can be traced as far back as Rousseau's *Confessions*,²⁷ but where it nevertheless first becomes a generalised phenomenon within the *Bildungsroman*— that literary genre which Moretti rightly calls “the symbolic form that more than any other has portrayed and promoted modern socialization,”²⁸ and which Bakhtin has shown to be the first to formulate those presuppositions regarding temporality and self-formation which for the next two centuries would inform the popular narrative genres, if not the dynamics of identity formation as such, of industrialised western nations.²⁹

development, always heading towards some kind of self-realisation. We have been searching after experience, always preparing ourselves for significant actions that may enhance our lives if we remain open to the new.” “Ordinary and Extraordinary Experience,” p. 50.

²⁷ In their “historical reconstruction of important phases in the development of mimesis” (as they put it), Gunther Gebauer and Christoph Wulf indeed note that Rousseau's *Confessions* is a “text arranged as a series of sequences. ...They culminate in a collisions between the *I* and the external world...Each collision, including the final and greatest of them, leads to an affirmation of the self, which, because of the intensity of the experience, becomes the equivalent of a formation of the *I*. The *I*, in the experience of the conflict, is created anew.” *Mimesis. Culture, Art, Society*, trans. Don Reneau (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 210.

²⁸ *The Way of the World*, p. 10.

²⁹ See Bakhtin's “The *Bildungsroman* and Its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel),” in *Speech Genres and Other Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), pp. 10-59. This will be dealt with at greater length in the next chapter.

But the shift of experience from the exceptional and the extraordinary to the everyday encounter between the self and the new, as Vierhaus reminds us in reference to *Bildung*,³⁰ ought not to be entirely imputed to the 18th century secularisation of cultural and philosophical concepts;³¹ such a semantic change instead stems from a new notion of the human subject—a subject which has so persisted to this day that, as Gadamer puts it, “in hindsight the century of Goethe still seems contemporary to us, whereas in contrast the Baroque era already appears as a bygone age which belongs to history.”³² This tells us two things: first of all we are reminded that the late 18th century semantic changes in various key concepts, of which experience is but one, have contemporary significance for us to this day,³³ and that such concepts, informing as they do our self understanding, are not unrelated to present concerns—indeed, if experience by the late 18th century becomes decisively linked to how the new and unexpected participate in, are managed by and integrated within economies of the self and of consciousness, such a link persists to this day, where we have seen it at work in theories ranging from Thompson’s to Foucault’s; secondly, it is in the problem of the self-formation or self-

³⁰ This change of focus in the concept of experience is indeed also duplicated in the semantic shift undergone by *Bildung* itself, which after the late 18th century increasingly refers to the process of self-formation resulting from the subject’s confrontation with the unexpected as *immanent to his everyday environment*, and no longer as a result of external divine intervention or of other meddlesome transcendental entities. See Dumont, *L’idéologie allemande*, pp. 109-110 and 224-225.

³¹ The most comprehensive repertoire of such concepts, which include the new, the individual, development, culture, etc., can be found in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*.

³² *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 15, cited in Vierhaus, “Bildung,” p. 517.

³³ Or at least until the last two decades, as we shall later see.

identity, which Vierhaus unfortunately mentions only in passing, that may lie the answer as to why experience has been so insisted upon during the *Erfahrungshunger* decades in spite of the difficulties we earlier saw plaguing this concept. Indeed, if experience as a dialectic of continuity and discontinuity has aroused strident debates both academic and para-academic since the 1970s, it is because it has a very real referent—a referent which is betrayed by that towards which experience oriented theories of the *Erfahrungshunger* decades invariably gravitate: the manner by which a sense of self is constituted through the new and the unexpected. Theories which appeal to or reckon with the relation of experience to cultural or aesthetic mediation, to resistance and counter-hegemony, whether in the name of neo-ethnic specificity and subaltern agency, of aesthetic and libidinal “resistance,” of aestheticized self-cultivation³⁴, of cognitive mapping, or even of anti-oedipal, rhizomic depersonalization, are indeed all informed by issues either of identity and self constitution or, conversely, and at the opposite end of the spectrum, of depersonalization and self disruption—by issues, in short, which are linked, positively or by negation, centrally or peripherally, to the constitution of a sense of self and its imbrication within larger social entities, to the manner by which the unexpected both disrupts and consolidates self identity, and to the manner by which this self impinges upon and is itself impinged upon by its socio-cultural horizon (to put it in the

³⁴ Such aesthetic self-cultivation includes both the logophilic concern for socio-cultural integration and continuity, as well as the logophobic celebration of discontinuous and unfettered self invention or what Axel Honneth has dubbed a "Nietzschean tinged concept of aesthetic freedom." See his *The Fragmented World of the Social: Essays in Social and Political Philosophy*, trans. Charles W. Wright (New York: SUNY press, 1990), p. 221.

phenomenological terms, say, of Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckman) or by its environment (to use Luhmanian terminology). Even in the case of aesthetic experience as proposed, say, by Jauss, at stake is not so much the disruptive fluidizing of literary horizons as such than it is the manner by which the aesthetic contributes to and expands upon the subject's horizon and thus his self understanding. Since it became an important category at first in 18th and 19th century aesthetic, phenomenological and hermeneutic inquiry and, later, in the cultural, aesthetic and historiographical inquiry of the *Erfahrungshunger* decades, the various formulations of experience, *as a concept*, whether as retrospectively mediated or always already mediated, whether as punctual *Erlebnis* or as temporally extended *Erfahrung*, all have as a common denominator the manner by which experience, *as a process*, operates in the constitution of individual and collective self-formation in the face of the new, the unexpected or the strange or, as current parlance likes to put it, of "otherness" or of the "incommensurable." It is to a certain extent with good reason, then, that Jay, Scott, Bellamy and others tell us that experience is not to be so readily dispatched—only the resilience of experience stems not so much from its undeniable ubiquity within "everyday language," as Scott, in her variant of Gadamerian *Wirkungsgeschichte*, would have us believe, than from the central role it has played in self-formation or, as we shall later see, in the constitution of a historically specific sense of self which, after its initial manifestation within the late 18th century bourgeoisie, has become increasingly generalized over the last two centuries.

Experience indeed testifies to a historical problem which must first be addressed before its demise can be pronounced or its resurgence proclaimed. If with regard to experience, theorists from Gadamer and Seel to Thompson and Foucault appear as but so many footnotes to Hegel, this is not because Hegel “invented” experience and somehow exercises, *outré-tombe*, a nefarious influence on us all to this day; it is instead because Hegel merely gave a philosophical formulation to the dialectic of continuity and discontinuity which was already embedded in the history of the term, and which was already present in how experience has been generally understood, but which only a convergence of socio-historical vectors could bring to the foreground by the late 18th century. And if *Erlebnis* in the early 19th century becomes so ubiquitous a term in popular fiction and biographical literature, and later in aesthetics beyond Germany to the point where, as Gadamer notes, “its axiological character was so self-evident that many European languages adopted it without translating it,”³⁵ it is not because of the influence of German literature as such, but rather because as a response to a cluster of problems that were increasingly being felt by the late 18th century, it struck a sensitive chord which reverberates to this day. It is only with the differentiation of the private from the public sphere, as well as the intra-differentiation of an *Intimsphäre* from the private sphere itself, it is only when historically emerges a sense of subjective interiority (or, as Foucault would put it, the opposition as such between depth and surface),³⁶ it is only when the

³⁵ *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 67.

³⁶ Regarding the emergence of the modern opposition between interior and exterior, or depth and surface, in what Foucault calls *les pratiques du savoir*, see chapter VII,

once seamlessly conjoined past and future, to put it in Koselleckian terms, begin to pronouncedly diverge— in short (and if only to put an end to this hopelessly Ciceronian periodic sentence), it is only by the mid to late 18th century, which for the sake of expediency will henceforth be referred to here as the advent of modernity, that self-identity, no longer an externally conferred attribute preordained by caste affiliation or kinship ties, becomes sufficiently negotiable an affair and sufficiently open-ended a project so as to allow for experience to become a central *enjeu* in its constitution, let alone the basis for individual as well as collective self-formation. So while experience is not itself a specifically modern phenomenon, it is nevertheless only with the advent of modernity that experience becomes an explicitly thematised problem imbricated within issues of self-formation.

Self-formation is in other words not exempt from the vicissitudes of historical transformation and, as such, the role played by experience in issues of identity, let alone in the attendant issues, say, of counter-hegemonic cultural specificity or even aesthetic self-cultivation, is not a matter that can be peremptorily presupposed. Before we can diagnose the current status of experience, then, we must first consider those socio-historical vectors³⁷ which presided over the emergence and generalisation of the role of

sections 3 and 5, of *Les mots et les choses*.

³⁷ The term “sociohistorical vector” is intended as a reminder that are socio-historically contingent, and not transhistorically given or natural, those processes such as temporality, experience or subjectivity, which are implicated within signification, within the manner by which the complexity of one’s environment is reduced (to use Luhmann’s

experience in issues of self-formation. Only by then ascertaining the continuing presence or, conversely, the gradual waning of such vectors can the current status of experience, let alone the Thompsonian insistence on this experience, lend themselves to a diagnosis. Only then will it be possible to ascertain or at least to speculate on the extent to which experience may or may not be, or rather, may have been but may no longer be, a constitutive element of self-formation or a viable category for aesthetic, historiographical and cultural theory.

2. Experience as a Temporal Issue.

Although the nature of the relation between concepts and their social context is a thorny issue which cannot be addressed here, suffice it to say that one need not resort to Goldmanian homologous structures or to Althusserian last instances in order to acknowledge a connection between conceptual history and historical socio-economic structures. Concepts, philosophical or otherwise, do not after all arise *ex nihilo* or gain currency in isolation from the larger social context in which they are embedded—they no less abhor a vacuum than does nature. As Foucault reminds us in his archeological investigations, “in the historicity of knowledge [that is, the historically contingent

terminology), or within the manner by which one’s horizon of possible signification is constituted (to use phenomenological terminology).

legitimizing of what constitutes knowledge], what is of import are not the opinions nor the resemblances that throughout the ages can be established between them;” of import instead are the “conditions of possibility” of epistemological shifts.³⁸ Likewise must the role of experience in problems of self-formation be addressed less in terms of a history of opinions on the matter than in terms of its socio-historical conditions of possibility. And of these conditions of possibility, the one which shall detain us is temporality, that is, the historically contingent manner by which past, present and future are related and coordinated.

Temporality is of course only a necessary, and not a sufficient, condition of possibility for the explicit thematisation of the relation between experience and self-formation. Sauerland has shown for example (and there many more such examples) how *Erlebnis* became a popular concept only with the late 18th century division between the “inner” and the “outer,” between subject and world³⁹ –what Foucault calls in *Les mots et les choses* the modern opposition of depth to surface, or what Charles Taylor considers to be the opposition between the interiority of the modern subject and the external means of its expressive objectification.⁴⁰ But if temporality has been singled

³⁸ *Les mots et les choses*, pp. 287-288.

³⁹ *Diltheys Erlebnisbegriff*, p. 11.

⁴⁰ See Charles Taylor’s *Sources of the Self*. It should be noted here that Taylor of course does not advocate that the subject or the self, as such, is structured as an interiority opposed to the external world. As his work on the problem of recognition makes clear, he is all too aware of the intersubjective constitution of self-identity. What Taylor is

out here at the expense of other socio-historical vectors, it is first of all because it is at the core of the most common of academic and para-academic appeals to experience and, as such, it is best poised for helping diagnose that of which the insistence on experience during the *Erfahrungshunger* decades may well be a symptom. The salient issue in Thompsonian subaltern historiography and cultural theory is indeed a temporal one: the whole point of appealing to immediate experience and to its retrospective “handling” within a local culture, after all, is to reverse the dissipation of subaltern specificity by consolidating subaltern counter histories –counter-histories within which are to be reconnected the subaltern group’s past with its present so as to provide the temporal continuity which enables future oriented action. Such temporal continuity in turn, it is frequently argued, ought then to provide the counter-hegemonic mediating narratives which can articulate the specificity of the subaltern’s experience, let alone his identity and socio-economic interests. As the historian John Toews puts it while justifying his methodology, it is only by turning to the “irreducibility of experience” that a historian can then fulfill “the task of connecting memory and hope ” and, in so doing, thwart the dominant historiographical trend which, so he tells us, “undermines the traditional quest for unity, continuity and purpose by robbing them of any stand point from which a

referring to is the *sense*, and not the *fact*, of interiority in the modern subject. Taylor underlines how our various “languages of self -understanding” (p.111) are historical products, and with regard to the sense of inwardness, at hand is not a universal quality, but rather “a function of a historically limited mode of self -interpretation, one which has become dominant in the modern West and which may indeed spread thence to other parts of the globe, but which had a beginning in time and space and which may have an end” (p. 111).

relationship between past, present and future can be objectively reconstructed.”⁴¹ This situation, moreover, extends beyond Anglo-Saxon boundaries and is no less present even in Germany, where Michael Geyer, in diagnosis of the rise of cultural theory in Germany, notes that “the key concern is temporality rather than positionality, which had been the main issue of cultural studies in the past twenty years.”⁴²

The imbrication of experience in temporality is not limited to Thomsonian historiography and subaltern cultural studies, however. Whether experience is appealed to in the name of immediacy and as a rampart against everything from dominant ideology to reason itself, or whether experience is conjured on the contrary as a foil to premature immediacy, as has frequently been the case from Hegel to Gadamer, the various uses of experience are nevertheless subtended, as we have seen, by a common denominator: the manner by which the unexpected, the new, the surprising or the unfamiliar occasion a change in orientation precisely because they cannot be seamlessly assimilated within current praxis or a given horizon. And this is where the temporal aspect of experience comes into play: in order for the new and the unexpected to even cross the threshold of a given horizon, let alone perturb it or cause a certain *remue ménage*, in order for the unexpected to assume in other words such importance so as to

⁴¹ “Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience,” *American Historical Review* 92 (October 1987): pp. 902, 907. Cited in Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” p. 789.

⁴² “Why Cultural History? What Future? Which Germany?” *New German Critique* 64 (Winter 1995): p. 112.

warrant its transformative *integration into* the past and present (where it restructures the past) as opposed to its *absorption by* the past (where it is merely dissolved without a trace), a certain temporality must be presupposed—a temporality whereby a given present horizon is less under the sway of tradition and the past than it is open to the new and unexpected that arrive from an indeterminate future. As Jauss reminds us:

Expectation is directed at the *open horizon* of the individual, *not yet realised* possibilities, and is thus open to the incursions of unexpected events that break through the closed horizon of earlier experience and found new expectations that will themselves be corrected through experience and are themselves able to engender new perspectives.⁴³

Such a temporality is dominated, to use Koselleck's expression, by an open future rather than one delimited in advance by past practices or orientations. It is indeed only when future possibilities are no longer hemmed in by tradition and shackled by the past that the unexpected, which can neither be extrapolated from the past, nor yet integrated within the present, can lead to a reorganisation or restructuring of acquired past experience and a present horizon. Only when the present distances itself from the past and, in so doing, opens itself to the future, can the unexpected and the new graduate from mere mishaps to be managed, from *bavures* to be dismissed or from isolated miracles to be ascribed to divine whim, in order instead to become disruptive intrusions to be heeded as the very stuff out of which one's orientation is forged and one's sense of self negotiated. The new and the unexpected, without which experience as a transformative process cannot be undergone, are in other words predicated on a

⁴³ "Horizon Structure and Dialogicity," p. 202. My emphasis.

temporality which shall henceforth be referred to here as *future oriented*— a temporality where a disjunctive past and future allows for the revision of the past and the provisional status of the present in the name of the unexpectedness of an indeterminate future.

Temporality, or the manner by which past, present and future are coordinated, is not exempt, however, from the vicissitudes of historical change. Whereas before the late 18th century the future and the unexpected it harbors were held in check by the sheer weight of tradition and of the past, it is modernity, as Habermas phrases it, that “expresses the conviction that the future has already begun: It is the epoch that lives for the future, that opens itself up to the novelty of the future.”⁴⁴ A decidedly future oriented temporality where the unexpected and the new become salient features is indeed predicated upon what Koselleck, Luhmann and others⁴⁵ have diagnosed as a temporality *specific to modernity*, a temporality which by the mid- to late 18th century was (and at least until recently has still been)⁴⁶ characterized by a growing rift or disjunction between past and future, between memory and hope, or, to use Koselleckian terminology,

⁴⁴ *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 5.

⁴⁵ See for example Koselleck, “Historia Magistra Vitae: The Dissolution of the Topos into the Perspective of a Modernized Historical Process,” in *Futures Past*; Luhmann, “The Future Cannot Begin” and “World Time and System Theory,” in *The Differentiation of Society*; Giddens, *Modernity and Self Identity*. A more recent investigation into the temporality specific to modernity can also be found Peter Osborne’s study, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and the Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 1995).

⁴⁶ Paul Ricoeur for example entertains serious doubts as to whether such a disjunction is still predominant today. See vol. III, part II, chapter 7 of *Temps et Récit*, (Paris: Seuil, 1985).

between space of experience (*Erfahrungsraum*) and horizon of expectation (*Erwartungshorizont*)⁴⁷—a disjunction, in short, between the accumulated past experiences of tradition and the oncoming future from which emerges the ‘New.’ Only with this late 18th century divergence between the past and the future could sufficient weight be accorded to the new and the unexpected so as to allow for new experiences to revise and alter past experiences rather than remain shackled to them: No longer a mere perpetuation of the past, the future is envisaged instead as something different from, if not potentially better than, the past, and from this opening of the future ensued in turn a new concept of history as a continuing and decidedly linear process that allowed expectations not only to extend beyond what previous experience offered, but also to reassess, re-hierarchise and if need be eliminate elements of a past seen now as supersedable and a present seen at best as provisional.

If in contrast to modernity such a temporal divergence was minimal in premodern societies, it was because past tradition held such sway over the present and the future that

⁴⁷ *Erfahrungsraum* (the persistence of past experiences in the present) and *Erwartungshorizont* (the future made present, oriented to the not-yet) are two categories which Koselleck deploys not as actual concepts which might lend themselves to a *Begriffsgeschichte*, but rather as formal categories which refer, on an anthropological basis, to two “dissimilar modes of existence from whose tension something like historical time can be inferred” (“‘Space of Experience’ and ‘Horizon of Expectation’: Two Historical categories,” in *Futures Past*, p. 274). Although these two “modes of existence” are themselves metahistorical, that is, they are anthropologically given, their assymetrical inter-relation itself nevertheless historically varies: whereas in premodernity these two “modes of existence” were in relative continuity with one another, by the late 18th century they pronouncedly diverge. For a critical discussion of these two categories, see Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit* III, pp. 300-312.

everything was always already articulated in advance and, as a result, past, present, and future roughly coincided, or, as Koselleck puts it, “temporal difference was not more or less arbitrarily eliminated; it was not, as such, at all apparent.”⁴⁸ The premodern horizon of expectation was so circumscribed by tradition and past experiences that expectations, Koselleck adds, “subsisted entirely on the experiences of their predecessors, experiences which in turn became those of the successors,” and change was so imperceptible that the “rent between previous experience and an expectation to be newly disclosed did not undermine the traditional world.”⁴⁹ Within such a temporality, the unexpected was hardly in a position to seriously disturb a given horizon but tended instead to be, to use Luhmann’s expression, “normalized” and contained within previous interpretative schemes: as Jauss puts it, premodern temporality “could insulate everyday apprehension of the world from new experience by linking everything related to the future to the truth revealed by the past.”⁵⁰ There was little room, in other words for the unexpected, as can be seen for example in the persistence well into the late 18th century of one of the most tenacious of premodern topoi, *Historia Magistra Vitae*.⁵¹ According to this topos, history

⁴⁸ “Modernity and the Planes of Historicity,” in *Futures Past*, p. 4. Koselleck is not alone in such a diagnosis: it is also shared by Luhmann, Jauss, Giddens and others.

⁴⁹ “‘Space of Experience’ and ‘Horizon of Expectation’: Two Historical Categories,” in *Futures Past*, p.277, 278.

⁵⁰ “Horizon Structure and Dialogicity,” p. 202.

⁵¹ Although *Historia Magistra Vitae* is a premodern topos which has undergone variations over the two millenia during which it held sway, its temporal dynamic has remained essentially unchanged. For more on this matter, see Koselleck’s “*Historia Magistra Vitae*,” pp. 21-38.

is a pedagogical reservoir of past *exempla* from “which one derived lessons for the future out of the past,” and which, Koselleck tells us, is a “symptom of a continuity that connected the past to the future”⁵²—a seamless continuity which did not exactly foster an incongruence between the given and expectation.⁵³ So while it is true that premodern societies were not entirely bereft of future orientedness or of the capacity for distinguishing between past, present and future, such societies nevertheless held the future at bay: “Where traditional modes of practice are dominant,” Giddens observes, “the past inserts a wide band of ‘authenticated practice’ into the future”⁵⁴ — and this is hardly a situation favorable to an accentuated role of unexpectedness, and thus of experience, in the engendering of reorientations, let alone in the forging of the self. If,

⁵² “*Historia Magistra Vitae*,” pp. 24, 26.

⁵³ It is indeed no surprise that the most common premodern theory of time has been what Peter McInerney calls the “present representation theory,” of which St Augustine was the first important advocate. Its central tenet is that “perception can be in direct contact only with entities that are simultaneous with it. In the past-present-future terms in which the theory is usually expressed, a present phase of perception can be in direct contact only with presently existing entities” and, as a result, “in a past-present - future time, present representation theories consider the present to be the primary and practically only locus of existence.” Peter McInerney, *Time and Experience* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991) p. 19, 27. The specifics need not detain us here— what is of interest are the consequences and the presuppositions underlying such a stance towards time: this “present representation theory” sheds light on just how subaltern was the position occupied by the future in premodernity: indeed, if in such a theory “only present conscious awareness counts” and “only present phases of perceptual acts can contribute to that of which we are aware,” then it goes without saying that “future entities do not participate in the generation of representations; representations of future entities are generally thought to be derived from complex projections into the future of patterns discerned in the past.” *Time and Experience*, p. 27.

⁵⁴ *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p.48

then, the premodern horizon was seen (as Jauss notes) as “fixed and unalterable (that is, the permanently closed frontier between sensorial and intelligible knowledge),” and if horizon in premodernity “is the name given to the location of the soul in the cosmic hierarchy,” by the late 18th century, in contrast, horizon refers to “the self-generated, human experience of the world delimited by the horizon” which is “movable and changing (that is, a unique and momentary field of vision that, as experience moves on, opens unto an endless succession of new horizons).”⁵⁵

The future is of course not the exclusive property of modernity. But premodern temporality has envisioned the future less at the expense of the past than in terms of the past (as in *Historia Magistra Vitae*), if not in terms of an atemporal present (as in eschatology). In the case of eschatology, for all its apparent emphasis on other-worldly future redemption, at hand is indeed not the future orientedness characteristic of modernity, whereby the unexpected impinges upon and changes the present; at hand in eschatology is instead an immobile static temporality which, Bakhtine explains, “always sees the segment of a future separating the present from the end as lacking in value; this separating segment of time loses its significance and interest, it is merely an unnecessary continuation of an indefinitely prolonged present.”⁵⁶ As such, eschatology is

⁵⁵ “Horizon Structure and Dialogicity,” p. 200.

⁵⁶ “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel” in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988) p.148. With regard to eschatological expectations, Jauss also notes that “prior to the onset of the modern era...the asymmetry between the closed horizon of

not fertile ground for the changing of orientations following encounters with unexpectedness. Much as the anagogic mode of interpretation in medieval hermeneutics, when confronted with that which is unaccounted for by a prior interpretative framework or horizon, defuses the situation by considering such strange textual passages as but so many cryptic omens signalling the impending Second Arrival of Christ,⁵⁷ likewise does

the past and the open horizon of future experience was offset by the Christian doctrine of divine order, providence and the last judgment, which placed unalterable restrictions on the horizon of expectations." *Question and Answer*, p. 202. Hans Blumenberg's study on modernity has also shown how the temporality of eschatology is antithetical to, rather than homologous with, the temporality of modernity. It is therefore a mistake to maintain, as does Karl Löwith's popular thesis, that modern future orientedness is but a secularization of eschatological temporality. For further elaboration of Löwith's position see his *Meaning in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), and Rudolf Bultmann's *History and Eschatology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1957), and the response by Blumenberg in his *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Mass: MIT Press, 1983). Löwith's thesis, commonly adopted before Blumenberg's counter-thesis, persists to this day—as a recent example, see Peter Osborne's study *The Politics of Time*.

⁵⁷ The dynamic of eschatological temporality is indeed echoed in the very practices of pre-Renaissance exegetical practices. With regard to the status of language up until the Renaissance, Foucault indeed notes in his archeology of epistemic shifts that premodern allegorical interpretative practices essentially involve the begetting of commentary upon commentary—commentaries which are not asked to produce credentials as to their fidelity to a text but which instead are merely expected to “make everything speak, that is, to beget beyond the marks of discourse the second discourse of the commentary” (*Les mots et les choses*, p. 55). Such exegetical practices were deemed plausible because language at the time operated as something which is “never enclosed within a definitive *parole*, it will enunciate its truth only in a future discourse, entirely devoted to saying what it will have said” (pp. 55-56). In the manner of eschatology, the temporality of such exegetical practices is that of the future anterior (“entirely devoted to saying what *it will have said*”), and not the future *tout court*—a temporality where the future cannot impinge upon the present because it is endlessly deferred, or rather, where an endlessly deferred future nevertheless inhabits the present and, in so doing, becomes timeless. As Erich Auerbach puts it, echoing Bakhtine's observations: “In this way the individual earthly event is not regarded as a definitive self-sufficient reality, nor as a link in a chain of development in which single events or combinations of events perpetually give rise to new events, but

eschatological temporality in general contain the new by either considering it as a confirmation of things foretold in the past, or by confining it to the ethereal realm of the supernatural and the miraculous. As Habermas notes,

The traditional form of authority included as one of its elements the right to represent whatever was held to be “the ancient truth.” Communications concerning actual events remained anchored in this knowledge of the tradition. Any thing novel appeared under the aspect of a more or less marvellous event. “New facts,’ if only they were sufficiently unusual, were transformed in the court of the ‘ancient truth’ into something ‘extraordinary’—into signs and miracles. Facts were transfigured into ciphers. Since they could only be representations of knowledge vouched for by tradition, the novel and the surprising assumed an enigmatic structure.⁵⁸

Such manoeuvring fobs off the new as an enigmatic miracle unrelated to everyday reality and, in so doing, prevents the new and the unexpected from directly impinging upon (let alone from changing) the present. If in *Historia Magistra*, the future and the unexpectedness it harbors operate as a perpetuation, and not as the perturbation, of tradition and of the past, in eschatological temporality on the other hand, Bakhtine adds,

viewed primarily in immediate vertical connection with a divine order which encompasses it, which on some future day will itself be concrete reality; so that the earthly event is a prophecy or figura of a part of a wholly divine reality that will be enacted in the future. But this reality is not only future; it is always present in the eye of God and in the other world, which is to say that in transcendence the revealed and true reality is present at all times, or timelessly.” “Figura”, trans. by Ralph Manheim, in *Scenes From the Drama of European Literature*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota press, 1984), p. 77. For more on the fourfold structure of medieval hermeneutics, see Lubac’s classic study, *Exégèse médiévale: les quatre sens de l’Écriture*, 4 vols. (Paris: Aubier, 1959-1964) and part 1, chapt 3 of Georges Gusdorf, *Les Origines de L’herméneutique* (Paris: Payot, 1988).

⁵⁸ *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Thought*, trans. T. Burger and F. Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), p. 254, n. 35.

“there is a greater readiness to build a superstructure for reality (the present) along a vertical axis of upper and lower than to move forward along a horizontal axis of time”⁵⁹ and, as such, time becomes a transcendental extension of a timeless present. In either case, the future is in no position to seriously disturb the present or the past, and the new and unexpected are held at bay within an essentially static temporality.⁶⁰

With the peace of Augsburg in 1555, where the principle of *Cuius regio eius religio* replaced the grander universal claims of religion, and after which temporal concerns begin to supplant eternal ones, eschatological temporality was of course no longer faring so well, and it was for the most part marginalized by the end of the Thirty Years War, which failed to herald the Final Judgment, and at which point the principle of religious indifference increasingly became the basis for domestic peace.⁶¹ But for all the secularisation of temporality that was to follow—a secularisation which had in fact

⁵⁹ “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel,” p. 148.

⁶⁰ It ought to be added here, however, that premodernity did not of course entirely exclude the possibility of innovation. As Luhmann puts it in his discussion of premodern experience, “the customary characterisation of archaic experience in terms of its being bound to tradition seems to me to miss the point or merely to grasp a secondary characteristic. More important is the overwhelming pre-eminence accorded the present in which life must take place and whose existence (that is rich in risks but poor in possibilities) provides the occasion to look for security in the repetition of the past. *Innovation is by no means excluded. But it is admitted only if it can be stabilized quickly and successfully in the present*” “Meaning as Sociology’s Basic Concept,” p. 74, n. 36. My emphasis.

⁶¹ For more on the temporal implications and the eventual demise of eschatological temporality, see Koselleck, “Modernity and the Planes of Historicity,” pp. 3-20.

already begun with early Renaissance mercantilism⁶²— a decidedly future-oriented temporality had yet to be ushered in. True, the slow shift to profane history under the aegis of mercantilism might seem to testify to a decidedly future-oriented temporality. After all, Barbara Adam in her discussion on H.-W Hohn's recent work is not mistaken in observing that

Market economies were future and uncertainty oriented. With an awareness of the divergence between the past and the future, that uncertainty got transformed into a risk factor to be allowed for and calculated; and with the emergence of world trade in conjunction with city states, the future became an entity, a quantity to be allocated, budgeted, controlled, and utilized for exchange. It became equated with money.⁶³

There is nevertheless a difference between, on the one hand, mercantilist goal orientedness with its quantitative calculation of probability and, on the other hand, the actual future orientedness of modernity where qualitative and not only quantitative change takes place. What is specific to modern open futurity is indeed that the future will qualitatively differ from, impinge upon and restructure the past and present, and not

⁶² It is a mistake, however, to overestimate the presumed effects of secularisation, as such, on underlying social structures, let alone on temporality. As Jochen Schulte-Sasse puts it, "The mode of cultural reproduction of stratified societies depends on the existence of a global and universal transcendent anchor; their hierarchical structure is mirrored in a legitimising discourse that anchors the existing hierarchy within a universal entity. *Structurally, the displacement of such an anchor from "God" to an absolute ruler, to nature, and so on, does not change anything.* Structurally, "Nature" or "Reason" still serves as a metaphysical entity that legitimizes societies and their discursive practices." Afterword to Luiz Costa Lima, *Control of the Imaginary: Reason and Imagination in Modern Times*, trans. Ronald W. Sousa (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 214. My emphasis.

⁶³ Barbara Adam, *Time and Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), p. 139, discussing H.-W Hohn's *Die Zerstörung der Zeit. Wie aus einem göttlichen Gut eine Handelsware wurde.* (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer Alternativ, 1984), p. 49-104.

that the given order of things merely lend itself to quantitative extension. For all the “discoveries of new worlds,” as J.H. Elliott notes, the 16th century remained “an age which was inclined to prefer the classification of old facts to the discovery of the new,”⁶⁴ and quantitative extension, not qualitative innovation, remained the order of the day. This was no less the case for the 17th as well as the better part of the 18th centuries: Before the late 18th century, Foucault notes, the opening of the future in nascent capitalism, for all its emphasis on change, turns out in fact to be but a “modification of a spatial type: the *tableau*, which wealth was supposed to form by deploying itself, by exchanging itself and by ordering itself, could very well increase; it remained the same *tableau*.”⁶⁵ What Foucault calls the *épistémè*⁶⁶ of the Classical Age (which spans the mid- 17th to the late 18th centuries, including and encompassing the *Aufklärung*) can indeed be visualised as a unified, atemporal and permanent *tableau*, as a static taxonomic order where identities and differences are synchronically or spatially distributed according to immutable universal laws –an order of things in other words which is beyond the meddlesome ways of historical change, and in which even “the

⁶⁴ J.H. Elliott, *Europe Divided, 1559-1598*. (London: Fontana Press, 1968), p. 391.

⁶⁵ *Les mots et les choses*, p. 271.

⁶⁶ By *épistémè* or “champ épistémologique,” Foucault essentially refers to the cluster of presuppositions governing the prevalent discourse of a given historical period. As he himself puts it, *épistémè* refers to the “fundamental codes of a culture—those which govern its language, its perceptual schemas, its exchanges, its techniques, its values, the hierarchy of its practices—[which] in advance determine for each man the empirical orders with which he will reckon and within which he will find himself.” *Les mots et les choses*, p. 11.

succession of chronologies could but run through the prior and more fundamental space of a tableau which offered all possibilities in advance.”⁶⁷ In this sense, the classical *épistémè* differed little from that of premodernity as a whole in which, as Marc Augé puts it,

Every unexpected event, even one that is wholly predictable and recurrent from the ritual point of view (like birth, illness or death) demands to be interpreted not, really, in order to be known, but in order to be recognized: *to be made accessible to a discourse, a diagnosis, in terms that are already established ...*⁶⁸

If change was possible in the classical *épistémè*, it was only as a quantitative intensification, and not as a qualitative change or transformation, of a pre-existing and transcendently anchored order of things. Nor is even the *Aufklärung* notion of progress immune to such an order: here, the past was not reorganized in light of the new but was instead altogether jettisoned as but an obstruction to the universal reign of Reason. As such, the *Aufklärung* notion of progress points not to the differentness of the future, and still less to the advent of the truly new or unexpected; it refers merely to the unshackling of Reason from the trappings of obscurantist superstition, from dubiously founded tradition and from other variants of the *infâme* which Voltaire exhorts us to crush. In such a context, the new was not truly new in the sense it might entail a reorientation of the present or a re-writing of the past: indeed, within the present is already contained in advance the repertoire of all possible future permutations, permutations which the future

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 230

⁶⁸*Non-Places. Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity.* Trans. John Howe. (London: Verso Press, 1995), p. 44. My emphasis.

(under the aegis of course of the *Aufklärer* or enlightener) can only better bring to light, but which it cannot themselves be radically altered. As Foucault puts it, “to be sure, classical space did not exclude the possibility of change (*un devenir*), but this change did nothing more than assure a course on the closed prior table of possible variations.”⁶⁹

Premodern temporality, then, is characterized well into the late 18th century by an apparent seamless continuity between past, present and future, between past experience and expectation—a continuity which, as such, precludes the possibility of any serious breach within an essentially static horizon. In what Arthur Lovejoy calls the Great Chain of Being, where continuity and plenitude were the order of the day well into the late 18th century,⁷⁰

There not only is not, but there will never be, anything new under the sun. The process of time brings no enrichment to the world’s diversity; in a world which is the manifestation of eternal rationality, it could not conceivably do so [...] To many eighteenth-century minds, this conception of a world in which, from the beginning, no emergence of

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 288.

⁷⁰ In his *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936), Lovejoy in fact goes so far as to say that just as the chain of being, which dominated the better part of western civilisation for two millenia, began to crumble under its own weight and lent itself to temporalisation, it is nevertheless “in the eighteenth century that the conception of the universe as a chain of being, and the principles which underlay this concept—plenitude, continuity, gradation—attained their widest diffusion and acceptance” (p. 183). The secularising displacement of divinity by reason and rationality, in other words, is not of itself a sufficient condition for the instauration of discontinuity and the valorisation of the new. As Lovejoy puts it: “The Chain of Being, insofar as its continuity and completeness were affirmed on the customary grounds, was a perfect example of an absolutely rigid and static scheme of things. Rationality has nothing to do with dates” (p.242).

novelty had been or would hereafter be possible seems to have been wholly satisfying.⁷¹

Without a noticeable discrepancy between the past and the future, premodern temporality provided little room, in other words, for the discontinuity that might arise from a confrontation with unexpectedness. At best, only negligible weight could be accorded to the new and to the unexpected, let alone to experience as a dialectic of continuity and discontinuity or of disruptive unexpectedness and reflexive reintegration. Because future expectations were not demarcated from past experience, they could indeed but be always already fulfilled—a situation hardly conducive, as Koselleck reminds us, to the undergoing of experience as a dialectic of continuity and discontinuity:

When they are fulfilled, expectations that are founded on [prior] experience may no longer involve any degree of surprise. Only the unexpected has the power to surprise, and this surprise involves a new experience. The penetration of the horizon of expectation, therefore, is creative of new experience.⁷²

This is of course in sharp contrast, as we saw earlier, with what was to take place by the late 18th century when, following what Lovejoy calls the temporalisation of the Great Chain of Being, the divergence between past, present and future began to widen, and when the future, no longer held in check by the past and tradition, opened in such a way that the new could intrude and impinge upon rather than submit to a given horizon. And it is at this historical juncture that the disruptiveness of the unexpected could become a

⁷¹ *The Great Chain of Being*, pp. 243-244.

⁷² “‘Space of Experience’ and ‘Horizon of Expectation,’” p. 275.

thematized problem and that experience could gain currency less as product at one's disposal than as a disruptive process one undergoes.

3. The historicity of Future Orientedness and Experience: A Parenthetical Caveat.

Predicated as it is on a historically contingent future oriented temporality, dialectical experience is not, then, a transhistorically given anthropological constant but is instead subject to the vagaries of historical change. This is not to imply that experience was nonexistent in premodernity—what historically varies is not experience as such, but rather the importance accorded to experience in issues of self-identity or self-formation. But to focus on the temporal dimension (and thus on the historical contingency) of experience demands further justification: the most common theory of dialectical experience has after all been the narrativist one which tells us that throughout and in spite (rather than as a result) of historical change, narratives have always already been at work in the configuration of otherwise unintelligible experience into the meaningful elements of a biographically constructed self. If it is indeed the case that the narrativisation of experience is an anthropological constant, to what extent can future oriented temporality actually be considered a historical condition of possibility of dialectical experience? Is it not possible that the narrativisation of experience has always already been involved in problems of self-formation and, as such, is immune to historical change?

According to the narrativist approach to experience, as Anthony Kerby tells us in his recent work on the subject, “narratives are a primary embodiment of our understanding of the world, of experience, and ultimately of ourselves,”⁷³ and Stephen Crites goes so far as to claim that “in principle, we can distinguish between the inner drama of experience and the stories through which it achieves coherence. But in any actual case the two so interpenetrate that they form a virtual identity.”⁷⁴ To this Kerby then adds that “this storied nature of our experience is, for Crites, what holds the past (memory) and future (anticipation) together in the present, creating the more or less unifying sense we have of our ongoing lives, a sense upon which our personal identity so thoroughly depends.”⁷⁵ As a description of what is necessary for the meaningful organization of experience in modern self-formation, this thesis seems plausible enough; and even if, as some narrativist theorists maintain, as does Louis Mink *contra* Alasdair MacIntyre, for example, that there is room for non- or pre- narrative experiences, Paul Ricoeur’s three- volume study on narrative and time convincingly shows that even such an unorganized prenarrative experience “constitutes a demand for narrative,” for “the

⁷³ Anthony Kerby, *Narrative and the Self*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 3.

⁷⁴ Stephen Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39, 3 (September 1971): pp. 291-305. Cited in *Narrative and the Self*, p. 8.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

plots that we invent help us to shape our confused, formless and in the last resort mute temporal experience."⁷⁶

The problem with such a theoretical stance, however, lies in the assumption that experience and sense of self have always been and always will be or even still are sustained by narrative structures, and that narratives have, throughout history, organized the experiences of the self into linear continuity. Research on oral cultures have shown that such is not the case, for in such pre-chirographic cultures it is the repeated performance of oral recitations, and not the narrative sequencing itself of events, which constitutes the primary process whereby the self is socialized and formed. While narratives of course played a significant role in pre-chirographic and pre-typographic cultures, such narratives, whether as epics or as early (i.e., before the mid 18th century) novels, were well into the 18th century not so much the emplotment or "*mise en intrigue*" (as Ricoeur puts it) of events and experiences into temporal coherence than they were paratactic aggregates of disparate episodes, the temporal sequentiality of which was not an issue within a cosmological order itself regarded as unchanging.⁷⁷ It is also precisely the historicity of narratively articulated experience that Benjamin tried to address when

⁷⁶ Cited in *Narrative and the Self*, p. 42.

⁷⁷ See Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1982), pp. 140-151. The classical account of this issue is of course Eric Havelock's *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), and a panoramic survey of these issues can be found Paul Zumthor, *Introduction à la poésie orale* (Paris: Seuil, 1983).

he linked what he calls the impoverishment of experience with the erosion of the capacity for telling stories. Moreover, the very thesis advanced by Kerby and others which tells us that narratives are needed for coordinating the past, present and future *presupposes* a pronounced divergence between these temporal components— yet such a temporal divergence, as we have seen, is not transhistorically given but on the contrary a product of history which becomes generalized only by the late 18th century. The very need for narratively organized sequentiality, then, is itself a historical phenomenon rather than an anthropological constant: if narrative is a temporal affair, as Ricoeur's study on this matter rightly suggests, but if temporality itself historically varies, and we have just seen that it indeed does, then it follows that is also historical the extent to which narratives, let alone the narrativisation of experience, play a role in the forging of self-identity or in the economy of a sense of self.

It is indeed only by the late 18th century that the future and past so diverge from one another so as to require their sequential coordination through mediating narratives: whereas in premodern society the exemplary force of the past held the future in check and, in so doing, limited the range of possible retrospective reevaluations of the given following the irruption of the unforeseen or the new, in modern society, on the other hand, the lack of external referents to caste or kinship ties, as well as the erosion of a timeless exemplary history which might have provided a buffer against the onslaughts of the unexpected unleashed by a henceforth open future, all conspired to make narratives the necessary tool by which the divergent past and present could be reconnected and, in

so doing, the complexity of the environment reduced and managed.⁷⁸ Metanarratives (for example) such as “progress,” Habermas reminds us, after all “*close off the future as a source of disruption* with the aid of teleological constructions of history.”⁷⁹ Such coordinating narratives, however, have operated not only on a larger social scale through what Hayden White has rightly diagnosed as the mediating narrative operations of modern historiography (as opposed to the premodern chronicling of the disparate into paratactic aggregates),⁸⁰ as can be seen for example in the role played by literary histories in forging national narratives throughout the 19th century;⁸¹ as David Carvounas and myself have observed elsewhere, they have also operated on the smaller scale of the individually forged sense of self in terms of a biographical narrative:

Just as history (a budding academic industry only by the 1830s) served as a coordinating narrative by means of which could be linked an increasingly disjunctive or discrepant past and future, likewise did individual future oriented biographies or itineraries, the growing

⁷⁸ The notion of complexity management will be addressed in more detail in the next chapter. Suffice it to say at this point that complexity management refers here to the containing of the contingent and of the unexpected – the management in other words of that which is not always already circumscribed in advance.

⁷⁹ *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 12. My emphasis.

⁸⁰ For a more comprehensive account of the extent to which modern historiography is subtended by narrative structures, see Hayden White’s classic study, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1973).

⁸¹ Studies of this particular question have been numerous since the mid-1980s, where the problem of the literary canon has enjoyed a certain vogue; for some representative samples of this trend, see Gregory Jusdanis, *Belated Modernity and Aesthetic Culture: Inventing National Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), and Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *Building a National Literature: The Case of Germany, 1830-1870*, trans. Renate Baron Franciscono (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

importance of which is symptomatically revealed, *inter alia*, by the increased predominance of the novel at the expense of earlier literary genres, serve to coordinate into a coherent sequential continuity the otherwise increasingly disparate past, present and future of the modern individual's life. Such biographical narratives in fact became all the more necessary once the future could no longer be explained in terms of the past: increasingly disembedded from what were once determining external circumstances anchored in the past and tradition (such as the circumstances of caste, of birth, of regional affiliation or of kinship ties), and thus no longer considered a pre-ordained entity within a transcendentally grounded and unchanging cosmic order, self-identity by the late 18th century increasingly becomes, as Giddens work shows, a reflexive project articulated in terms of individually forged biographical narratives—narratives by means of which the individual can “integrate information deriving from a diversity of mediated experiences with local involvements in such a way as to connect future projects with past experiences in a reasonably coherent fashion.”⁸²

If in premodern society, then, the past and Tradition served as a selecting mechanism which circumscribed the limits of the possible, in modernity, however, the future now plays this role and the modern reflexive self, Giddens rightly stresses, henceforth “appropriates his past by sifting through it in the light of what is anticipated for an (organised) future.”⁸³ The late 18th century witnesses in other words the gradual

⁸² David Carvounas and Craig Ireland, “The Future Oriented Temporality of Welfare Capitalism,” paper delivered at the *Third Annual Great Lakes Conference in Political Economy* held on May 7- 9th 1998 in the Department of Political Science at York University, Toronto, Ontario. See also *Modernity and Self Identity*, p. 215. As also noted in this paper, it should be remembered that with regard to the notion of disembedding mechanisms (which *only seems* to connote a Tönniesian *Gemeinschaft-Gesellschaft* dichotomy), Giddens reminds us that these mechanisms “do not empty out the self anymore than they simply remove prior supports on which self-identity was based. Rather, they allow the self (in principle) to achieve much greater mastery over the social relations and social context reflexively incorporated into the forging of self-identity than was previously possible” (*Modernity and Self Identity*, p.149).

⁸³ *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p.75. My emphasis.

emergence and consolidation of a modern self henceforth organized as a narratively constructed and future oriented project—a project to be undertaken individually and without the buttressing formerly provided by a transcendently anchored order of things. And the narratives at work in such a modern sense of self are reflexively constituted in light of new developments rather than timelessly proclaimed in terms of past genealogies.

What is specific to modernity is not the fact itself of narratives, but instead the centrality of future oriented narratives in the forging of a sense of self—narratives in other words which lend themselves to reflexive revision in the light of the unexpected and the new. What Ricoeur calls *narrativité* is indeed not an exclusively modern phenomenon—in fact it could be argued, say, along Husserlian lines, that narrative operations are always already at work even in the most minimal of conscious acts, as can be seen in the retentive and protentive aspects of temporality which are the condition of possibility of, and not a mere an appendage to, the present act of perception itself. The “always already” temporal and ek-static extendedness of Heidegger’s *Dasein* could also be considered a narrative operation, as could also Gadamer’s notion of the anticipatory nature of understanding which within a Tradition is always already ahead of itself in terms of the prejudices without which it could not come about. This is why Kerby, who adopts an essentially (refurbished) Husserlian stance on this matter, rightly tells us that “narration should not be seen as creating order where there was once pure chaos or

dissonance.”⁸⁴ It is quite possible that attempts to historicise the narrative operations at work in general cognitive issues are as senseless as would be attempts to historicize breathing. Nevertheless, the anthropological status of narrative operations is not the issue at hand here—at hand is instead the extent to which is exacerbated the divergence between past, present and future by the late 18th century, as well as the extent to which the resulting future oriented narrative becomes conflated with a modern sense of self.

Informing as it does not only the temporality of collective social narratives but also of individual biographies forged as future oriented itineraries, the future oriented temporality of modernity as diagnosed by Koselleck, then, has had consequences not only for the history of ideas or for historiographical methodology, which indeed by the late 18th century underwent considerable change in their structure and presuppositions; it also had ramifications which, to use Foucault’s formulation, led to a “fundamental new mode of being.”⁸⁵ As Donald Lowe put it in his history of bourgeois perception, by the late 18th century, “the new spatio-temporal order defined, as well as validated, new knowledge of history, society, language, philosophy, and even the human psyche.”⁸⁶ The

⁸⁴ *Narrative and the Self*, p. 44.

⁸⁵ *Les mots et les choses*, p. 288.

⁸⁶ Donald M. Lowe, *History of Bourgeois Perception*, (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 11. Studies corroborating such findings are the spawn not only of phenomenological and hermeneutic loins, as might be expected (such as Georges Poulet’s ground-breaking *Études sur le temps humain* or Paul Ricoeur’s *Temps et récit*), but also of such divergent schools of thought as pre-Habermasian Critical Theory (e.g., Adorno’s studies on music and the regression of hearing, or Benjamin’s writings on

claim regarding the narrative structure of the self and its experiences, then, does have some validity, but only insofar as it limits itself to the modern sense of self. Since the narrativist theory of experience refers to and is predicated upon the historical emergence of future orientedness, it cannot retrospectively foist its findings upon premodernity, nor can it legitimately extrapolate them to the future or even to the present— the present is, if anything, the site of a dispute as to whether it is the continuation of modernity or a break from it into postmodernity. So while the various narrativist theories of experience may have provided important insights into the spatio-temporal dynamics of experience and modern self-identity, a socio-historical analysis concerned with the possible inadequacy, today, of these modern paradigms must consider whether the future oriented temporality presupposed by experience and the narrative structure of self-identity is still operative.

story- telling and Baudelaire), studies on the contrast between oral and literary cultures (from Havelock's *Preface to Plato* to Zumthor's *Introduction à la poésie orale* and Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word*), as well as the work of literary theorists (from Bakhtin's studies on the chronotope of the epic and novel and Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* to Andreas Huyssen's recent diagnosis of cultural amnesia, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (London: Routledge, 1995)). Even Niklas Luhmann's systems theory has dealt with the imbrication of narrativisation (as a form of complexity-reduction) within a specifically modern temporal divergence of past, present and future.

4. *A Panoramic Socio-Historical synopsis*

The work of Koselleck and the general project of the dictionary *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexicon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland* may have convincingly historicised the opening of the future by tracing its emergence to the late 18th century and, in so doing, it may well substantiate our thesis regarding the historicity of how experience— which is, as we have seen, a temporal affair— came to play an accentuated role in self-formation; it nevertheless remains, as Luhmann rightly points out, that such work has failed to address the actual *causes* behind such a historical shift in temporality.⁸⁷ True, such causal factors could be accounted for with equal plausibility (depending on one's theoretical bent) by invoking, say, the consolidation of capitalism, the instrumentalisation of reason or the rise of the protestant ethic, or by appealing to the shift from oral to chirographic and then to typographic culture, or to the shift from stratified to functional social differentiation. But while the causes behind the transition to modern future oriented temporality, if not to modernity *tout court*, continue to arouse debates which cannot be settled here, it is nevertheless safe to say that there is *correlation*, and not necessarily *a causal relation*, between the rise of modern temporality, on the one hand, and the consolidation, on the other hand, of networks of horizontal dependencies (i.e., the intensified circulation of exchangeable commodities) which could no longer be accommodated by the vertical or hierarchical relationships of

⁸⁷ *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy*, trans. Jeremy Gaines and Doris L. Jones (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 2.

dependence characteristic of a feudal socioeconomic system based on self-sufficient and regional economic units.⁸⁸ With the rise, in other words, of capitalism,⁸⁹ where lateral

⁸⁸ See *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, pp. 14-26. It is true that such developments can already be seen in germ within the budding towns of 11th and 12th century Western Europe. As Carlo M. Cipolla reminds us: "In the feudal world, a vertical arrangement typically prevailed, where relations between men were dictated by the concepts of fief and services; investiture and homage; lord, vassal, and serf. In the cities, a horizontal arrangement emerged, characterized by cooperation among equals. The *gild*; the *confraternity*; the *University*; and above all of them, that gild of gilds, the sworn union among all the burghers, the *Commune*...." See Carlo M. Cipolla, *Before the Industrial Revolution. European Society and Economy: 1000-1700*. (New York: Norton, 1976), p. 148. Such a thesis must nevertheless be taken *grano salis*: As Maurice Dobb early pointed out, "... while these urban communities, to the extent that they were independent centres of trade and of contractual dealings, were in a sense alien bodies whose growth aided in the disintegration of the feudal order, it would be wrong to regard them as being, at this stage, microcosms of Capitalism. ...Nor can one regard their existence as necessarily solvent of feudal relations. True, the trading element that these communities nourished were gathering between their hands the first germs of merchant and money-lending capital that was later to be employed on a larger scale. But other instruments of accumulation than the mere snowball-tendency had to intervene before this capital became as dominant and ubiquitous as it was to be in later centuries. *In their early stage many, if not most, towns were themselves subordinated to feudal authority.*" see Maurice Dobb, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1946), p. 71. My emphasis.

⁸⁹ There have of course been various definitions of capitalism— a term which is after all a relatively recent one first used as late as 1854 (*A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, ed. Tom Bottomore *et al.*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p.72). Although this is not the place to wrangle over the problems surrounding the definition of capitalism, suffice it to say that for the reasons outlined by Maurice Dobb, and because it is the definition adopted by most historians since the 1940s to this day regardless of their ideological stance, the Marxian definition of capitalism shall prevail here: rather than consider capitalism as an aggregate of attitudes, rather than speak of the "spirit" of capitalism (in the manner of Werner Sombart and Max Weber), and rather than define capitalism in terms of an opposition between "market economy" and "natural economy" (in the manner of the German Historical School), the Marxian definition instead traces the specificity of capitalism to its mode of production, which refers not to "technique" but instead to "the ways in which the means of production were owned and to the social relations between men which resulted from their connections with the process of production." See Maurice Dobb, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*, pp. 4-11.

functional differentiation eventually supplanted hierarchically stratified differentiation by the late 18th century as the dominant mode of social organisation, and where upward social mobility became conceivable at the expense of the formerly non-porous castes into which stratified society had been rigidly segregated,⁹⁰ *the past and tradition could indeed but see eroded their former capacity for self-legitimation* –a situation which in turn could but aggravate, to defer again to Koselleck, “the difficulty of apprehending one's own time...since the course that it was to follow could no longer be derived from previous history.”⁹¹ No longer hemmed in by the weight of the past or reined in by hallowed tradition, the present had to henceforth reckon with the contingencies of an open future and, as a result, the unexpected could penetrate the formerly self-contained and hermetically sealed horizon of premodernity. The new and the discontinuity it occasions began to assume a life of their own.

⁹⁰ It should of course be kept in mind that this Luhmanian terminology refers to the varying degree to which different modes of social differentiation have *co-existed* through out history; Luhmann in other words defines modernity as the *predominance*, and not the all-encompassing ubiquity, of functional differentiation at the expense of stratification. For those unfamiliar with this Luhmanian terminology, Eva M. Knodt succinctly explains this transition from premodernity to modernity as follows: Luhmann conceptualizes “the process of modernization in terms of a transition from a primarily ‘stratified’ to a ‘functionally differentiated’ society. In the course of this structural transformation, which was essentially completed by the end of the eighteenth century, the hierarchically ordered, ‘monocontextual’ universe of premodern society broke apart, and the reproduction of society was distributed among a plurality of non-redundant function systems such as the economy, art, law, and politics, each of which operates on the basis of its own, system -specific code.” Foreword to *Social Systems*, p. xxv.

⁹¹ “Neuzeit’: Remarks on the Semantics of the Modern Concepts of Movement,” in *Futures Past*, p.254.

That future oriented temporality should initially have been a specifically bourgeois phenomenon ought not to surprise. Future orientedness was indeed in the economic interests of such a class: the accumulation of capital is after all predicated on future oriented deferred gratification⁹²—a form of future orientedness which tradition and the past could but obstruct.⁹³ And as Luhmann reminds us with regard to the temporal changes that followed the late 18th century rise of the bourgeoisie to political and economic dominance,

With the transition to bourgeois society, a ‘change of command’ among temporal horizons appears to emerge in the sense that the future rather

⁹²Deferred gratification, as Barbara Adams tells, after all “entails a certain trust, knowledge and expectancy of the future; in other words, *the future has first to attain reality status.*” *Time and Social Theory* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 1990), p. 124. My emphasis. And this attainment of “reality status” by the future is itself entwined with the development of capitalism as a dominant socio-economic order. As J.B. Thompson indeed reminds us, “as time was disciplined for the purposes of increasing commodity production, there was a certain trade-off: sacrifices made in the present were exchanged for the promise of a better future.” *The Media and Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 36.

⁹³ Max Weber for example noted that in spite of the raising of piece rates by budding entrepreneurs in an effort to galvanise the rural worker’s output with the carrot of higher income, the resiliency of the pre-capitalist attitude towards labour proved stronger: because the short term gratification of needs as defined by tradition prevailed in pre-capitalist labor at the expense of future oriented possibilities enabled by increased monetary returns, for the pre-capitalist labourer “the opportunity of earning more was less attractive than that of working less. He did not ask: how much can I earn in a day if I work as much as possible? But: How much must I work in order to earn the wage, 2 ½ marks, which I earned before and which takes care of my traditional needs? This is an example of what is meant by traditionalism.” As Weber concludes, “The most important opponent with which the spirit of capitalism in the sense of a definite standard of life claiming ethical sanction, has had to struggle, was that of the type of attitude and reaction to new situations which we may designate as traditionalism.” See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons: 1958), pp. 58-60.

than the past now serves as the referential horizon for self- thematisations. Accordingly, the structural demand for decision making is transferred from memory to prognosis. This inversion or rearrangement may have had something to do with the transfer of functional primacy from politics to the economy, for politics (owing to its need for legitimation and consensus) tends to depend for orientation on articulated history, while the economy (owing to its need for calculation) tends to depend on an articulable future.⁹⁴

The correlation between the rise of the bourgeoisie and the emergence of future oriented temporality, however, was not limited to the strictly economic considerations of class interests, but also had political, cultural and social implications. The French Revolution, which “made it impossible for anyone to claim that revolution could be the restoration of anything time honored” as Loews notes, for “*the present had become so different from the past that it could no longer be bound by the past,*”⁹⁵ was of course, in spite of certain initially social democratic and populist elements (from the *Enragés*, *Hébertistes* and *Sans Culottes* to the *Jacobins*), a thoroughly bourgeois affair in both its national and international ramifications, as was to be made clear by the course of events following the fall of Robespierre, from the instauration of the *Convention Thermidorienne* and of the *Directoire* to the eventual “restoration” of monarchy (to say nothing of the subsequent series of Republics) under bourgeois tutelage. Furthermore, the consolidation of the bourgeoisie as the dominant socio-economic class

⁹⁴ “The Self-Thematization of Society: A Sociological Perspective on the Concept of Reflection,” in *The Differentiation of Society*, pp. 349 -350.

⁹⁵ *History of Bourgeois Perception*, p. 39. My emphasis.

between the late 18th and mid- 19th centuries⁹⁶ coincides with a series of semantic shifts in such words as revolution, development, and, as we saw earlier, experience, the results of which persist to this day, as the work of Raymond Williams⁹⁷ and of course Koselleck has shown— shifts which register the late 18th century changes in socio- economic circumstances and in which can be traced presuppositions regarding the structure of temporality. In the case of the concept of development, which parallels the semantic changes we earlier saw at work in the concept of *Bildung*, Lowe notes that in the mid- to late 18th century,

Development was a new word in bourgeois society, meaning ‘evolution or bringing out from a latent or elementary condition’ or ‘the growth and unfolding of what is in germ.’ It reflected the new experience of time as cumulative change. The concept was absent before this period. Previously, temporal changes were experienced as seasonal, cyclical or restorative. They could be ritualized as mythic imitation [sic] of some cosmic archetype. Or, as in seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, time was compared with and likened to space. However, the dynamic of the economic and political revolutions which ushered in bourgeois society broke the bounds of the traditional experience and conceptualization of time. In their stead or overlaying them, new forces were at work to

⁹⁶ Feudal modes of production began of course to erode under the rising importance of towns in the 14th century, and were dealt serious blows by various religious and political developments throughout the 16th and 17th centuries. But in spite of, say, the clearly decisive political transformations of 17th century England, which were to culminate in the Cromwellian revolution, it is not until the closing years of the Tudor era in the early 18th century, as Maurice Dobbs reminds us, that a capitalist mode of development, along with a specifically capitalist or bourgeois class, began to have a significant influence on *socio-economic*, instead of merely political, developments. And it is of course with the late 18th century industrial revolution that such influences were to be felt on a large scale by a significant proportion of the general population. See Dobbs, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*, pp. 18-19.

⁹⁷ See for example his *Keywords* (London: Fontana, 1976).

promote the secular sense of *time as cumulative change, leading to the unexpected, the new.*"⁹⁷

It is also at this socio-historical juncture, at which point the bourgeoisie began to develop an awareness of itself as a specific class with identifiable interests,⁹⁸ that became generalized such future oriented narratives as those of the unfolding of the nation state at the expense the perpetuation of static estates, of modern notions of utopia, inaugurated in 1771 by Louis-Sebastien Mercier's *L'An 2440*, as opposed to the premodern relegation of utopia to either some past Golden Age, or to some timeless haven⁹⁹ and, finally, of the

⁹⁷ *History of Bourgeois Perception*, p 21. My emphasis.

⁹⁸ It is a mistake to correlate the rise of a bourgeois self-awareness with the 16th century diffusion of the Reformation: "In sober truth," G.R. Elton notes, "any description of the sixteenth century, or the Reformation, which lays stress on the 'rise' of bourgeois or middle-class is quite simply wrong. Sixteenth century society was hierarchic, believing in ordered ranks from kings downwards" (*Reformation Europe, 1517-1559* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1963), p. 306). In short, the self understanding of the late 18th century bourgeoisie ought not to be conflated with that of the premodern mercantilist merchant class. This latter class indeed merely mimicked the ways of the established older nobility and landed gentry, buying or intermarrying its way into aristocratic titles and privileges, and currying the political favor of the ruling elite instead of demarcating itself as a specific class with specific political goals and economic interests. As Dobbs notes of the merchant bourgeoisie before the late 18th century industrial revolution: "While the influence of commerce as a dissolvent of feudal relationships was considerable, merchant capital remained nevertheless in large measure a parasite on the old order, and its conscious role, when it had passed its adolescence, was conservative and not revolutionary." *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*, p. 89. Elton likewise adds that "Merchants who made enough money [...] hoped to move into that rank [the nobility] of society; they had no loyalty to their 'class' or any awareness that it was 'rising'" (p. 307). But if earlier the merchant bourgeois class could be accommodated by the prevailing premodern social hierarchy, by the mid to late 18th century the bourgeoisie rose to economic and political predominance as it began to consolidate itself as a separate class with its own temporality and *Weltanschauung*.

⁹⁹ See especially Krishan Kumar's *Utopia & Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p. 38, and Frank E. Manuel and Fritzie P. Manuel, *Utopian*

primacy of individual personal development or *Bildung* at the expense of rigidly preordained caste.

It is in tandem with the rise of the bourgeoisie to politico-economic predominance, then, that a future oriented temporality asserted itself by the late 18th century in such a way so as not only to permeate metanarratives of progress, whether of reason, of the unfolding of the nation's *Geist*, or of a future directed utopian gaze, or to impose itself on certain fundamental concepts, but also, and more importantly, so as to *inform the very manner by which is to be negotiated a sense of self*: No longer always already circumscribed by the weight of past tradition or by the sanctification of preordained caste, modern self identity instead became a negotiable affair and a future

Thought in the Western World (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 458-460. Kumar points out that Mercier gave expression to the "new zest for the future which in the second half of the eighteenth century was transforming both the form and the substance of utopia." As David Carvounas adds, "regardless of who receives credit for initiating the shift, there can be little doubt that the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw the proliferation of explicitly future oriented utopias....These future oriented utopian systems differed from their premodern counterparts in that the latter usually projected ideals into a past Golden Age, or situated ideals within historical cycles, or contained the boundaries of the future within the Last Judgment of Christian eschatology. Even early modern utopian thought was not future-oriented. For example, the utopias of More and Campanella are *spatially* located in some imaginary present, not *temporally* located in the future. More's ideal commonwealth is reported—by the fictitious Portuguese mariner, Raphael Hythloday—to be located in a far off island. As reported by another mariner—this time a Genoese sea captain—Campanella's city of the sun is located in Taprobane (Ceylon). (...) Such a feat extracted utopia from the grip of the past, but it also extracted utopia from time itself. (...) The late Eighteenth century however saw a fundamental shift in the form of utopia away from an unsurpassable past, away from an imaginary present, and toward a future *in this world*." (David Carvounas, unpublished doctoral thesis manuscript, currently in progress, University of Toronto, department of Political Philosophy.)

oriented project, an open process of *Bildung*, which, in the manner of modern temporality as described by Lowe, capitalizes on “*cumulative change, leading to the unexpected, the new.*”¹⁰¹ Only at this socio-historical juncture could experience in the sense addressed earlier in chapter 2, that is, as a dialectic of continuity and discontinuity predicated upon the unexpectedness of an open future, come to the fore as an aspect of self-formation.

But for all the historical evidence pointing to a correlation between the rise of capitalism and the consolidation of future oriented temporality at the expense of past-bound traditional society, and although we will return to such a correlation in chapter 5, of import for us at this point, however, is not the causal chain leading to or the class origins of future orientedness; of import are instead the *consequences* that the late 18th century development of such a temporality was to have on the perceived role of experience in strategies of self-formation. Experience, as we have seen, presupposes a pronounced future oriented temporality which valorises the unexpected rather than seek to contain it, and this temporality itself is the result of a confluence of various socio-historical developments. But so far this only explains how experience became possible for, not why experience became perceived as central in, the economy of the modern sense of self. Just how did a future oriented temporality affect the sense of self, and how did it somehow result in a perceived need for experiences, let alone in the later

¹⁰¹ *History of Bourgeois Perception*, p 21. My emphasis.

Erfahrungshunger of the 1970s? With the advent of modernity, experience indeed not only became a thematisable problem, it also became a crucial leitmotif—so much so, as Daniel Bell phrases it, that what to this day is considered as characteristic of modernity is that “for us, experience, rather than tradition, authority, revealed utterance, or even reason, has become the source of understanding and identity.”¹⁰² In order to understand just how experience after the late 18th century came to be entwined with processes of self-formation, it is not sufficient to merely acknowledge the historicity of temporality and the manner by which it informs experience; also must be considered the effects that such a temporality had on the very manner by which were to be forged both collective identity (such as that of the nation state, which was just then beginning to impose itself) as well as the individual sense of self. As Giddens reminds us, while the advent of a modern future oriented temporality is not to be underestimated, it does not, in itself, adequately account for the change in the structure of self-identity by the late 18th century. More instrumental in the forging of modern self-identity, let alone in the accentuated role imputed to experience, has been not so much temporality as such than it has been a *consequence* of modern temporality, namely, the increase in complexity and unexpectedness, or as Giddens puts it, “counterfactuals” :

Living in circumstances of modernity is best understood as a matter of the routine contemplation of counterfactuals, rather than simply implying a

¹⁰² Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), p.89.

switch from an 'orientation to the past' characteristic of traditional cultures, towards an 'orientation to the future.'¹⁰³

What must be addressed, in other words, is not only the fact, but also the consequences, of modern temporal divergence. As we shall see, the most significant of these consequences were the emergence of reflexivity and of the need for a sense of continuity which might reduce the complexity of an open future.

¹⁰³ *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 29.

CHAPTER IV

The Consequences of a Divergent Temporality.

1. The Complexity and Reflexivity of Modernity .

While future orientedness is a temporal condition of possibility of experience as a process one undergoes, experience nevertheless involves a receptiveness not only to the discontinuity of future unexpectedness, but also to the continuity of a reconnected past and present. As we saw in the second chapter, experience not only refers to that which, by not lending itself to seamless integration within prior expectations or horizons of signification, perturbs routinized perceptions, actions and attitudes; it also refers to the *retrospective revision*, rather than the outright dismissal, of the earlier orientation it disrupted. Because experience involves a reintegration of the unexpected within those very practices and horizons it perturbed, it can be said to harbor two temporal manoeuvres: *an initial disruption is to be followed by a return to and revision of the past and the given so as to accommodate the new and re-establish continuity*. At hand in the dialectic of continuity and discontinuity of experience, then, is what can be called, in fact, what has already been called by Kristeva , Heidegger and others, *a reflexive dynamic*– a dynamic which Seel describes in his analysis of experience as that process whereby a confrontation with unexpectedness is followed by a reinterpretation of one's earlier perceptual schemas.¹ We have already seen how such a reflexive return to and revision of

¹ See *Die Kunst der Entzweiung*, pp. 81-83.

past orientations or horizons operates in Thompsonian subaltern historiography and cultural theory which, after all, appeal to both experience and its retrospective “handling” within a local culture in order to counter the dissipation of subaltern specificity with the consolidation of subaltern counter histories— counter-histories within which are to be reconnected the subaltern group’s past with its present so as to provide the temporal continuity which enables future oriented action. The whole point of appealing to experience is indeed not to jettison the past, but *to return to it in order to reconstruct it differently*. And such a manoeuvre is no less at hand in the etymological and post-Hegelian conceptual history of experience than in the early 19th century literary use of the term *Erlebnis*, where the initial disruption of unexpectedness is followed by a subsequently reestablished continuity, and where the unexpected leads to experience only insofar as it provokes a further reaction whereby it is neither dismissed, nor entirely assimilated by the familiar, but is instead reintegrated in one’s earlier horizon in such a way that this horizon changes in the process of accommodating it.

It is this reflexivity within experience that must now be addressed. If the third chapter has shown us *how* a modern future oriented temporality made it *possible* for experience to play an accentuated role in self-formation, it is the reflexivity at hand in experience which will show *why* such a role became *necessary*. Indeed, because the open future of modernity fostered unbridled unexpectedness, the modern sense of self needed a strategy for countering and containing an overwhelming increase in temporal complexity— and it is the reflexive aspect of experience which has provided such a

strategy. Experience in other words *was not only allowed, but also required*, for self-formation in the midst of a future-oriented temporality replete with unexpectedness. We must therefore take leave of the specific problem of experience as such in order to take a closer look at the more general problem of the reflexivity of modernity. It is here that can be brought to the fore not only the full temporal implications at hand in experience but, more important, the reason *why* experience came to play a central role in modern self-formation to begin with. It is this latter problem which will also help lay the groundwork for a later diagnosis of the Thompsonian insistence on experience noted in the first chapter. But what exactly is reflexivity, and what does it entail? Is it to be seen, as it has tended to be particularly since the mid- 18th century, in the epistemological terms of the relation of subject to object? Or is it to be seen on the contrary, as Giddens contends, as historically descriptive of the modern sense of self? Is reflexivity an anthropological category, an epistemological issue or a historical product of modernity?

Among the more prominent consequences of modern future oriented temporality was a growing sense of the provisional nature and historical relativity, or historicity, of everything from history and knowledge to the individual's self-interpreted biography. If premodernity excluded qualitative change and confined itself to the mere quantitative extension of an always already divinely revealed and transcendentally anchored *universitas rerum* or *aggregatio corporum*,² and if premodern *pratiques du savoir* (to

² For more on this, see Luhmann's "The Differentiation of Society," p. 232.

use as Foucault's expression), legitimised as they were by the past, were sheltered from the unexpected and from the potential for change, in modernity on the contrary, as Luhmann put it, "the world can be meaningful only as an *indeterminate horizon for further exploration*"³ and, as such, the need could but arise to *reflexively turn back upon, reinterpret or rewrite the past and the present in the light of new developments and unexpected turns of events*. As future orientedness dominated temporality by the turn of the 18th century, Koselleck notes in the case of historiography,

...The relativity of historical judgment was no longer treated as an epistemological defect, but rather as a testimony to a superior truth itself determined by the passing course of history. It was subsequently possible for an event to change its identity according to its shifting status in the advance of total history. ...History was temporalised in the sense that, thanks to the passing of time, it altered according to the given present, and with growing distance the nature of the past also altered.... *It became regarded as self-evident that history as world history had to be continually rewritten.*⁴

Premodern historiography could afford to confine itself to the chronicling of disparate past *res gestae* or to the recounting of genealogies from which could be distilled timeless *exempla*, and this precisely because it presupposed a seamless continuum between past, present and future from which the unexpected was precluded;⁵ such a temporal

³ Ibid., p. 232.

⁴ "Neuzeit': Remarks on the Semantics of the Modern Concepts of Movement," in *Futures Past*, p. 250. My emphasis.

⁵ As Luhmann notes with regard to premodern historiography, "the aim was to present *examples* of human behaviour, a style which assumed there was a moral continuum between past and present and thus did not tie down historical events (viewed as empirical confirmation for moral beliefs) to their position in history." *The Differentiation of Society*, p. 403, n. 39.

continuum, however, would yield by the late 18th century to a temporality fraught with discontinuity: with the increased predominance of future orientedness, the past and present became so tenuously linked to one another that the new and unexpected in turn became prevalent rather than aberrant, and disrupted rather than submitted to a given horizon. Bereft of an exemplary past or of authoritative tradition, any presumed act of knowing, whether historiographical, philological or otherwise,⁶ had to turn back upon if not revise its own premises, rather than appeal to timeless essences, as it confronted the unexpected –only to heed the unexpected meant not an unqualified rejection of, but rather a reflexive turning back upon and rewriting of, the past and the given. It is from within their own revisable history and from within themselves that various *pratiques du savoir*, then, had to henceforth fathom the grounds for their own legitimation—so much so that after the late 18th century, in the very dynamic of modern thought itself, Foucault notes, “the essential is that thought be for itself and within the density of its work at the same time knowledge and modification of what it knows, reflection and the

⁶ Although such a reflexive turning back upon the very operative mode of a particular practice can flagrantly be seen at work in historiography, which after all did indeed begin to historicise its own premises and methodology by the early 19th century, it can be seen no less at work in other institutionalised epistemological enterprises which at the time were also undergoing a mutation, as can be seen for example in philology and hermeneutics: unlike their premodern homologues where, as Jauss tells us, the act of understanding is itself taken for granted because without a pronounced divergence between past, present and future, “the conflation of the text’s and the interpreter’s horizon takes place naively,” modern exegetical practices on the contrary acknowledge that “the recognition of something that has been previously understood can no longer guarantee correct understanding. As soon as historical consciousness begins to uncover the qualitative difference that exists in the temporal distance between past and present life, the mediation between the text’s horizon and that of the interpreter must transpire reflectively.” “Horizon Structure and Dialogicity,” p. 201.

transformation of the mode of being of that upon which it reflects.”⁷ So prevalent had such reflexivity become by the late 18th century that it became identified with the very dynamic of modernity itself: For Luhmann, it is precisely the predominance of what he prefers to call self-referentiality or self-thematization which demarcates modernity from premodernity,⁸ and for Habermas, reflexivity is a quintessentially modern phenomenon because “modernity can and will no longer borrow the criteria by which it takes its orientation from the models supplied by another epoch: it has to create its normativity out of itself. Modernity sees itself cast back upon itself without any possibility of escape.”⁹

It is of course in philosophical discourse that has been most explicitly thematised the notion of reflection—a notion which Rodolphe Gasché rightly suggests can be minimally defined, in spite of its numerous different philosophical uses, as “the structure

⁷ *Les mots et les choses*, p. 338

⁸ See Luhmann, *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik*, vol 1., 166, 176ff. See also his “The Self-Thematization of Society: A Sociological Perspective on the Concept of Reflection,” in *The Differentiation of Society*, pp. 324 -361.

⁹ *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 7. This reflexivity is of course alive and well today: it can be seen at work in various current theoretical ventures such as certain textualist and formalist schools of literary criticism, (which owe much to the Russian formalist aesthetic criterion of the “perception of perception” engendered by “defamiliarising literary devices”), in the “experience of experience” proposed by Seel as a new aesthetic category (“to have an aesthetic experience is to have an experience with experiences,” and aesthetic interest “seeks and creates objects through which can be satisfied our desire to experience our own experience.” *Die Kunst der Entzweiung*, pp. 170-173), or in the “strategic essentialism” à la Spivak examined earlier (which tells us that a “vigilant self-awareness” of one’s manoeuvring is a sufficient immunization against the more abusive excesses of logophilia or ontotheology).

and the process of an operation that, in addition to designating the action of a mirror reproducing an object, implies that mirror's mirroring itself, by which process the mirror is made to see itself."¹⁰ It is in modern philosophy in particular, however, that the problem of reflection comes to the fore, receiving its first systematic exposition as early as Descartes *prima philosophia*,¹¹ but becoming an explicitly thematised problem only with Fichte, and eventually culminating into Hegels' attempt to go beyond both the subjective and objective versions of self consciousness and self reflection (as incarnated by the radicalisation of Kant's idea of the transcendental unity of apperception into a subjective idealism by Fichte or into an objective idealism by Schelling).¹² But as Gasché further notes, if from Descartes to Kant, self consciousness as the ground for possible knowledge still remains an unanalysed presupposition, it is only after Fichte that such a presupposition itself falls under scrutiny and that *the philosophy of reflection itself begins to self-reflexively turn upon its own mode of operation*. Indeed, if Locke's

¹⁰ Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 16-17

¹¹ For more on this issue and for a detailed history of the philosophy of reflection, see chapters 1-5 of *The Tain of the Mirror*. As Gasché has noted, while the various philosophical concepts of reflection from ancient Greek philosophy to this day all allude, however indirectly, to an optic metaphor whereby the "mode and operation by which the mind has knowledge of itself and its operations, becomes analogous to the process whereby physical light is thrown back on a reflecting surface," (p. 16) it is nevertheless only with Descartes' *prima philosophia* that reflection becomes a central philosophical principle which, "instead of being merely the medium of metaphysics, becomes its very foundation" (p.17), and that the essence of human being no longer entirely rests on grounds external to itself but instead resides in the phenomenon of the *cogito me cogitare* (in which the thinking subject, the *cogitans*, appears to itself as a *me cogitare*).

¹² *The Tain of the Mirror*, p. 19.

empirical reflection preoccupied itself with psychological knowledge by “bending in on what takes place within us”, if Leibnitz’s logical reflection concerned itself with the “turning backward of thought, away from its relations to objects,” and, finally, if Kant’s transcendental reflection inquired into the *a priori* principles of the cognition of objects in general,¹³ it is with Hegel’s absolute or speculative reflection that occurs a *surenchère*: rather than limit itself to a paradigm of reflection beset by the two irreconcilable movements of “the mirroring of an object by a polished surface *and*, at the same time, a mirroring of the mirror as well,”¹⁴ or (to put it in less arcane terms) the thinking being and the being of what is thought –a paradigm which raises the thorny issue of how to connect the reflection of objects to the self reflection of the subject– Hegel’s absolute reflection, intended as a critique of such a paradigm of reflection, instead turns reflection upon itself so as to encompass both moments within a “meta-theory” of reflection, and this Hegel achieves by considering being and thinking not as irreconcilable opposites but instead as “only moments in the objective process of self-developing thought.”¹⁵ The

¹³ Ibid., pp 15, 17-19.

¹⁴ As Gasché explains, reflection as a philosophical concept up to and including Kant “is the process and structure of the mirroring of an object by a polished surface and, at the same time, a mirroring of the mirror as well. Reflection thus seems to yield to a double movement, and to contain two distinct moments, but it is far from clear how these two moments relate, how reflection as a unitary phenomenon can at once be reflection of Other and reflection of the mirroring subject.” *The Tain of the Mirror*, p. 20.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 63, 24. To be fair to Kant, Gasché rightly adds that the decisive turn in postkantian philosophy of reflection owes much to Kant himself: “With the pure synthetic unity of the *I think* that must at least virtually accompany all of the experiencing subject’s representations, and which Kant was led to assume as a result of his transcendental deduction of the categories, he achieved a first, however hypothetical,

specifics of such a Hegelian *surenchère* need not concern us here. What is important to note however is that only by the early 19th century does the problem of reflexivity reach such a climax in philosophical discourse that it reflexively subjects itself to its own operations, and this in a manner which parallels the self reflexive tendencies of other institutionalised *pratiques du savoir*, if not of the dynamic of modernity itself.

The question of reflexivity, however, need not be restricted to epistemological considerations, and still less need it be equated, in an association which entrenched itself in philosophical discourse particularly by the late 18th century, “with the ‘intentional’ movement of thinking,” as Luhmann phrases it, or “with the idea of an underlying subject that unfolds itself and asserts itself in the ‘thinking of thinking.’”¹⁶ True, the link between reflection and the cognitive antics of the thinking subject towards objects, if not upon itself, has been a resilient one which, in spite of repeated critiques from various

unification of the different moments that constitute the minimal definition of reflection as self-reflection.” (pp. 18-19). Kant in other words well recognised, as was later to do Hegel, that “logically speaking, doubling, separation and dissolution are meaningful only with respect to a totality. The metaphysic of reflection, without its knowledge, presupposes an original unity within which the fragmenting and antithetical power of understanding can become effective” (p. 27). But because Kant considered this need for totality as only a hypothetical necessity or as a mere object of human yearning (the ideas of *Vernunft* beyond the legitimate realm of *Verstand*), he essentially “removes the original unity from the realm of what can be properly known” (p. 27) and, as such, he himself falls victim to the very philosophy of reflection the conditions of possibility which he had hoped to establish.

¹⁶ “The Self-Thematization of Society,” p. 324

quarters,¹⁷ can still be found at work in what Habermas derisively (and not without good reason) calls “philosophies of consciousness” or of “the subject;” it nevertheless remains that reflexivity is first of all a movement of turning back, an *Umkehrung* in the sense discussed earlier in chapter 2— only later would it refer in specialized philosophical discourse to the specular unfolding of self consciousness. By *historicising* the role of reflection in what he calls social and psychic systems, that is, in systems where meaning plays a predominant role,¹⁸ Luhmann has indeed shown that the “classical philosophy of reflection ” as epitomized by (though not limited to) German idealism is in fact but a

¹⁷ For more on the persistence of the philosophy of reflection in current philosophical thought, see chapter 5 of *The Tain of the Mirror*.

¹⁸ While the complexity of Luhmann’s position need not detain us at length, suffice it to say, as does Peter Beyer in his introduction to Luhmann’s *Religious Dogmatics and the Evolution of Societies*, trans. P. Beyer (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1984), that “an understanding of Luhmann’s concept of system can begin by distinguishing it from other concepts of systems. The first of these sees a system as a whole made up of parts. The order of the parts guarantees the continued existence of the whole. Such a concept refers purely to an internal order: it is defined without reference to an environment. A second concept takes the environment into consideration, but only as a potential threat to the system. A concept that comes closer to Luhmann’s sees system and environment as interdependent. In this view, a system’s selectivity processes input from the environment and responds by changing its state or attempting to influence the environment with selective outputs. The system then is a combination of processes that maintains itself by maintaining a boundary between itself and its environment” (p. xiv). But what is specific to social and psychic systems, as Harro Müller explains, is that these “consist of the continual processing of differences, in the continual combination of self-reference and external reference [*Selbstreferenz* und *Fremdreferenz*].” If meaning is understood, as it is by Luhmann (who combines functional analysis with Husserlian phenomenology), not as a content of consciousness but instead as “the continuous processing of the difference between actuality and possibility,” then “the social system and the psychic system process complexity in the form of meaning.” “Luhmann’s Systems Theory as a Theory of Modernity” *New German Critique* 61 (Winter 1994): p. 43.

culturally and historically specific formulation¹⁹ of a more fundamental dynamic which refers less to specular self-knowledge than it does to the movement of a system upon itself, to a self reflective (or “self thematising,” as he prefers to put it) “process through which a system establishes a relationship with itself”²⁰—a process which need not take the form of the self-hypostatization of the self under the aegis of absolute knowledge or of self-consciousness, but which is instead to be seen in terms of *how a system cultivates its own sense of continuity across time so as to sustain itself in the face of temporal discontinuity and growing complexity*.²¹ For Luhmann, Giddens and others, reflection

¹⁹ In “The Self-Thematization of Society,” Luhmann suggests that the traditional concept of the subject can be seen “as a sort of cultural ‘prescription’ for individual self-thematization” which stems from an increase in complexity following the shift from stratified to functional differentiation. It is after all in early modern philosophy that “the psychological reflexivity of thinking, willing and feeling, for example, was hypostasized as ‘the subject’ unable to negate itself. Similarly, it became a last ditch source of certainty in an unstable world.” (p. 330).

²⁰ Ibid., p. 327. It is the predominance of this sort of reflexive manoeuvring by the late 18th century which, according to Luhmann, distinguishes modern from premodern social and psychic systems. See his “The Differentiation of Society,” where he links the historical emergence of self-reflexivity (and the need for narratives) with the emergence of an open future (which in turn was a consequence of the functional differentiation of society). Will not be settled here, however, the issue as to whether modernity and self reflexivity are the result of functional differentiation (as Luhmann would have it), or of the opening of the future (as Koselleck would maintain).

²¹ Complexity can be defined in Luhmanian terms as that which forces social or psychic systems, for the sake of their survival, to select from a surplus of environmental possibilities which would otherwise prove overwhelming. To survive, that is, to maintain a difference between themselves and their environment, social and psychic systems must indeed keep complexity within manageable proportions, that is, they must select which aspects of the environment are relevant (or not) for their own operations. Such a process of “complexity reduction” is essentially a process of negation whereby certain possibilities are discounted while others are made actual—a process which Luhmann describes as “meaning.” He explains this process as follows: “for each system the

indeed refers not so much to epistemological issues than to the very process of managing the increased complexity that can but arise from an open future no longer fettered by the past and no longer hemmed in by an immutable order of things.²² In the face of the perpetually renewed advent of the new which the past and tradition were no longer in a position to absorb or contain, and as appeals to timeless essences or to a transcendently anchored cosmos lost their viability by the late 18th century, beset as they were by a modern temporality which fostered a sense of historicity or historical relativity, institutionalized disciplines from history to philology, no less than society as a

environment is more complex than the system itself. Systems lack the requisite 'variety' ...that would enable them to react to every state of the environment... . There is, in other words, no point-for-point correspondence between system and environment (such a condition would abolish the difference between system and environment). This is why establishing and maintaining this difference despite a relative difference in degree of their relative complexities becomes the problem. The system's inferiority in complexity must be counter-balanced by strategies of selection." *Social Systems*, p. 25. As he adds elsewhere, "*complexity is meant to indicate that there are always more possibilities than can be actualized,*" and "in practice, then, complexity means the necessity of choosing." "Meaning as Sociology's Basic Concept," p. 26. My Emphasis. Of course, one need not be a Luhmanian in order to abide by such a definition of complexity. Giddens, for example, comes to essentially the same conclusions as Luhmann while couching his analysis in the phenomenological terminology of Alfred Schultz and Thomas Luckmann: for Giddens, the maintenance of a sense of self identity presupposes the reduction of complexity through trust and the sustaining of a viable *Umwelt* (see *Modernity and Self-Identity*, pp. 127-129).

²² Such a premodern "immutable order of things" can of course assume various names depending on one's theoretical predilections. For Luhmann, such an order is embodied by the stratified vertical differentiation of premodern society into rigidly hierarchical and non-porous social castes. For Giddens, who uses more conventional sociological terminology, it is "traditional society."

whole if not, as Giddens has shown, an individual's very sense of self,²³ could but increasingly depend, for their self-maintenance, on a *diachronically extended sense of self-coherence and continuity*—a sense of continuity through time to be *reflexively cultivated* and without which complexity would assume overwhelming proportions. Indeed, when the past distances itself from the present with the advent of a divergent modern temporality, and when the present thus becomes susceptible to revision in the light of the new and unexpected, a *reflexive turning back* upon one's modes of operation becomes not only a possible, but also an essential moment in the sustaining of a sense of identity across a temporality fraught with discontinuity. As Luhmann explains,

A self-reflective orientation becomes unavoidable if problems of continuity or discontinuity spring up and *have to be solved by going back to a system's conception of its own identity*. Their solution requires a history of the system that can be reconstructed as an exploration of concepts, problems, solutions, and idealizations.²⁴

It is in other words precisely because “self-reflection... looks backward,” as Luhmann puts it, that it “reinforces the identity of the system so that it can survive novel choices and

²³ By “self” or “self-identity,” Giddens refers not to a “cartesian centered subject” or to any other of the currently maligned notions of the self or of subjectivity (whether as an idealist unfolding *Geist* intent on manhandling hapless “differences” within its hegemonic “identity of identity and non identity,” or as some phallo-albinocratic subject intent on subjugating postcolonial or gendered others); for Giddens, if identity “presumes continuity across time and space,” self-identity itself is “such continuity as interpreted reflexively by the agent,” for “self identity is not a distinctive trait, or even a collection of traits, possessed by the individual. It is the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography.” *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 53. Regarding self-identity, Kerby also tells us that “what seems truly unchanging... is not so much the content of this identity, ...but rather the need for and belief in such an identity, which is correlated with our desire to be.” *Narrative and the Self*, p. 110.

²⁴ “The Differentiation of Society,” p. 238. My emphasis.

innovations by reconstructing its past history as a consistent series of intentions and actions."²⁵ The need for such a sense of identity or unity across time is not to be underestimated: it is just such a sense of unity, as Luhmann and others remind us, which in the context of modernity

serves as the basic reference point for a selective reduction and mastery of environmental complexity. To the extent that the unity of a system is made an explicit topic in reflection, the system itself becomes capable of making meaningful choices even in what is for it an indeterminate and unexplored environment.²⁶

It is because of a system's sense of its past history of choices or selections—a history which is reflexively maintained, that is, which is perpetually revised so as to

²⁵ Ibid., p. 239. It should be noted here, however, that a "system's history" is not an aggregate of empirical facts that may or may not have taken place and which can be "objectively" reconstituted. In a system's sense of its past history, which is reconstructed in the face of unexpectedness, "historical events...are viewed as 'relevant' or meaningful not because they are purely factual and not merely because of the sequence in which they happen to occur, but rather because they can be understood as having been selected from an array of possibilities." "World Time and System History," p. 293. It should also be noted that what Luhmann calls a "system's history" need not be restricted to systems theory, and has assumed other names (as we shall later see) such as "biographical narratives of self-identity" in the work of Taylor, Giddens, Kerby and others.

²⁶ "The Self-Thematization of Society," p. 328. By "choices," Luhmann refers to the selectivity to which a system must resort in order to maintain the difference between itself and its environment. As Peter Beyer puts it in his introduction to Luhmann's *Religious Dogmatics and the Evolution of Societies*, "The environment is always more complex than the system: that is, there are always more possibilities in the environment than in the system. However, there must be enough possibilities in the system to respond to the variety of possible inputs from the environment. Maintaining this what [sic] Luhmann calls a complexity gradient between system and environment constitutes the system as system. The strategies by which a system can use relatively few responses to compensate for many environmental inputs constitute the system's selectivity. The capacity for reducing complexity is the *selectivity* of the system." (p. xiv).

accommodate unexpected and new developments—that a given system, social or psychic, can cultivate its sense of continuity and, in so doing, make meaningful choices among what would otherwise be an overwhelming and complex surplus of possibilities spewed forth by an unbridled future.

But the problem of complexity and the need to contain it, reflexively or otherwise, are not issues specific to systems theory: Luhmanian credentials are hardly required in order to stress the link between, on the one hand, the survival of a social or psychic system (or, to use Giddens's more traditional terminology, a sense of self-identity, that is, a diachronically extended sense of difference between one's self and one's environment) and, on the other hand, a capacity for reducing the complexity that can but follow from an onslaught of the unexpected and the new no longer reined in by a timeless eschatological temporality or by the weight of an exemplary past.²⁷ Similar conclusions have been reached by Taylor and others who argue in their socio-historical studies of the modern sense of self that it is only through self reflexively forged biographical narratives that sufficient *trust*²⁸ can be mustered so as to bracket the overwhelming "counterfactual

²⁷ Luhmann in fact uses "complexity" in terms of elements and relations *precisely because it is not restricted to systems theory*: used in this sense, the term complexity indeed "enjoys the advantages of making the concept applicable to what is not a system (environment, world) and, because the term is defined without using the concept of system, of enriching systems-theoretical analyses with additional perspectives." *Social Systems*, p. 24.

²⁸ By "trust," which cultivates the sense of "ontological security" (to use Giddens' term) without which overwhelming complexity would beset daily existence, Giddens and others essentially refer to the filtering mechanism whereby certain possibilities are

possibilities” of an open future which would otherwise preclude the formation of a temporally extended coherent sense of self.²⁹ In a similar vein, but from an entirely different philosophical tradition, Walter Benjamin’s theory of the 20th century impoverishment of experience contends that in order to palliate the proliferation of urban audio-visual and cognitive stimuli which threaten his psychic economy with overload, modern urban man developed a self-preserving or protective psychic barrier which filtered such stimuli yet which, in so doing, reduced experience from the temporal extension of potential meaning to the spatial punctuality of disparate brute shocks.³⁰ Complexity reduction is in other words not a problem specific to systems theory but is on the contrary, as Moretti suggests, coterminous with modernity itself: the complexity of

discounted and complexity reduced. It is because we generally discount, say, the possibility that the sun will fail to rise, or that the laws of gravity will be arbitrarily suspended, that a considerable number of problems no longer demand our attention and that our focus can tend to other matters. As Giddens puts it, trust “brackets out’ potential occurrences which, if the individual were seriously to contemplate them, would produce a paralysis of the will, or feelings of engulfment.” *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p.3. See also pp. 18-19 and 36-38.

²⁹ Such a correlation between the reflexivity both of modernity and of the modern self in the face of growing complexity has been noted before Giddens work— although it is true that Giddens himself has not acknowledged this. Some 20 years earlier, Peter Berger, Thomas Luckman and others had indeed come to similar conclusions. In this regard for example Peter Berger et al., *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (New York: Random House, 1973) and Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (London: Allen Lane, 1967). For a concise overview of this issue, see Brian S. Turner’s introduction to *The Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*, ed. Bryan S. Turner (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996) pp 14-16.

³⁰ For more on this Benjaminian theme, see his “on some motifs in Baudelaire” and “The StoryTeller,” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1955).

modernity, or what Moretti calls the restless dynamism of modernity, was such that it had to be curbed, and it ought not to come as a surprise that the “ ‘excess of stimuli’... -- from Simmel to Freud to Benjamin--has always been seen as modernity’s most typical threat.”³¹

Such a threat had indeed become very real by the late 18th century, for one of the consequences of modern temporal divergence has been the acceleration of time: once tradition lost its capacity for self-legitimation, and once the present was severed from the past, “the divide between previous experience and coming expectation,” to defer again to Koselleck, “opened up, and the difference between past and present increased, so that lived time was experienced as a rupture, as a period of transition, in which *the new and the unexpected continually happened.*”³² No longer confined within the parameters of tradition, the new could but proliferate, thereby fostering what Habermas calls the “new experience of an advancing and accelerating of historical events ” in which

Time becomes experienced as a scarce resource for the mastery of problems that arise—that is, as the pressure of time. The *Zeitgeist*, or spirit of the age, one of the new words that inspired Hegel, characterizes the present as a transition that is consumed in the consciousness of speeding up and in the expectation of the differentness of the future.³³

³¹ *The Way of the World*, p. 6.

³² “Neuzeit,” p. 257. My emphasis.

³³ *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 6

As Koselleck further notes, two prominent consequences of the modern temporal divergence between past, present and future were “the expected otherness of the future” and, with it, “the “acceleration by means of which one’s own time is distinguished from what went before.” Such developments, which “generated ever-shorter intervals of time,”³⁴ did not go unnoticed by Wilhelm von Humboldt, a contemporary of these temporal changes:

Whoever compares even superficially the present state of affairs with those of fifteen or twenty years ago will not deny that there prevails within this period greater dissimilarity than that which ruled within a period twice as long at the beginning of this century.³⁵

Complexity could in other words but become a pressing problem, and it is with good reason that Luhmann, echoing Koselleck’s diagnosis, has shown how the specificity of modern complexity resides in the manner by which it became temporalised by the late 18th century,³⁶ and how reflection, by allowing for a system *to turn back on its sense of*

³⁴“Neuzeit,” p. 252.

³⁵ Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Das achtzehnte Jahrhundert*, in *Werke* I: 401, cited by Koselleck in “Neuzeit,” p. 252 .

³⁶ See pp. 238-240 of Luhmann’s “The Differentiation of Society” for more on his contention that it is specifically as a result of a modern divergent temporality that emerges the need for reflexive self-constitution (or “self-narrating,” as narrativist theorists put it), that is, the need for constructing a history of one’s itinerary (or, to use Luhmanian terminology, a history of one’s past selections and choices) so as to maintain a sense of consistent identity through time. Although the specifics of his argument need not be rehearsed here, suffice to say that for Luhmann, functional differentiation is directly proportional with the temporal divergence between past and future, and the specificity of modernity lies in the predominance of functional differentiation— a form of differentiation which results, *inter alia*, in a separation and divergence of the temporal horizons of past, present and future. This modern temporality in turn leads to what he calls “complexity in time” or “temporalized complexity,” which “...correlates with the high probability of divergence between past and future states” (“The Future Cannot

its own history, induces a sense of continuity which keeps such complexity in check. By fostering the coordination between a past that has become distant, a present transitional and a future unexpected, the reflexive operations of the present upon the past in the face of the new hailing from an open future indeed keep complexity within manageable proportions precisely because, as Luhmann phrases it, “the present, in this situation, assumes the specific function of mediating between very dissimilar past and future states.”³⁷

If for Giddens reflexivity follows from the “disembedding mechanisms”³⁸ of emergent capitalism, and if for Luhmann reflexivity stems from the predominance of functional differentiation by the late 18th century, both theorists nevertheless both point to the correlation between reflexivity and the late 18th century consolidation of modern

high probability of divergence between past and future states” (“The Future Cannot Begin,” p. 275).

³⁷ “The Differentiation of Society,” p. 239.

³⁸ As an explanation for his admittedly vague notion of modern “disembedding” mechanisms, Giddens tells us that he chose “the metaphor of disembedding in deliberate opposition to the concept of ‘differentiation’ sometimes adopted by sociologists as a means of contrasting premodern and modern social systems. Differentiation carries the imagery of the progressive separation of functions, such that modes of activity organised in a diffuse fashion in pre-modern societies become more specialized and precise with the advent of modernity. No doubt this idea has some validity, but it fails to capture an essential element of the nature and impact of modern institutions—the ‘lifting out’ of social relations from local contexts and their rearticulation across indefinite tracts of time space. This ‘lifting out’ is exactly what I mean by disembedding which is the key to the tremendous acceleration in time-space distancing which modernity introduces.” *Modernity and Self-Identity*, pp. 17-18.

future oriented temporality. It is indeed only when a future oriented temporality occasions an increased discrepancy between the past and the present that the new and unexpected can so impinge upon a horizon so as to entail a reflexive revision of the past and the present. When seen as a socio-historical phenomenon rather than as a timeless philosophical concept, the reflexivity of modernity, then, appears as imbricated less in speculative idealism than in a divergent modern temporality, and it refers less to self knowledge than it does to the problem of how the new released by an indeterminate future impinges upon the given and, more important still, to how the resulting increase in complexity is to be reckoned with. “Modernity’s self reflexivity” as Giddens puts it, “refers to the susceptibility of most aspects of social activity, and material relations with nature, to chronic revision in the light of new information of knowledge.”³⁹ It is shortsighted, then, to peremptorily dismiss reflection as but the perpetuation of debunked “philosophies of the subject” or as the resilience of insidious ontotheological schemes. As Luhmann reminds us, reflection or self-referentiality is “in itself nothing bad, forbidden, or to be avoided (or, more precisely, something that is permissible only in a subject and that must remain locked up inside it);” instead, it “designates that unity which an element, process, or a system is for itself”—an unity that “can come about only through a relation operation, that ... must be produced and that ... does not exist in advance as an individual, a substance, or an idea of its own operation.”⁴⁰ In this sense,

³⁹ *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 20. My emphasis.

⁴⁰ *Social Systems*, p. 33.

reflection refers less to self knowledge or self consciousness than it does to self maintenance in the face of temporal discontinuity and increased complexity—in fact, self-knowledge and self-consciousness ought instead to be seen as attempted responses to increased temporal divergence and temporalized complexity. It is in this historicized sense of reflection that reflection shall be used here. While it is true that the anthropological role of reflexivity in understanding, if not the epistemological and critical potential of reflection in general, ought perhaps not to be cavalierly dismissed, such questions are not the issue here. Of concern here is instead the more pronounced role reflexivity historically came to assume as a response to the increased complexity unleashed by an open future.

As a socio-historical problem rather than as a timeless philosophical concept, *reflexivity stems in large part from the late 18th century opening of the future*. This is no less the case, as we saw earlier, with experience as a dialectic of continuity and discontinuity: it is after all upon a future oriented temporality that is predicated the element of surprise or unexpectedness without which experience cannot take place. But for all their indebtedness to future orientedness, both reflexivity, which involves a return to and revision of the past in the name of complexity reduction, and experience, which can be said to have taken place only if it leads to a restructuring of earlier horizons, do not so much reject the past as they submit it to revision so as to accommodate the unexpectedness of an open future. Of import in this detour through reflexivity, however, is not merely a sketch of some late 18th century *Zeitgeist*, or the fleshing out

of the historical background behind the rise of experience as a thematized issue and as an aspect of self-formation: as we shall see, reflexivity and the dialectic at hand in experience are not unrelated—in fact, the temporal dynamic of reflexivity best sheds light on the interrelation of past, present and future at work in experience itself. And it is to this temporality, which permeates modernity as a whole no less than the very structure of the modern self, that we must now turn in order to uncover just how, and why, experience came to be perceived as central in the constitution of the modern sense of self.

2. Reflexivity and the Need for Continuity: a Dialectic of Continuity and Discontinuity.

The opening of the future by the late 18th century did not so much foster the outright rejection of the past than it incited to *a reflexive return to* and reassessment of the past so as to maintain temporal continuity in the light of the new and unexpected. True, with the advent of a modern future oriented temporality, notions of utopia abandoned their earlier longing for some past Golden Age or for a timeless paradise in order instead to gravitate towards the shimmering gleam of promises held in store by the future; it is nevertheless

no less true that the past was not itself altogether jettisoned in favor of a headlong rush into the future: it is indeed by the late 18th century, for example, that the notion of nostalgia shifted from an essentially spatial yearning for familiar surroundings to a temporal yearning for a familiar but lost past. As Lowe observes,

‘Nostalgia’ was a word coined in the second half of the seventeenth century, to denote a form of melancholia induced by prolonged absence from one’s home or locale, i.e., homesickness, the longing for a familiar space. It was not yet the longing for a familiar time, since the continuity from the past into the present was still a seamless web. However, in bourgeois society, with the break between past and present, nostalgia was temporalized to be the longing for a former, more familiar time. And this nostalgia for the past soon became a widespread phenomenon....Old documents were discovered and preserved; museums and antiquarian societies proliferated. New disciplines such as anthropology, archeology and mythology developed out of an interest to recapture the past.⁴¹

For all the future orientedness at hand in modern temporality, the past was not seen as obsolete, but instead as in need of being revived and re-assessed. Whereas in premodernity the past posed few problems and appeared seamlessly connected to and readily accessible from the present, in modernity the past instead appears distant, strange and in need of resuscitation. This was an inevitable consequence of modern temporality, as Koselleck has shown: once the new becomes valorized at the expense of the old, the past recedes into decreasing contemporary relevance and, as such, can but appear as

⁴¹ *History of Bourgeois Perception*, p. 40. To this Lowe rightly adds that with regard to the 19th century novels of Walter Scott, it is precisely because "the past was put to use in the historical novel, to restore that temporal coherence lacking in the reader’s present" that we "we need to credit the popular reception of the historical novel to the time consciousness peculiar to bourgeois society" (p. 41).

“other” and distant *vis -à- vis* the present.⁴² This in turn has as a further consequence the need for a reflexive return to the past so as to maintain a temporal continuum which might buffer the onslaught of the new and which might integrate the unexpected within a given horizon.

A future oriented gaze and a receptiveness to the unexpected have in other words as their counterpart a retrospective and reassessing glance to the past. It is no coincidence that tradition should have been “invented” (to use the expression popularized by Eric Hobsbawm and others)⁴³ precisely at that time when, with the late 18th century advent of modern temporality, the past so distanced itself from the present, that the rampart of tradition had to be conjured in order to rein in the overwhelming complexity of an open

⁴² As Koselleck puts it in his discussion of temporality after the late 18th century, “If in one’s own history it becomes possible to register new experiences, those which supposedly no one had ever before had, it was also possible to conceive the past as something that was fundamentally ‘other.’” “‘Neuzeit,’” p. 250.

⁴³ In this regard see Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1983), where is shown how many of the traditions regarded to day as hailing from the distant past turn out to be but recent codifications and inventions often dating no earlier than the late 18th century. See also Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983). For a recent assessment of these positions, see chapter 6 of John B. Thompson, *The Media and Modernity*. Osborne summarizes these positions as follows: “Attention has been drawn to the pervasive tendency within modernity towards the ‘invention’ of traditions, with a hitherto unseen degree of self-consciousness, as an integral part of the formation of nations, as the destruction of tradition provokes its willed restitution, in increasingly artificial forms. There is no reason to doubt the power of such inventions to articulate experience... .In their most extreme, exclusionary, and modernistic form (as myth), such inventions provide an ideological basis for fascism.” *The Politics of Time*, p. 157.

future in which, to again quote Koselleck, “the new and the unexpected continually happened.”⁴⁴ The modern “invention” of tradition, however, refers not to the *fact* of tradition but rather to the late 18th century *awareness* both of the precarious link between the past and the present and of the need for a reflexive return to and cultivation of the past and tradition. lest temporal continuity, let alone a sense of individual as well as collective identity, be torn asunder and dissipated into an aggregate of disparate and unconnected presents – a risk which Edmund Burke had in mind as he aired his reservations, in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), about the excessive zeal with which the French revolution precipitously attempted to altogether dispense with the past.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ "Neuzeit," p. 257.

⁴⁵ The Enlightenment, to which most of the initial French revolutionary ideals were indebted, can indeed be characterised by the zeal with which it waged a war against the sway of the past over the present and the future, from customs and institutions to epistemological methodology. This war was to reach its apex with the proclamation, in September of 1792, of a new Revolutionary Calendar inaugurating year I (yet which also to come to an end in year XII (*anno Domini* 1805). Burke’s warnings against the viability of such a stance, for better or for worse, did not stem merely from a conservative stance towards changes in the social order—as is well known, he hardly viewed the American revolution with a jaundiced eye. Rather, Burke was concerned, among other things, with what he perceived to be the destruction of the social fabric that might follow attempts to abstractly atomise the population into individuals without a common collective history and to suspend all semblance of temporal continuity. It is easy to forget that Burke was more a critic of economic liberalism than he was a defender of *l’Ancien Régime*.

The role of tradition in premodernity is of course not belittled by the fact of its “invention” (for want of a better expression) by the late 18th century. So predominant was in fact the place of the past and tradition in premodern temporality, as we have seen, that the future was for all practical purposes foreclosed and the new and unexpected held in check. *If continuity and tradition were not issues before modernity, it is not because they were inoperative, but rather because they were all too operative: they caused no problems and, as such, they failed to so much as cross the threshold of the premodern horizon. Before it succumbed to temporalisation, what Lovejoy calls the Great Chain of Being indeed kept ontological, let alone temporal, discontinuity, at bay: the entities constituting the *series rerum*, however variegated they might be, were conceived as contiguously linked to one another in an uninterrupted and gradually ascending chain, as “an absolutely smooth sequence, in which no break appears.”⁴⁶ With such a “diagram of the general pattern of the universe” at one’s disposal, one “could know in advance what to expect,”⁴⁷ and discontinuity was thus always already glossed over, the past was perceived as unproblematically accessible, the new was hardly in a position to perturb the given, and complexity was thus kept within manageable proportions—and this without having to resort to a reflexively constructed sense of one’s past history. Moreover, even when the disparate temporal states of past, present and future did present problems regarding their inter-relation (which they certainly did, albeit so imperceptibly so as to*

⁴⁶ *The Great Chain Of Being*, p. 327.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 328.

pass unnoticed),⁴⁸ these could be altogether circumvented insofar as could be safely presupposed the existence of a timeless “preestablished harmony” of things— something not exactly difficult to achieve in a premodern cosmos which was divinely preordained and thus unlikely to arouse any epistemological gnashing of teeth or wringing of hands. Premodern hermeneutics were for example able to bypass thorny epistemological issues (such as how to understand an ancient text that has become strange due to its historical and cultural remoteness) precisely because, as Peter Szondi has shown in his reading of Chladenius, they presupposed the atemporal presence of a transcendent referent, whether as *res extensa* or *res gestae*, to which both author and interpreter could appeal.⁴⁹ When confronted by the inevitable strangeness of ancient textual passages replete with archaisms or with the portrayal of *mores* that had become outdated over time, premodern exegetical practices and hermeneutic inquiry did not incite to a *remise en question* of the interpreter’s horizon, and still did they less arouse any sense of historical relativity or historicity; such inquiry instead merely confined itself, as Jauss notes, to “wiping out the alterity of that which is past, and revivifying the one, undiminished truth

⁴⁸ As Koselleck reminds us, and as we saw earlier, before the late 18th century “temporal difference was not more or less arbitrarily eliminated; it was not, as such, at all apparent.” (“Modernity and the Planes of Historicity,” p. 4) and, as such, change was so imperceptible that the “rent between previous experience and an expectation to be newly disclosed did not undermine the traditional world.” (“Space of Experience and Horizon of Expectation,” pp.277- 278.)

⁴⁹ See chapter 9 of his *Einführung in die literarische Hermeneutik* (Frankfurt; Suhrkamp Verlag, 1975).

of the canonical text”⁵⁰—a manoeuver which, if anything, effectively defused any thematisation of a possible historical distance between past and present.⁵¹ With such a perceived contemporaneity of past distant events in spite of intervening historical change, it is not surprising that, say, medieval portrayals of Virgil and other ancients should have them attired not in togas but in contemporary garb, or that Alexander’s victory over Darius at the Battle of Issus in 333 B.C. should be depicted in Albrecht Altdorfer’s *Alexanderschlacht* (1529) as if it had taken place the week before.⁵² Anchored as they were in an immutable order beyond the intemperate ways of historical change, and delimiting as they did the realm of the possible, tradition and the past indeed precluded the possibility of a vantage point external to themselves from which they themselves might be surveyed. As such, they could not lend themselves to the explicit thematisation (or “invention”) they would later receive in modernity.

⁵⁰ “Horizon Structure and Dialogicity,” p. 201.

⁵¹ It should be added here, however, that if in premodernity tradition was perceived as self-evident as is the daily rising of the sun, and if the past was perceived as unproblematically given and accessible, the force of such convictions stemmed not from any actual, but rather from a *perceived*, exemption from historical change. For more on this see pp. 127-130 of Peter Osborne’s *The Politics of Time*. For more on how this is to be seen at work in the operations of premodern philology, see the first two chapters of Szondi’s *Einführung in die literarische Hermeneutik*.

⁵² For all the meticulous attention to historical accuracy (e.g., the *exact* number of soldiers fighting, killed or taken prisoner—Altdorfer had in fact sought advice from the court historiographer Curtius Rufus), it nevertheless remains that everything depicted in Altdorfer’s *Alexanderschlacht*, from the soldiers’ armour and the Persians’ garb to the weaponry and the fortified town in the distance, is unmistakably of the 16th century. For a detailed analysis of the temporal implications to be found in Altdorfer’s painting, see Koselleck, “Modernity and the Planes of Historicity,” pp. 3-20.

It is only when the past appears distant from rather than seamlessly continuous with the present, and it is only when the future becomes unexpected rather than foreclosed, that the past and tradition, if not the problem of *conservatio* itself,⁵³ can become an object of concern, and that the need for temporal continuity can be felt. The awareness of the past as alien or at least as precariously related to the present is a modern phenomenon. By the late 18th century, the past had indeed become so flagrantly estranged from the present, and the future had begun to harbor such a surplus of possibilities so as to warrant efforts at reconnecting the past, present and future by means of temporally extended and coordinating narratives— so as to warrant in other words *a reflexive return to the past so as to accommodate the new*. And the “invention” of tradition was but one of these efforts at reflexively reworking the past in the light of the new so as to link it in a linear sequence leading to the present. If at this time “the ideological labour of inventing tradition became of great significance,” David Harvey notes, it is “precisely because this was an era when transformations in spatial and temporal practices implied a loss of identity with place and repeated radical breaks with any sense of historical continuity.”⁵⁴ Other efforts at countering the threat of

⁵³ As Luhmann observes, it is only by the late 18th century that the problem of *conservatio* comes to the fore: “...older societies which thought of themselves as living in an enduring (or even eternal) present did not experience our problem [of temporal integration] . Only in modern times, and only after a shortening of the time span of the present, does the problem of perseverance or *conservatio* become of current interest.” “The Future Cannot Begin,” pp. 282-283.

⁵⁴ *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 272.

discontinuity can be seen no less at work in the frequent recourse, by emerging nation-states, to national literary historiography as evidence of an unfolding national *Geist* (say, *à la* Gervinus), or in the rise of biographical and autobiographical literature which depict the self as an explicitly narrativised and temporally organized trajectory rather than a timeless entity ordained according to caste or decreed by fate. Attempts at reckoning with growing temporal discontinuity are yet more tellingly revealed by the late 18th century emergence of linearity itself as a problem: Luhmann has shown how the very idea that “time is a linear series of temporal points... is a relatively late idea; in an abstract form it appears only in modern times”⁵⁵—a relatively late idea which forcefully imposed itself precisely because of the strongly felt need, with the advent of modernity, for “the reconstruction of past history in terms of a linear sequence of actions, events, or stages...” and thus for a form of linear temporal continuity which “reinforces the identity of a changing system—in our case, the identity of bourgeois society in its transition from stratification to functional differentiation.”⁵⁶

Even in the economy of the human sense of self does temporal continuity become a salient issue: in the face of a discrepant temporality, it is to memory that is increasingly entrusted the sustainment of a sense of self-identity across the temporal manifold—with

⁵⁵ “World Time and System History,” p. 302.

⁵⁶ *The Differentiation of Society*, pp. 392-393, n. 17. As we saw in the third chapter, it is of course precisely the *historicity* of linearity which various narrativist theories of experience fail to address in their attempts to ahistorically conflate narrative structures with the constitution of the self.

Hume, it becomes the condition of possibility of a sense of identity: "Had we no memory, we never should have any notion of causation, nor consequently of that chain of causes and effects, which constitute our self or person."⁵⁷ Finally, it is to the modern disjunction between past, present and future that can conceivably be traced the increasingly pronounced interest of 18th century philosophical discourse in reflexivity as a problem of self-consciousness and of the subject: if with the rise of a sense of historicity, the past could appear as but tenuously connected to the present, then could likewise become a serious problem not only the relation of subject to object, but also *the relation of the subject to itself as it alters along a diachronic axis*. The otherness of past socio-historical cultural horizons *vis-à-vis* a present horizon, which began to preoccupy both biblical and secular hermeneutics at the turn of the 18th century,⁵⁸ is indeed echoed in

⁵⁷ Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), pp. 262-263.

⁵⁸ Except for the odd case of Vico's *Scienza Nuova* (1725) where, as Auerbach has shown, many of the problems of aesthetic historicism are advanced, it is only in the last quarter of the 18th century that issues of historicity and of historical perspectives, at first aesthetic and then in general, come to the fore and gain currency in hermeneutic and historiographical inquiry. Such developments are of course usually attributed to Herder and the Schlegel brothers, but they were first fully addressed by Johann Semler (1725-1791), whose work on biblical hermeneutics shows how the bible, far from being a homogeneous whole of which each part had equal contemporary validity, was on the contrary a collection of disparate texts circumstantially written for specific historical communities. As Gusdorf explains, Semler was instrumental in showing how historical understanding involves two fundamental movements: it first "directs itself to the past in order to reconstitute it in its temporal substance; but it must then return from the past to the present, translate in the language of the present the import of a past which would otherwise remain *lettre morte*. This reactivation of meaning presages romantic historicism." *Les origines de l'herméneutique*, p. 135. See also Erich Auerbach, "Vico and Aesthetic Historism," in *Scenes From the Drama of European Literature*, pp. 183-200.

philosophy's concern for the otherness or alienation (*Entfremdung*) that a temporally extended and changing subject can but experience towards its earlier past states—a problem which threatens the possibility of self-identity across time. Lovejoy has shown how already in Leibniz's *Monadology* (1714) does the *principium individuationis* shift from a fixed status within the chain of being to the matter of temporal coordination: “a being which recalls its past experiences as its own experience has a continuing sense of personal identity which may persist through out any number of changes of any degree.”⁵⁹ And such a problem informs to a certain extent Kant's recourse to transcendental apperception as a means of connecting the otherwise disparate empirical “I's” scattered across the temporal manifold.

The reduction of complexity and the need for temporal continuity, then, are closely related problems with which reflexivity tries to reckon. If “modernity's self reflexivity,” to quote Giddens again, “refers to the susceptibility of most aspects of social activity, and material relations with nature, to *chronic revision in the light of new information of knowledge*,”⁶⁰ such a susceptibility not only entails a predisposition to revision but, more important still, it also prompts to a reflexive reorganisation of the past and present so as to maintain a sense of continuity across time—a sense of continuity which might in turn keep complexity within manageable proportions. Reflexivity

⁵⁹ *The Great Chain of Being*, p. 260.

⁶⁰ *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 20. My emphasis.

harbors in other words a double-sided temporal manoeuvre: Insisting as it does both on heeding the disruptiveness of an unexpected future *and* on revising the given and the past, reflexivity can be characterised as both a disruptive and restorative dynamic— and this much in the manner of the dialectic of continuity and discontinuity that we earlier saw at work in the conceptual and etymological history of experience.

So ubiquitous had reflexivity become by the late 18th century, permeating as it did not only methodological questions of historiography, philology and philosophy but also the very structure of self-constitution, that it has often been equated with the very dynamic of modernity itself. It is hardly surprising that shortly thereafter experience should come to the fore and receive explicit thematisation as a dialectic of continuity and discontinuity, that is, as an essentially reflexive process which reintegrates the unexpected within the very orientations or horizons it disrupts. Experience depends as does reflexivity not only on a future oriented receptiveness to the new, but also on a reassessing glance to the past—the new and unexpected are valorised only insofar as they do not leave one unchanged, that is, only insofar as they entail a return to and a restructuring of both the given and the past so as to accommodate the new and unexpected. The dialectic of continuity and discontinuity at hand in experience is an essentially reflexive process—and it is for this reason, as we have seen, that for Heidegger, Seel, Kristeva and others, experience stems not only from the disruptiveness of the unexpected but also from a retrospective *Umkehrung* or *retournement* upon past

practices or presuppositions. Experience, far from being a reckless rush to the new, is on the contrary, as Victor Turner put it, "constantly arrested by reflexivity."⁶¹

As both a consequence of modern future oriented temporality and as a response to increased complexity and temporal discontinuity, reflexivity sheds light on the dynamic at hand in experience itself: experience refers as does reflexivity to a dialectic of continuity and discontinuity or, if you prefer, the dialectic of continuity and discontinuity of experience is essentially a reflexive process. But what is the actual relation of reflexivity to our initial problem, the dialectic of continuity and discontinuity of experience? Increasingly problematised and thematized as they both were following the advent of a modern future- oriented temporality, and exhibiting as they do a similar temporal dynamic, reflexivity and experience can but raise questions about the actual nature of their affinity to one another. Is experience but a particular incarnation of the reflexivity of modernity in general, or is it a parallel but unrelated phenomenon? Are reflexivity and experience both but reflections of some "Spirit of the Age" or is one the subset of the other?

While both experience and reflexivity owe their explicit thematisation to the opening of the future, their affinity does not merely testify to some late 18th century *Zeitgeist*. Experience as a dialectic of continuity and discontinuity is indeed not so much

⁶¹ Victor Turner, cited by Edward Bruner, "Experience and its Expressions," in *The Anthropology of Experience*, p. 13.

a phenomenon parallel to than it is instead *a particular instance* of reflexivity in general. True, it would seem that the dynamic of experience is essentially described by the reflexivity at hand, say, in Russian formalism—a reflexivity whereby “defamiliarising literary devices,” by disappointing perceptual expectations, so disrupt the continuity of one’s cultural and perceptual horizon that one is prompted into countering the ensuing discontinuity with a reflexive turning back upon and revising of former presuppositions,⁶² and this in turn so as to augment one’s self understanding and repertoire of responses, much in manner of *Bildung* as an accumulative and transformative process.⁶³ What demarcates the reflexivity of experience from the reflexivity of Russian formalism, if not from reflexivity in general, however, is its specific association with problems besetting the formation and sustaining of a modern a sense of self: whereas reflexivity can as readily refer to historiographical or hermeneutic methodology, to the unfolding of some national *Geist*, to the tenets of Russian formalism and early *Rezeptionsästhetik*, as it can

⁶² Or, in the case of Jauss’ early *Rezeptionsästhetik*, one’s former literary horizon. See pp. 224-225 of “Horizon Structure and Dialogicity” for Jauss’ own *mea culpa* in which he acknowledges and repents for the Russian Formalist presuppositions at work in his earlier texts (such as his manifesto “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,” in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, pp. 3-45.)

⁶³ For more on the reflexivity at work in Russian Formalism, see Victor Shklovsky’s “Art as Technique. Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*: Stylistic Commentary” and Boris Eichenbaum’s “The Theory of the ‘Formal Method,’” in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reiss (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), pp. 3-25 and 99-141. For a critical account of the presuppositions at hand in Russian formalism, if not in formalism *tout court*, see Bakhtin’s *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*, trans. Albert J. Wehrle (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), and chapter II of Fredric Jameson’s *The Prison-House of Language* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972), pp. 43-100.

to the dynamic of modernity itself, the reflexive dynamic of experience itself, however, typically revolves around issues of *identity formation in the face of a future oriented temporality replete with increased complexity*. As we shall see, experience is no less imbricated than is reflexivity in the reduction of complexity: both reckon with one of the most insistent problems of modernity—the problem of how a system is to avoid its own dissolution by sustaining a sense of difference between itself and its environment, of how in other words a system is to reduce the complexity of an environment that threatens to overwhelm it. But what distinguishes experience from reflexivity in general is that the system at stake is the modern sense of self.

An accentuated role for experience in self-formation, however, could come to the fore only when the self itself became reflexively structured, for only when it is so structured can the unexpected impinge upon and prompt to a reflexive revision of an individual's narrativised sense of self and, in so doing, foster the undergoing of experience as a process. Unlike its premodern homologue which, anchored as it was by the immutable external referents of tradition, caste or kinship, remained shielded from the complexity of an unbridled future, the modern self in contrast becomes an open process of self-revision in the face of unexpectedness, an individually forged future oriented project as well as a reflexively narrativized biographical trajectory which sequentially mediates into temporal continuity the otherwise disparate and discontinuous past, present and future of an individual, and this in the manner of an expanding hermeneutic circle which both articulates and is articulated by the experiences it

undergoes.⁶⁴ Once permeated by reflexivity, the self not only allows for but also *depends upon* experiences, for these not only help coordinate a discrepant temporality and reduce complexity, as we shall see, but also because they become the fodder, so to speak, out of which the modern sense of self constructs and sustains itself as a reflexively forged narrative or, to use Ricoeur's term "emplotment" (*mise en intrigue*): "Our identity is that of a particular historical being," as Kerby puts it, "and this identity can persist only through the continued integration of ongoing experience."⁶⁵ The key to the insistence—Thompsonian or otherwise—on experience in other words lies in the manner by which the self itself became reflexively structured by the late 18th century. Accordingly, we must shift our focus from reflexivity in general to the historical emergence of a reflexively structured sense of self, for it is at this juncture that experience, associated as it has been particularly since the late 18th century with issues of self-formation, came to the fore as a problem and began to be perceived as central to the forging of a sense of self.

⁶⁴ It is no mere happenstance that it is at the end of the 18th century, when the self was becoming increasingly reflexive and narrative in structure, that hermeneutics should have shifted from problems of mere textual exegesis to the more encompassing problem of the circular dynamics of understanding.

⁶⁵ *Narrative and the Self*, p. 45.

3. *The Reflexivity of Modern Self-identity.*

If such a reflexive structuring of the self surfaces with insistence only by the mid- to late 18th century, it is because before the advent of a modern future oriented temporality, the self was less a diachronically extended and narrativized itinerary or biography to be reflexively sustained in the face of unexpectedness than it was *a predetermined and static entity from which change and the new were for the most part excluded*. Even when change or the new were the order of the day, they tended to be confined, as we have seen, either to initiatory rites of passage institutionalized by a tradition which itself was immutable, or to ethereal miracles unrelated to daily existence. In either case, the unexpected was either contained or dismissed and, as such, was hardly in a position to perturb a given horizon, let alone impinge upon one's sense of self or horizon in the manner that we saw at work in experience.

In this regard, Bakhtin has shown in his "chronotopal" studies of premodern literary genres,⁶⁶ where the spatio-temporal construction of the hero parallels that of the

⁶⁶ For Bakhtin, chronotopes constitute the "organizing centers for the fundamental narrative events of the novel. The Chronotope is the place where the knots of narrative are tied and united." As such, "it is precisely the chronotope that provides the ground essential for the showing forth, the representability of events"—including the representation of the self. "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel," p. 250.

premodern sense of self in general,⁶⁷ that a common denominator to various premodern literary genres has been the imperviousness of portrayed characters to the incremental change characteristic of experience as a process one undergoes. The chronotope of the epic, for example, presents us with a past that is “absolute and complete. It is as closed as a circle. ...There is no place in the epic world for any openedness, indecision, indeterminacy. There are no loopholes in it through which we glimpse the future.”⁶⁸ In such a temporality, what Bakhtin calls the “image of the individual” could but be construed as a

fully finished and completed being....He is all there, from beginning to end he coincides with himself, he is absolutely equal to himself. He is furthermore completely externalized. There is not the slightest gap between his authentic essence and its external manifestation. All his potential, all his possibilities are realized utterly in his external social position, in the whole of his fate and even in his external appearance; outside of this predetermined fate and predetermined position there is nothing. He has already become everything that he could become, and he could become only that which he has already become.⁶⁹

⁶⁷Although the relation between fiction and environing reality is a complex issue which cannot detain us here, Bakhtin’s chronotopal studies can nevertheless help better illustrate the historically contingent temporal changes that separate modernity from premodernity, as well as the modern from the premodern constitution of a sense of self. As Bakhtin rightly points out: “The changes that take place in temporal orientation ...appear nowhere more profoundly and inevitably than in the process of re-structuring the image of the individual in literature.” (“Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel”, in *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 33). As Taylor puts it in his comparison of the modern and premodern sense of self, various theories and portrayals of the self ought not to be seen as but ideas exchanged among philosophers or an educated elite, but instead as a “widespread self-understanding.” See for example his discussion of the premodern theory of humours in *Sources of the Self*, p. 190-192.

⁶⁸ “Epic and Novel,” p. 16.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

In other predominantly premodern chronotopes,⁷⁰ such as “adventure time,” which first surfaced as early Petronius’ work but which no less permeated travel novels, picaresque novels (*Lazarillo de Tormes*, *Gil Blas*) and works as late as Defoe’s *Moll Flanders*, characters remain unchanged in the face of various events, for “the hammer of events,” as Bakhtin puts it, “shatters nothing and forges nothing—it merely tries the durability of an already finished product. And the product passes the test.”⁷¹ And even when a hero’s social status changes, the hero himself remains the same, and the result is “a mere affirmation of the identity between what had been at the beginning and what is at the end.”⁷² This holds true even for those literary genres where a changed protagonist is what one would expect, as in the novel of ordeal (*Prüfungsroman*) and early Christian “crisis hagiographies,” (the chronotope of which persists well into the 17th century Baroque novels of D’Urfé, Scudéry and others): indeed, for all the adversity and unexpectedness of events faced by characters, “nothing they [the heroes] see or undergo

⁷⁰ Bakhtin’s classification of literary genres according to their chronotopes ought not to be interpreted as a rigid categorizing scheme. Far from being mutually exclusive, various chronotopes tend on the contrary to coexist in varying ratios depending on the historical period, and what demarcates one genre from another is the predominance, and not the exclusive domination, of one particular chronotope over others. The chronotope of the *Künstlerroman*, for example, which is closer to that of the *Bildungsroman*, nevertheless harbors vestigial chronotopal elements of the novel of ordeal. See his “The *Bildungsroman* and its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historical topology of the Novel), in *Speech Genres, and Other Late Essays*, p. 16. For a different take on the historical implications of “adventure time,” see Michael Nerlich, *The Ideology of Adventure* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), vols. I and II.

⁷¹ “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel,” p. 106

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 110

can be utilized as a life experience that alters and shapes them."⁷³ In spite of various genres and numerous subcategories, premodern literary discourse and the chronotopes subtending them have in common their lack of a sense of historicity, of contingency, let alone of the possibility that the unexpected might spur to that reflexive revision of one's sense of self. When deviations from the norm do occur, these are either mishaps or exceptional events which merely serve to delay the normal course of things and which, in so doing, confirm and reinforce rather than reflexively revise the given and one's sense of self.

Such a state of affairs is of course to be expected if in addition to Bakhtin's chronotopal studies we pause to consider the dominant structure of premodern society—a structure which can be characterized as vertically hierarchised into rigid non-porous social strata or estates into which individuals were born and by which they were entirely and unambiguously encompassed, from vestmental codes and demeanor to spoken dialect and accent. Always already predetermined as he was by the external determinants of kinship ties, of lineage, and of the caste into which fate had thrust him, the premodern individual was not exactly subjected to reflexive revision in the face of unexpectedness—in fact, to once again put it in Luhmanian terms, “in stratified societies, the human individual was regularly placed in only one subsystem. Social status (*condition, qualité, état*) was the most stable characteristic of an individual's

⁷³ “The *Bildungsroman* and its Significance in the History of Realism,” p. 12. My emphasis.

personality.”⁷⁴ Complexity, in this context, was not a pressing problem for the maintenance of a sense of self, and the reflexive narration of the self was not only an unlikely, but also an unnecessary, scenario: in a temporality where past present and future are continuous, there can be but little room for the unexpected and the new the management of which, as we have seen, account for the need for reflexive self-narration to begin with. The premodern individual sense of self posed in other words few problems, and while it is true that the individual has of course always existed, the individual as a thematised category, let alone as a problematic issue, did not even emerge until the late 18th century.⁷⁵

The individual sense of self becomes a problematic affair by the late 18th century, however. We have already seen how a divergent modern temporality caused considerable *remue ménage* in the premodern order of things, sabotaging as it did the legitimacy of the past and of other transtemporal courts of appeal. To complicate things further, the predominance of functional differentiation at the expense of stratification by the late 18th century prevented any single system, let alone a caste, from encompassing the entire identity of the individual's sense self: “This is no longer possible,” as Luhmann notes, “for a society differentiated with respect to functions such as politics,

⁷⁴ “The Individuality of the Individual: Historical Meanings and Contemporary Problems,” in *Essays on Self-Reference*, p. 112.

⁷⁵ For more on the late 18th century emergence of the individual as a thematized problem, see Luhmann's “The Individuality of the Individual.”

economy, intimate relations, religion, sciences and education. Nobody can live in only one of these systems.”⁷⁶ Rather than remain confined to a single overarching system or caste, the modern sense of self is instead constituted by a plurality of intersecting functionally differentiated subsystems.

Such developments could but raise two closely related problems with regard to the forging and sustaining of a sense of self. The first involves the unification of the otherwise disparate and conflicting aspects of an individual’s life (such as family ties, social function, legal status, a sense of past history and of future expectations, etc.): since “in a highly differentiated society ... individuals cannot be located exclusively inside any single social system,” Stephen Holmes and Charles Larmore tell us, “one of the most personally burdensome characteristics of a sharply differentiated society [...] is the absence of socially approved models of *how to combine a plurality of roles into coherent life stories*”⁷⁷— a problem which, as Moretti suggests, might account for the

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 112.

⁷⁷ See pp. xx -xxi of their introduction to Luhmann’s *The Differentiation of Society*. My emphasis. It is of course because of such complications in the forging of a modern individual sense of self that the category of the individual became a thematized problem only by the late 18th century. As Luhmann put it, modernity is characterised not so much by “increased individuality” as such than it is by *the increased difficulty of integrating the individual within larger social structures*—something to be expected in a functionally differentiated society. For the better part of premodernity, the individual presented few problems— the structure of premodern society was, after all, vertically hierarchized into non-porous strata or estates which entirely and unambiguously encompassed the individual and which, as such, limited the possible combination of varied functional roles. For more on this see the first chapter of Luhmann’s *Love as Passion*. The category of the individual in other words did not emerge just because Descartes woke up one day

obsession with which, in an attempt to compensate for the perceived threat of a dissolution of the self, “the Bildungsroman attempts to build the ego, and make it the indisputable center of its own structure.”⁷⁸

A second problem closely associated with this need for unification is the *need for complexity reduction*: It is indeed upon an individual’s sense of self-unification in terms of a coherent life story that depends the capacity for managing an overabundance of possibilities hailing from an open future⁷⁹—only such a unification refers more to the reflexive sustaining of narrative sequentiality than it does to the arbitrary positing of some logophilic, phallogocentric or albinocratic “centered subject” intent on manhandling

and decided to oppose *res extensa* to *res cogitans*-- after all, the individual was present even in societies based on hunting and gathering. The increased problematisation of the individual stems instead from social processes that go beyond the realm of ideas alone.

⁷⁸ *The Way of the World*, p. 45.

⁷⁹ This notion of an “overabundance of possibilities hailing from an open future” refers to the disorienting abundance of possibilities from which selections must be made. As Stephen Holmes and Charles Larmore put it in their introduction to Luhmann’s *The Differentiation of Society* (p.xxii): “The future always contains more ‘real possibilities’ than could ever be compressed into a single present”—hence the problem of selectivity, that is, the problem of the “the necessity of tradeoffs or the discrepancy between the possible and the co-possible”—trade-offs which entail considerable risk since optimal choices might not be made and since better alternatives may have been discounted *à notre insu*. This is why Giddens, Luhmann, Ulrich Beck and others have rightly characterized modern society as a society fraught with risk. As Giddens explains: “The notion of risk becomes essential in a society which is taking leave of the past, of traditional ways of doing things, and which is opening itself to a problematic future” (*Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 111). Luhmann likewise notes that insecurity and security became explicitly thematized problems only after the second half of the 18th century (See his *Social Systems*, pp. 312-313). For a work representative of this issue, see Ulrich Beck’s *Risikogesellschaft: Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986).

hapless differences.⁸⁰ As Giddens puts it, “so far as the self is concerned, *the problem of unification concerns protecting and reconstructing the narrative of self-identity in the face of massive intensional and extensional changes which modernity sets into being.*”⁸¹ This need for “protecting and reconstructing the narrative of self-identity” by the late 18th century is not to be underestimated: it is at this time, Giddens adds, that “the future is recognized to be intrinsically unknowable, and as it is increasingly severed from the past, the future becomes a new terrain—a territory of counterfactual possibility.”⁸² As a such terrain of “counterfactual possibility,” the future harbors a complexity of overwhelming proportions which the past and tradition, defused as they had been by a modern temporality, could no longer buffer or contain—an inauspicious situation to say the least for the sustaining of psychic systems (as Luhmann would put it) or of viable economies of self-identity (to use Giddens’ term) since it is unlikely that these could sustain themselves in the face of a perpetually renewed overhauling of their entire

⁸⁰ A centered subject, so reviled today as some insidious Cartesian, phallogocentric or bourgeois entity, ought to be seen more as a *symptom* of functional differentiation, temporal divergence and other late 18th century developments (not least of which would be the consolidation of a capitalism), rather than as the unavowed *desideratum* of incorrigible logophiliacs, or as descriptive of any actual or past state of affairs. In reference to his historical diagnosis of the late 18th century sense of self, which he describes as self-referential rather than as “centered,” and of the various concepts which he calls a “stopgap measure” to palliate increased complexity, Luhmann notes that “It is no accident that modern concept of the subject began its career at the historical moment when modern European society discovered that it could no longer describe itself in the old categories of a stratified society, its essential forms and essential hierarchy, but could not yet say what was the case instead.” *Social Systems*, p. xl.

⁸¹ *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 189.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 111.

constitution following each contingent encounter with unexpectedness. As the work of Giddens, Charles Taylor, John B. Thompson and others shows,⁸³ the biographical narration of the self into linear, developmental and reflexively sustained sequentiality in fact becomes the only alternative for maintaining a sense of self when, as a result of an open future which eroded the external references to kinship, caste or a divinely sanctioned order of things, the stability and trust needed for reducing complexity can no longer be presupposed.

If the onslaught of the new is kept within manageable proportions after the 18th century, it is because of the increased recourse of systems to reflexivity which, as we saw, “reinforces the identity of the system so that it can survive novel choices and innovations by *reconstructing* its past history as a consistent series of intentions and actions.”⁸⁴ Such a reflexive structuring of the modern self provides the *narratively constituted framework and future-oriented project* in terms of which selections can be made. It enhances in other words the capacity for selecting among an overwhelming proliferation of possibilities no longer held in rein by the sway of the past. As John .B. Thompson puts it in reference to the structure of the self by the late 18th century:

If we understand the self as a symbolic project which the individual shapes and reshapes in the course of his or her life, then we must also see that this

⁸³ Note that narrativist theories of the self, as advanced by (for example) by Ricoeur and Kerby, are conceptually close to those of Giddens and Taylor, but with this crucial difference: they do not *historicize* the narrative structure of self-identity.

⁸⁴ "The Differentiation of Society," p. 239. My emphasis.

project involves a *continuously modifiable set of priorities* which determine the relevance, or otherwise, of experiences or potential experiences. ...We do not relate to all experiences or potential experiences equally, but rather orient ourselves towards these experiences *in terms of the priorities that are part of the project of the self*.⁸⁵

Since no system can maintain a difference between itself and its environment if it relates equally to all fluctuations and changes in its environment, the modern self must operate through a system of relevances which, no longer buttressed by the past, is instead sustained by a future oriented narrative— a narrative, that is, which delimits without

⁸⁵ *The Media and Modernity*, p. 229. Because it is a condition of possibility of experience as a dialectic of continuity and discontinuity and, more important, because it informs the insistence on experience in those Thompsonian inspired cultural theories with which our investigation began, temporality has been at the center of our concerns. This does not imply, however, that the modern increase in complexity and its corollary, the increasingly reflexive structure of modern self-identity, stem exclusively from the late 18th century advent of a divergent temporality. There are of course numerous other no less important variables involved in complexity reduction and self-formation which cannot be addressed here, such the historical changes at work in intersubjectivity and recognition (as addressed by Taylor and Honneth), as well as historical transformations in the production and dissemination of media products (as Elizabeth Eisenstein, Walter Ong and others have suggested). With regard to the rise of the press, John B. Thompson has recently shown in his *The Media and Modernity* the extent to which the proliferation of media products at the turn of the 18th century played a large role in accentuating the reflexivity of the modern self: with the increased circulation of publications, Thompson notes that “the process of self -formation becomes increasingly dependent on access to mediated forms of communication—both printed and, subsequently, electronically mediated forms. ... By opening up the self to new forms of non-local knowledge and other kinds of mediated symbolic material, the development of the media both enriches and accentuates the reflexive organisation of the self. ...Increasingly the self becomes organised as a reflexive project through which the individual incorporates mediated materials (among other things) into a coherent and continuously revised biographical narrative. ... The reflexive organisation of the self becomes increasingly important as a feature of social life—not because it did not exist previously (no doubt it did in some way and to some extent), but because the tremendous expansion of symbolic materials has opened up new possibilities for self-formation and placed new demands on the self in a way and on a scale that did not exist before.” (pp. 211-212).

altogether foreclosing future possibilities, and this precisely because it can accommodate unexpectedness by reflexively turning back upon those “modifiable set of priorities” of which John B. Thompson speaks. The unexpected is in other words delimited by the individual’s biographical narrative– the unexpected can indeed prove disappointing only in terms of what one has come to expect– yet at the same time it can so disrupt a horizon or *Umwelt* that it leads to a reflexive revision of prior compartments, attitudes or assumptions. Characteristic of the narrative structure of the modern self is indeed not only the sequential emplotment of the disparate into narrative continuity, or the coordination of a divergent temporality; at stake in the narratively structured sense of self is also the reflexive turning back of this self upon itself so as to accommodate the unexpected within its economy. As Giddens explains:

Self -identity today is a reflexive achievement. The narrative of self-identity has to be shaped, altered and reflexively sustained in relation to rapidly changing circumstances of social life, on a local and global scale. The individual must integrate information deriving from a diversity of mediated experiences with local involvements in such a way so as to connect future projects with past experiences in a reasonably coherent fashion.⁸⁶

With the past and the given subject to revision, it is in terms of a reflexively revisable history of past operations, as well as in terms of prospective choices and future unexpectedness that the relevance of events is delimited, a horizon circumscribed, complexity thus contained, and a sense of self maintained. Giddens thus tells us with

⁸⁶ *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 215.

good reason that “the reflexive construction of self-identity depends as much on preparing for the future as on interpreting the past.”⁸⁷

This increasingly reflexive structure of the self by the late 18th century can be seen no more clearly than in that late 18th century literary chronotope which was the first to “introduce time into man,” to use Bakhtin’s expression,⁸⁸ yet which until recently has persisted, even if only residually, throughout modernity: the chronotope of the late 18th century *Bildungsroman*.⁸⁹ Even though the early to mid- 18th century biographical novel,

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 85. It must be noted here, however, that while it is true that the modern self, like reflexivity in general, entails a return to the past, such an operation does not merely mimick a premodern temporality in which the future is subsumed by or interpreted in terms of the past. The modern self on the contrary reinterprets the past in terms of the future. As Giddens puts it, “the individual appropriates his past by sifting through it in the light of what is anticipated for an (unorganized) future” (*Modernity and Self- Identity*, p.75). Luhmann also adds that “what is new about modern society lies neither at the causal nor at the normative level. Instead, there has been a change in the temporal horizon that primarily controls present selections. *Present selections are chiefly made with an eye no longer to the past but to future selections.* The present is understood as the past of future, contingent presents; its choices are seen preliminary choices in an area of future contingency, which strengthens chains of selections, brings the present together, no longer with the past, but with the future. *That is why the future becomes explicit as the horizon for making selections.*” “World Time and System History,” pp. 321-322. My emphases.

⁸⁸ “The Bildungsroman and its Significance in the History of Realism.” p. 21.

⁸⁹ Referring to the narrative structure not only of modern literary genres but also of the modern construction of a sense of self-identity, Taylor tells us that “typical forms of narrativity include stories of linear development, progress stories in history, or stories of continuous gain though individual lives and across generations... and they include construals of life as growth... Rather than see life in terms of predefined phases, making a whole whose shape is understood by unchanging tradition, we tell a story of growth towards often unprecedented ends.” (*Sources of the Self*, pp. 105-106). To this Taylor adds that “this mode of self- narration, where the story is drawn from the events in this

along with other “precursors” of the *Bildungsroman*, undeniably construct central characters as a narrative sequence of events, it nevertheless remains that these characters are presented well into the last quarter of the 18th century, as Bakhtin has shown, as steadfast constants around which are clustered peripheral and fickle variables, and not as works in progress which might themselves be subject to change in the face of unexpectedness. While it is true that in the biographical novel, “instead of abstract, sequential heroization, as in the novel of ordeal, the hero is characterized by both positive and negative features (he is not tested, but strives for actual results),” the hero of the biographical novel is nevertheless presented as but an aggregate of features that “are fixed and ready-made, they are given from the very beginning, and throughout the entire course of the novel man remains himself (unchanged). *The events shape not the man*, but his

double sense, as against traditional models, archetypes or prefigurations, is the *quintessentially modern one*, that fits the experience of the disengaged, particular self. It is what emerges in modern autobiography, starting with the great *exempla* of Rousseau and Goethe. And it is what determines the narrative form of the modern novel.... *This mode has been co-substantial with the modern novel from its beginnings in the 18th century until very recently. And it reaches one of its characteristic expressions in the Bildungsroman....*” *Sources of the Self*, p. 289. My emphasis. As the “characteristic expression” of the narrative structure of the modern self, it is hardly surprising, as Moretti has rightly pointed out, that the *Bildungsroman* should have been “the symbolic form that more than any other has portrayed and promoted modern socialization” (*The Way of the World*, p. 10), and that its chronotope should persist, however residually, to this day in most popular cultural forms, from Harlequin romances to Hollywood. In fact, so radically inaugural of modern narrative modes was the *Bildungsroman* that it has occupied a privileged place in major philosophical and historical studies of aesthetics and the novel, from Hegel’s *Aesthetics* to Lukacs’ *Theory of the Novel* and the work of Bakhtin, Goldman, Ian Watt and others.

destiny.”⁹⁰ Moreover, even when change is actually the order of the day in some of the premodern literary chronotopes, any changes in the premodern world, Bakhtin adds, “were peripheral, in no way affecting its foundations.”⁹¹ It is only with the late 18th century novel, *the Bildungsroman* in particular, that a modern future-oriented temporality manifests itself with force,⁹² and that unexpectedness and the new can assume such importance so as to impinge upon and change the constitution of characters who are “forced to become New.”⁹³ As the organisation of society shifts by the late 18th century from premodern stratification to modern functional differentiation, premodern literary chronotopes yield to a specifically modern chronotope which presents the self as a work in progress to be reconstructed anew in the face of the new rather than remain sheltered within a preordained caste, and where “*changes in the hero himself acquire plot significance, and thus the entire plot of the novel is reinterpreted and*

⁹⁰ “The *Bildungsroman* and its Significance in the History of Realism,” p. 19. In fact, Bakhtin goes so far as to add that for literary discourse before the late 18th century *Bildungsroman*, “the permanence and immobility of the hero are the prerequisite to novelistic movement.” My emphasis.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁹² As Bakhtin puts it, because the hero in the *Bildungsroman* is “forced to become New” in the face of unexpected turns of events, “the organising force field held by the future is therefore extremely great here” (“The *Bildungsroman* and its Significance in the History of Realism,” p. 23.) While it is true that in earlier writings, Bakhtin suggests that the decidedly future oriented temporality of novelistic discourse has sporadically surfaced throughout history (as he puts it in “Epic and Novel” (p. 38), “the novel, from the very beginning, developed as a genre that has as its core a new way of conceptualizing time”), he nevertheless acknowledges that the consolidation of a future oriented temporality takes place “with special force and clarity beginning in the second half of the 18th century.” “Epic and Novel,” p. 5.

⁹³ “The *Bildungsroman* and its Significance in the History of Realism,” p. 23

reconstructed.”⁹⁴ In the *Bildungsroman* is registered for the first time in literary discourse what Moretti calls the general modern dynamic of “identity and change, security and metamorphoses”⁹⁵ –the dialectic in other words of continuity and discontinuity at work in the conceptual history of experience particularly after the late 18th century.⁹⁶ Such a changed understanding of how a sense of self is to be forged and maintained is of course reflected not only in the particular genre of the *Bildungsroman*, but also in the very emergence of the category of the aesthetic by the late 18th century. As Taylor notes, in the new cosmological order of the late 18th century, where “the meaning that the natural phenomena bear is no longer defined by the order of nature in itself or by the Ideas which they embody,”but instead is “defined *through the effect of the phenomena on us, in the reactions they awaken,*” aesthetics in general no less than the *Bildungsroman* in particular, stress the manner by which the self is to submit to change and undergo experiences:

The category of the aesthetic itself develops in the eighteenth century, along with a new understanding of natural and artistic beauty, which focussed less on the nature of the object, and *more on the quality of the experience evoked*. The very term ‘aesthetic’ points us to a mode of experience. And this tended to be the focus of various theories of the century, developed by, *inter alia*, the Abbe du Bos, Baumgarten and Kant.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 21. My emphasis.

⁹⁵ *The Way of the World*, p. 9.

⁹⁶ It is indeed no coincidence, as we saw in earlier chapters, that *Bildung* and *Erfahrung* should have had a closely entwined conceptual and etymological history since the late 18th century.

⁹⁷ *Sources of the Self*, p. 299, 373. My emphasis.

Yet it is in the *Bildungsroman* that to be seen for the first time a representative of the modern self which is informed both by a future-oriented receptiveness to the new and by the need for a reflexive integration of the new within the past⁹⁸—a self in other words permeated by reflexivity and prone to undergoing experiences.

As a retrospective reassessment of the past which accommodates the new while at the same time bridging an otherwise disjunctive temporality, reflexivity, then, has not confined itself to the methodological issues of historiography or of textual exegesis, to the self-legitimising manoeuvres of emergent nation states, or to the epistemological hair-splitting of the philosophy of reflection: reflexivity indeed no less permeates the very manner by which a modern sense of self is to be negotiated in the midst of a modern temporality. Once the open future made the self rely more on how it confronts the unexpected than on how it turns to an essence, it is through reflexively maintained biographical narratives that the modern self musters a sense of unification. As Giddens put it, “in the context of a post-traditional order, the self becomes a *reflexive project*”

⁹⁸ It is important to add here that such a future oriented temporality, which has as one of its consequences the fostering of a reflexively constructed sense of self, is not necessarily thematised as such in the *Bildungsroman*. As is the case with chronotopes in general, such a temporality on the contrary informs the construction of the plot rather than lend itself to some direct portrayal. As Bakhtin cautiously adds, aware as he is of the dangers besetting “reflection theories” of literature, temporality in literary discourse is not so much explicitly thematized than it acquires “an essentially compositional and organizational significance.” “The *Bildungsroman* and its Significance in the History of Realism,” p. 26.

and the result is that “the reflexivity of modernity extends into the core of the self.”⁹⁹ Just as modernity, according to Habermas, “can and will no longer borrow the criteria by which it takes its orientation from the models supplied by another epoch,” but is instead “cast back on itself,”¹⁰⁰ likewise the modern individual, Giddens notes, “no longer lives primarily by extrinsic moral precepts but by means of the reflexive organisation of the self.”¹⁰¹ A consequence of modern temporality on strategies of self-formation has in other words been the migration of a sense of self from a set of timeless attributes to what Giddens calls an essentially reflexive process consisting “in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives.”¹⁰² As such, the reflexivity of the modern sense of self refers not so much to the epistemological antics of some self positing entity bent on self knowledge¹⁰³ than it does to the manner by which a coherent

⁹⁹ *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 32.

¹⁰⁰ *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 7.

¹⁰¹ *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 153. Thompson likewise adds that “with the development of modern societies, the process of self-development becomes more reflexive and open ended in the sense that individuals fall back increasingly on their own resources to construct a coherent identity for themselves.” Thompson warns us, however, against interpreting such developments as signs of an emergent “autonomous subject”: on the contrary, modern individuals came increasingly to depend “on a range of social institutions and systems which provide them with the means—both material and symbolic—for the construction of their life-projects.” *The Media and Modernity*, pp. 206, 215.

¹⁰² *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 5.

¹⁰³ Reflection cannot be related to the subject’s self knowledge; it can at best be related to a *sense* of self. Although his argument need not be rehearsed here, Dieter Henrich has indeed shown that the circularity of reflection presupposes the self consciousness it seeks to explain and, as such, it can hardly serve as a viable account of self-consciousness. At best, reflection can “account for an explicit self-experience of

and diachronically extended sense of self-identity might be diachronically maintained in spite of enviroing temporal discontinuity –it refers in other words to how the modern self is to sustain a sense of coherence as it negotiates its sense of identity across time.

4. Experience, Complexity Reduction and Bildung.

As appeals to caste or fate lost their appeal, and as new developments could but undermine the given, the need for a sense of biographical continuity could but become paramount by the mid- to late 18th century– a sense of biographical continuity to be assured through the reflexive turning back upon and reconfiguring of the given and the past so as to accommodate the unexpected and the new. And since the advent of modernity, *one of the names given to such a reflexive process has been experience*. It is indeed just this sort of reflexive manoeuvring that we earlier saw at work not only in the etymological and post-Hegelian conceptual history of experience, but also in the

the self, but it is unable to explain the self-knowledge of a knowing subjectivity.” Dieter Henrich, “Fichte’s Original Insight,” trans. D.R. Lachterman. In *Contemporary German Philosophy*, vol. 1, ed. Christensen *et al.*, (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1982), pp. 15-53, cited in Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror*, p. 69. As Gasché adds, critiques of reflection have of course come from many quarters, beginning with Fichte’s awareness of the inadequacy of self-reflection as an accounting for self-consciousness (as Dieter Henrich has noted), and continuing in the work of Russel and Wittgenstein, to name but a few. For an overview of post-Hegelian critiques of reflection, and for an analysis of the persistence of reflection even in those critiques, see chapter 5 of the *Tain of the Mirror*.

early 19th century literary use of *Erlebnis* before its subsequent appropriation by *Lebensphilosophie*. In the case of the latter, the distinctiveness of *Erlebnis*, as we saw earlier, stems not only from a rupturing of the continuity of the life flow, where nothing is truly experienced, but also from the durable traces or residues that such a rupture leaves behind as a result of not lending itself to seamless integration. By forcing a life course to accommodate something unexpectedly new or foreign to it, *Erlebnis* indeed effectively impinges upon and reflectively restructures this life course. And in the case of the conceptual history of experience and *Erfahrung*, we have seen how it is in conjunction with the increasingly reflexive structure of the modern sense of self that such a history registers a series of semantic shifts, migrating as it does from a concern with the relation between particular incident and universal concept to the problem of the self's confrontation with the new, the unexpected, the incommensurable—the modern self's confrontation in other words with that which it can neither readily assimilate to nor peremptorily dismiss from its horizon. Insofar as issues other than those of empiricist methodology are concerned, the common denominator at hand in the conceptual history of experience after the late 18th century, whether as *Erfahrung* or as *Erlebnis*, as mediate or immediate, has been the manner by which the unexpected and the new are to be reflexively integrated and thus managed within economies of self-formation. Under the guise of experience as a process one undergoes, the new and the unexpected, rather than suffer outright dismissal (as in premodernity) or, conversely, rather than overwhelm and undermine a diachronically extended sense of self (as in late modernity or

postmodernity),¹⁰⁴ instead lend themselves in modernity to reflexive integration within the narrative of the self which, while submitting to possible change, nevertheless retains a minimally coherent sense of identity across time.

It is through such coordinating operations upon a divergent temporality that experience, like reflexivity, participates in the reduction of complexity. The unexpectedness of an open future indeed leads to experience only insofar as is elicited a second manoeuvre which reworks the unexpected into the very biographical narrative of the self that it disrupted—a manoeuvre which prompts to the reflexive reconfiguration of the past and the present so as to accommodate the future and which, in so doing, reduces the complexity that temporal divergence might otherwise incur. Unlike the unexpected of premodernity, which was dismissed outright or fobbed off as a miracle unrelated to earthly going-ons, the unexpected in modernity or, as Nowotny prefers to call it, “surprise,” “indicates that the time-curve of history cannot simply be extrapolated from the past, that there can be discontinuities and breaks”¹⁰⁵—and experience represents the process which can be reduce the surprise, the unexpected and the strange. As Seel puts it:

To undergo an experience always means to react in multiple ways to something which comes upon us and concerns us. For the process of experience, this is revealed in the double character of the sense of strangeness which it arouses: the unsettling of the established attitude is

¹⁰⁴ If, that is, theorists from Fredric Jameson and David Harvey to Baudrillard are to be believed. This issue will be considered in the next chapter.

¹⁰⁵ *Time: The Modern and Postmodern Experience*, trans. Neville Plaice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), p. 44.

endured in the course of a process aiming at *reducing the strangeness of the new which arises*.¹⁰⁶

Such a “process aiming at reducing the strangeness of the new” is none other than the renewed narrativisation of one’s biographical itinerary following a confrontation with unexpectedness. By so reworking the unexpected within a reestablished but altered narrative continuity, “it is experience that best affords us protection from surprises”¹⁰⁷ as Agamben put it, for “to experience something means divesting it of novelty, neutralizing its shock potential.”¹⁰⁸ Experience fosters change through unexpectedness and discontinuity while at the same time reducing such potential complexity through the re-integration of the unexpected within renewed but modified narratives of the self.

True, complexity reduction is not a function specific as such to experience after the late 18th century. Well before the association of experience with problems of self-formation and consciousness, the etymological and conceptual history of experience testifies in one way or another to issues of complexity reduction—generally as a step leading from the manifold to unity, from the particular to the universal, as that which in other words allows for the contingency of the empirical to eventually exhibit the regularity of the universal, or for the disparity of the singular to coalesce into the intelligibility of the concept. If the function of experience in modernity can be

¹⁰⁶ *Die Kunst der Entzweiung*, p. 82. My emphasis.

¹⁰⁷ *Infancy and History*, p. 41.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

summarised, as it has been by James Miller, as a way of wresting coherence from chaos¹⁰⁹ or, to put it in Luhmanian terms, as a strategy of complexity reduction, no less can be said of experience in premodernity, where for example Albertus Magnus defines it as “acceptio universalis in singularibus confusi et permixti.”¹¹⁰ Also true is that the meaning of experience as used to this day was not entirely inaugurated with the advent of modernity: for Aristotle and Bacon no less than for Hegel and Gadamer, experience is linked to the idea of unexpectedness, to that which, whether it potentially leads to the concept (so Aristotle tells us) or contributes to the unfolding of consciousness (as Hegel would have it) or to self-formation (*à la* E.P. Thompson), nevertheless remains initially disturbing because it has not yet been, or proves recalcitrant to being, subsumed within a given horizon or current modes of mediation. But as we have seen, in modernity alone does reflexivity so permeate the structure of the self that the dialectic of continuity and discontinuity of experience becomes a problem for and a central aspect of self-formation, rather than as a mere mishap to be glossed over or as a necessary evil to be endured in the name of the higher end of universal truth. What is specific to the reduction of complexity at hand in experience by the late 18th century is less its role in the uncovering of timeless truths than it is its imbrication in issues of *diachronic self-formation*, of the operations of consciousness in relation to its *changing environment*, of the constitution of horizons of understanding in the face of *new developments*. It is in such a stress on the

¹⁰⁹ See Jay’s analysis of Miller’s *The Passion of Foucault* (New York, 1993) in “The Limits of Limit Experience,” pp.158-160.

¹¹⁰ Cited in Kambartel, “Erfahrung,” p. 610.

future as well as its corollary, a reflexively revisable past, that lies the specificity of the manner by which modern experience participates in the reduction of complexity. If premodern reality is already given and at best subject to quantitative extension, modern reality is *yet to be given*, and thus subject to qualitative transformation.

The relation between such reflexively sustained narratives, complexity reduction and experience, however, cannot be reduced to some operation whereby disparate brute sense data or punctual units of meaning are articulated into the intelligibility of temporally extended narratives. As Kerby put it, it is often mistakenly assumed that “...experience, in accordance with an objective and reductionist view of time, comes initially in units and that philosophy’s task is to propose how these units become linked into a unitary chain.”¹¹¹ One must instead keep in mind, Kerby reminds us, that to claim “experience naturally goes over into narration... is very different than saying that narrative structures are *imposed* on experience.”¹¹² Experience, moreover, is not some pre-discursive unit which need but be duly inserted within a narrative in order for things to be set aright, for the unexpected to be defused, for complexity to be contained and (with diligence and a little luck) for reality to be unveiled. After all, “narrativity is a principle of intelligibility and not simply a vehicle for a pre-given and evident sense. ... Narrative expression is not mere communication of information but is a constitutive and

¹¹¹ *Narrative and the Self*, p. 16.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 43.

synthetic activity”¹¹³ – a synthetic activity which, as we have seen, relates past present and future not in order to reflect present reality or recapture an actual past state of affairs,¹¹⁴ and still less in order to merely sequentialize empirical brute sense data into conceptually intelligible narratives, but instead in order to delimit the horizon from which selections will be made and complexity reduced, as well as to establish the threshold where expectations can be violated or disappointed.

As a constitutive synthetic activity, the role of experience in narrative operations of complexity reduction stems not from its passive submission to given narratives, but rather from its *active galvanising into further narration*. Indeed, we have seen that experience can be said to have taken place only insofar as the unexpected goads or prods into renewed narrative synthetic activity which leads to changed orientations. If experience disrupts prior meaning, this negativity, as Gadamer has shown, also harbors a “particularly productive meaning:”¹¹⁵ the negation of the given is not just left at that but

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 92.

¹¹⁴ This holds for the narrative operations not only of the modern self, but also of the various disciplines purporting to buttress a sense of both individual and collective self-identity, as can be seen for example in forms of psychotherapy and historiography. With regard to psychoanalysis, Kerby tells us that “Psychologically, a narrative is aimed not at achieving a mirror image of one’s history, but at generating a plausible account of the details of that history and allowing one to have an understanding of oneself that facilitates the overcoming of psychic blockages and allows one to function satisfactorily in the present.” Likewise, with regard to historiography, “Narrative truth is thus more a matter of facilitating understanding and integration than of generating strict historical verisimilitude” (*Narrative and the Self*, pp. 89-92).

¹¹⁵ *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 359.

on the contrary incites to the active production of new meaning, different orientations and reflexively revised narratives which take the unexpected into account and which, in so doing, manage complexity. Because it is within the parameters of a future oriented project or narrative that expectations are formulated and thus subject to eventual disappointment, experience itself is delimited by the very narratives it disrupts; at the same time, however, it is precisely as a result of such disruptions that narratives are formulated and reformulated to begin with. As Edward Bruner put it, the relation of experience to its narration is a dialectical or dialogical one, for “the performance [of cultural expression] does not release a pre-existing meaning [of experience] that lies dormant in the text.... Rather, the performance itself is constitutive.”¹¹⁶ Gianni Vattimo likewise adds in his account of experience that “the formation of the concept of the thing, the search for the *mot juste* for a given experience, are not so much efforts towards the recording of experiences already completed, to fix them or communicate them, than they are *constitutive* of the experience as such.”¹¹⁷ Experience, then, is not a pre-narrative or prediscursive entity lying in wait for its judicious articulation; it instead stands for the fissure within given modes of mediation or narration which prods or goads towards articulation and which, as such, as much constitutes as it is constituted by such an articulation. *Experience prompts to renewed narration rather than to the narration of*

¹¹⁶ “Experience and its Expressions,” p. 11. See also Stanley Aronowitz and William Difazio, *The Jobless Future: Sci-Tech and the Dogma of Work* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), pp. 174-175.

¹¹⁷ See Vattimo’s introduction to the Italian translation of Gadamer’s *Wahrheit und Methode: Verita et Metodo*, trans. a cura di Gianni Vattimo (Bompiani, Milan, 1972).

the new, and it is coterminous with, not subsequent or prior to, its narrativisation – experience is in other words *both the occasion for and the result of narrative emplotment*.¹¹⁸ As Roger D. Abrahams put it while discussing Dewey’s notion of experience: “An experience not only involves an intensity of feeling that takes it out of the flow of the everyday but also a framing operation by which the ongoing activity is translated into a reportable story.”¹¹⁹ Because such renewed narratives are reflexively modified so as to accommodate the unexpected while at the same time delimiting the horizon which can be unexpectedly ruptured to begin with, experience turns out to be a reflexive process which helps preserve the self from semantic and sensory overload while at the same time sustaining a self’s sense of diachronic continuity. It is in this sense that experience participates in the reduction of complexity.

In the midst of temporal discontinuity and temporalised complexity, experience fosters the synthetic operations of renewed narration in the face of unexpectedness and, as such, it could but play a crucial role in the forging of a modern sense of self. By making the self rely more on how it confronts the unexpected rather than how it appeals to a timeless essence, the opening of the future not only invited, but actually *required*, a more pronounced role for experience as a dialectic of continuity and discontinuity: it is henceforth less through eschatological timelessness, through an immutable exemplary

¹¹⁸ With good reason Gadamer considers experience not so much in terms of a relentless Hegelian dialectic than as a hermeneutic process.

¹¹⁹ “Ordinary and Extraordinary Experience,” p. 61.

past, or through the paratactic performances of oral culture, than it is through experience, that is, through the incorporation of unexpectedness within the continuity of a reflexively revisable narrative, that the modern sense of self reckons with discontinuity and unexpectedness while at the same time maintaining a diachronically extended sense of its identity across time.¹²⁰ Moreover, the need for self narration could but become paramount once the self increasingly presents itself as a problematic “social and linguistic construct, a nexus of meaning rather than an unchanging entity”:¹²¹ such self narration, Kerby explains,

is what first raises our temporal existence out of the chaos of memorial traces and unthematic activity, constituting thereby a self as its implied subject. This self is, then, the implied subject of a narrated history. Stated another way, in order to be we must be *as* something or someone, and this someone that we take ourselves to be is the character delineated in our personal lives.¹²²

¹²⁰ It should be noted here that just as experience, as we saw in the second chapter, need not entail cataclysmic mutations but can instead refer to mere changed nuances in orientation, likewise do narratives not necessarily involve one's entire life itinerary—they can instead merely refer to one's usual way of dealing with particular situations. Such narratives, furthermore, need not (and indeed tend not) to be consciously told—they are instead implicitly present so as to assure “self-identity in difference,” as Kerby puts it, by “framing the flux of particular experiences by a broader story.” As Kerby further adds, “we often undergo experiences in narrative sequences quite automatically, without choice. These may not be the full-blown narratives of autobiography of stories, but they serve in the same way to generate an understanding, direction, and unity in our lives.” *Narrative and the Self*, pp. 46- 47.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 34. This is not to insinuate that the self became discursively constructed only within modernity; implied instead is that such a discursive construction, formerly glossed over by an immutable order of things and by a timelessly stratified social hierarchy, becomes problematic only with the advent of modernity.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 109.

Within the future oriented temporality of modernity, however, such narratives of the self are not told once and for all but must on the contrary lend themselves to perpetual modification so as to accommodate unexpectedness and new developments: individual biographies, Giddens notes, “must *continually integrate events* which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing ‘story’ about the self.”¹²³ As a process whereby encounters with unexpectedness galvanise into renewed narrative activity, experience becomes essential in the self narrating operations of the modern self, let alone of the modern self as such—it is after all through such self narrations that implied subjects are forged and sustained yet at the same time modified as needed so as to provide the self with a sense of continuity and coherence across the temporal manifold. If experience, then, is to be seen as the “fodder” or material out of which the self constructs its narratives, this must be understood not in the sense that it provides the discrete units or building blocks out of which plots are constructed, but rather because it contributes to the narrative of the modern self *by furthering the synthetic activity of narratives* rather than by passively submitting to given narratives.

Once the self becomes by the late 18th century an open project rather than a static entity, experience comes into play as a mechanism for reducing complexity and maintaining continuity, *while at the same time promoting a sense of future oriented growth*. With the advent of modernity, experience indeed increasingly refers to the

¹²³ *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 54. My emphasis.

manner by which the new and unexpected of an open future both disrupt the individual's horizon or biographically narrated sense of self while at the same time enriching it through revised and renewed self-narrations. Those undergoing experience, in other words, are not left unchanged— it is in this sense that ought to be understood our description in the second chapter of experience as that which “leaves traces” testifying to its having taken place, to its eventness.¹²⁴ As a cumulative process of renewed self narration in the face of the new which leaves enduring traces, as the fodder in other words out of which the modern self constructs itself as a future oriented self narrative, it is hardly surprising that the etymological and post-Hegelian conceptual history of experience should exhibit an affinity with notions of self-formation, of incremental growth and of comparative enrichment, all of which tally with those other late 18th century semantic shifts that we earlier saw at work in concepts such as *Bildung* and ordeal. That experience should be attributed so central a role in modern self formation is not due to issues of temporal continuity and complexity reduction alone; it is also because the self is permeated by a sense of future oriented growth (rather than delimited in advance by the teleological fulfilment of an inherent essence) that experience came to the fore as an essential component of self-formation.

¹²⁴ As we saw in the second chapter, experience has the structure of an event, for it is in the tension between the given and the unexpected, the routine and the surprising, the old and the new, that experience comes about so as to not leave one unchanged.

To be sure, growth was not unknown in premodernity—but only in modernity does growth designate a truly future oriented and transformative process as opposed to, say, the Aristotlian notion of growth as the teleologically ordained actualisation and completion of the Form which lies in germ in natural entities. As Bakhtin notes, such a premodern model of growth, when transposed into the dynamics of self-formation, actually represents an “‘inversion in a character’s development’ that excludes any authentic becoming in character. A man’s entire youth is treated as nothing but a preliminary to his maturity.” At hand in such a model of growth is hardly the open future of modernity: struggles, trials and disappointed expectations, rather than entail a revision of earlier horizons and lead to experience, instead merely serve to “strengthen qualities of a character that are already present, but create nothing new. The base remains the stable essence of an already completed character.”¹²⁵ But by the late 18th century, as Lowe observes, “contemporaries experienced life as a developmental escalator, with maturation an unrealizable goal.”¹²⁶ It is also at this time, Taylor adds, that “a human life is seen as manifesting a potential which is also being shaped by this manifestation; it is not just a matter of copying an external model or carrying out an already determinate formulation.”¹²⁷ Furthermore, if *Erweiterung*— another term often used at the time of Herder in conjunction with *Bildung* and experience¹²⁸— can be considered as the single

¹²⁵ “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel,” p. 140.

¹²⁶ *History of Bourgeois Perception*, p. 52.

¹²⁷ *Sources of the Self*, p. 375.

¹²⁸ See Berman, *L'Épreuve de l'étranger*, p. 61.

most appropriate term which designates how the modern self reflexively constructs and sustains itself in the face of an open future, the same can be said of modernity as a whole, where *Erweiterung* no less informs the history of ideas, from national literary historiography to aesthetics. With regard to the very structure of the cosmos, Lovejoy notes that “by the late 18th century...the cosmical order was coming to be conceived not as an infinite static diversity, but as a process of increasing diversification”—in other words as future oriented growth.¹²⁹ Such a “demand for diversity” can likewise be found in Schiller’s *Stofftrieb* which, as Lovejoy further notes, “necessarily manifests itself in the life of a incomplete and temporal being as a *perpetual impulsion towards change, towards the enrichment of experience through innovation.*”¹³⁰ This was of course to reach paroxysmal proportions within certain currents of German Romanticism, where exhortations, as Lovejoy puts it, to “perpetual transcendence of the already- attained, for unceasing expansion”¹³¹ became commonplace. It also informs the narratives of nation formation, where literary history from the early 19th century to this day has often been summoned as a testimony to the future -oriented unfolding of national identity¹³² —a model of growth which persists even in recent variants of cultural studies where, although terms such as *Volk* may have been jettisoned, and although the history of

¹²⁹ *The Great Chain of Being*, p. 296.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 302. My emphasis.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 306.

¹³² In this regard, see for example chapter 4 of Jusdanis’ *Belated Modernity and Aesthetic Culture*.

national identity has yielded to the micro-histories of subaltern groups and groupuscules, the self appointed task of the subaltern historian of the last few decades can be summarized along Cochran's lines:

...The subaltern historian combs the past to identify moments of 'autonomous initiative' on the part of subaltern groups; one might almost say, to identify inklings of self-consciousness that according to the underlying understanding of history will later emerge in full force. Knowingly or unknowingly, much of so-called oppositional theory, history of the 'people,' or the empirical histories of daily life, dating from the last fifty years, share the basic assumptions of this theory of history.¹³³

But although future oriented growth has permeated modernity as a whole, from realms economic to concerns aesthetic, it is experience which has most frequently named that process, insofar as self-formation is at stake, whereby encounters with unexpectedness entail fortification and enrichment. And such an affinity between experience and *Bildung* is not specific to the late 18th century: it informs those strains in Cultural Studies and subaltern historiography which wager on experience as a means towards consolidating and furthering subaltern specificity as a future oriented task. It is with good reason that Taylor has suggested that there is "a deep continuity between us and the romantic era."¹³⁴

By the mid to late 18th century, then, the modern self, at first manifesting itself within a limited bourgeois class, but eventually extending itself to the rest of the

¹³³"Culture in its Sociohistorical Dimension" *Boundary 2* 21:2 (1994): p. 141.

¹³⁴ *Sources of the Self*, p. 429

population over the following two centuries,¹³⁵ shunned the dictates of caste, the strictures of fate or the timeless decrees of received wisdom and tradition in order instead to reflexively construct itself as an open ended and perpetually revisable project. But while it is true that the role of reflexivity in issues of self-formation is historically contingent, and while it is also true that reflexivity cannot serve as a viable basis for epistemological ambitions,¹³⁶ reflexivity can nevertheless be considered as an anthropological category, and this much in the manner of the Koselleckian categories of *Erfahrungsraum* and *Erwartungshorizont*: just as these latter categories can be considered as anthropological constants which historically vary only in terms of how they are coordinated with one another, likewise is reflexivity a constant (premodernity was hardly altogether bereft of reflexivity)¹³⁷ which nevertheless historically varies in terms of the centrality attributed to

¹³⁵ The late 18th century bourgeois class origins of a modern sense of self, as well as a *compte rendu* of the implications of such an origin for the late 20th century, will be dealt with in the next chapter.

¹³⁶ For more on this issue see *The Tain of the Mirror*, p. 69. Also to be heeded in this context is Osborne's reading of Gadamer, in which he warns us that reflection ought not to be seen as an attribute of the subject, but rather as one of its conditions of possibility: "reflexivity", he tells us, is but the "structure of the relation into which the present must enter with the past in order for memory to be possible—an external condition of subjectivity, rather than its self positing ground." *The Politics of Time*, p. 129.

¹³⁷ If unexpectedness (let alone the reflexivity required for containing it) was not altogether absent from premodernity, it was nevertheless kept within manageable proportions. As we saw earlier, premodern society was dominated by what Luhmann calls a "normative" approach to the new whereby prior dispositions or orientations are maintained *in spite* of conflicting evidence, disappointments or unexpected turns of events—the given is after all divinely sanctioned and thus hardly subject to revision. From the lack of a premodern future oriented temporality ought not to be inferred, then, the lack of unexpectedness, let alone the lack of a recourse to reflexivity so as to manage it. As Giddens put it, "Tradition offers time in a manner which *restricts* [and not which

it in the construction and sustaining of a sense of self. *And one of the names given to such a reflexive process, insofar as issues of self-formation are concerned, has been experience.* It is indeed as a result of the manner by which reflexivity impinged on the very structure of the modern sense of self that the dialectic of continuity and discontinuity of experience came to play an accentuated role in the constitution of modern self identity. And experience has come to designate since the advent of modernity that reflexive process which, in the name of a diachronically coherent sense of self, and through the selective integration of the unexpected within the individual's psychic economy, manages the complexity of a disorienting abundance of choices stemming from an open future. Experience, like reflexivity, is in other words essentially a matter of temporal coordination and complexity reduction; but unlike the general applicability of reflexivity, experience reckons specifically with the mediation between an individual's estranged past and uncertain future so as to assure the temporal continuity required for a coherent sense of self.

abolishes] the openness of counterfactual futures." *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 48. By the late 18th century, however, the unexpected or, as Giddens prefers to phrase it, "counterfactual futures," so besieged the modern self that reflexivity became not only a thematised problem but also an essential operation in the sustaining of self-identity along a diachronic axis—a reflexive operation which increasingly came to be dubbed "experience."

CHAPTER V

Experience Diagnosed

1. Swallowing the Pill of Historicity

A confluence of socio-historical vectors so impinged on the process of self-constitution, then, that by the mid to late 18th century the self increasingly becomes narrativisable in terms of events or, as Taylor put it, as a “chain of happenings,” rather than as a “story ready-made from the canonical models and archetypes.”¹ And these events or “happenings,” insofar as they are reflexively reworked into one’s sense of self and thus do not leave one unchanged, are what experience is all about. At this point it is legitimate to ask whether still holds the continuity between the late 18th century and the late 20th century noted by Taylor –whether in other words are still with us today those late 18th century socio-historical conditions of possibility for an accentuated role of experience and reflexivity in the forging of a sense of self. After all, although experience began some two centuries ago to assume an accentuated role in the constitution of self identity, such a role appeared self-evident at the time and hardly sparked widespread controversy or bitter recriminations. This is in stark contrast, however, with the *Erfahrungshunger* decades some two centuries later which have witnessed ardent manifestos and vitriolic polemics on the matter of experience—polemics so strident that one cannot help but suspect that something more ominous is afoot than a mere obsession with semantic

¹ *Sources of the Self*, p. 289.

rectitude or conceptual correctness. Is the insistence on experience since the 1970s a denial of the eroded role of experience in self-formation, just as current resurgent nationalisms are a reaction formation to the erosion if not the demise of the nation state in the face of transnationalized capital? Is this insistence on the contrary an index of the increased importance of experience in modern (or late modern or postmodern) self-identity? Does this insistence testify to the emergence of a new subject or does it instead portend the demise of the subject? Such are the questions raised by the *Erfahrungshunger* decades.

These are hardly idle questions. At stake is indeed the very condition of possibility of the modern sense of self in which experience plays a vital role—a role which for the last two centuries has helped contain complexity by fostering a sense of temporal continuity framed in terms of future oriented growth. Suspicion has been growing over the last two decades, however, over the extent to which are adequate to the current socio-historical situation the historical developments of modernity upon which are predicated appeals to experience in the name of subaltern specificity and self-identity. Whether they are to be seen as the result of the cultural contradictions (as Daniel Bell would have it) or of the cultural logic (as Jameson would maintain) of late capitalism, or as the outcome of a modernity either exacerbated into its purest form or *surmodernité*, or evacuated by a new era or post-modernity, the last twenty years have indeed witnessed considerable systemic socio-economic transformations, and death certificates (or, at the very least, doctor notes attesting to serious health problems) have

accordingly, rightly or wrongly, for better or for worse, been lavishly meted out to modernist leitmotifs, from ideology, the nation state, history and temporal continuity to the “centered” or “Cartesian” subject and the phallo-centric ways of oedipally forged libidinal economies. As just such a modernist leitmotif, experience, then, may turn out to involve more than issues regarding its suitability as a basis for counter-hegemonic self-formation or group specificity, or as an enclave impervious to strong structural determination or dominant ideology,² or even as a viable cultural, political or sociological category; experience may instead turn out to be a problem revolving around whether it is in fact still possible, whether, as Agamben suggested in his variation on a Benjaminian theme, contemporary man’s “incapacity to have and communicate experiences is perhaps one of the few self-certainties to which he can lay claim.”³

² In fact, as Jameson has repeatedly argued throughout his writings, the individual subject has itself become so discontinuous that the temporal coordination, let alone the ideological narrativisation, of its sense of self, has become quite pointless. If ideology, then, can be considered as dead or dying, it is not (as end-of-ideology ideology would have it) because there has never been such a thing and that we have finally been accordingly enlightened; nor is it because there has been a loss of faith in metanarratives (indeed, the neo-liberal, nationalist and various *völkisch* metanarratives have rarely fared better); rather, it is because ideology, whose fate is tied, as are so many other modernist phenomena, to the structure of modern self-identity, no longer matters once this self-identity itself succumbs to historical transformation. But since Minerva’s owl apparently persists in spreading its wings at dusk, it is only once ideology no longer makes a difference that groupuscules become obsessed with it in the manner of a child with a newly found toy.

³ *Infancy and History*, p. 13.

Such a line of questioning is not unwarranted. After all, if an accentuated role of experience in self-formation historically emerged, then likewise can such a role historically decline. What is needed at this point, then, is not so much that be swallowed the pill of conceptual rectitude than be swallowed instead the pill of historicity—the pill in other words of the historicity of those very concepts which designate the no less historically contingent processes at work, for the last two centuries, in the forging of a modern sense of collective and individual self-identity. Yet at hand in much theorizing on experience in the *Erfahrungshunger* decades to this day has precisely been the propensity for hypostatizing as psychologically or anthropologically innate, or as trans-historically given, that which is on the contrary socio-culturally specific and historically contingent and which, as such, ought instead to be considered in terms of its socio-historical conditions of possibility. In an era where until recently ahistorical formalist or textualist considerations have held considerable sway over the humanities, it is of course hardly surprising that much cultural theorizing, as Schulte-Sasse emphasizes, should be “characterized by inadmissible metahistorical generalizations.”⁴ A similar denial of the historicity of self-formation, let alone of the role played therein by experience, has of course been notoriously characteristic, Craig Calhoun rightly tells us, of “many of the ‘new social movements’ in which experience is made the pure ground of knowledge, the basis of an essentialized standpoint of critical awareness.”⁵ This failure to historicize the

⁴ “Theory of Modernism versus Theory of the Avant-Garde”, p.103, n. 64.

⁵ “Social Theory and the Public Sphere,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*, p. 468, n. 45.

role of experience in self-formation may be understandable, say, for the particularist identity politics of subaltern groupuscules—these have after all, as Jameson notes, been so materially, temporally and culturally disenfranchised that it is beyond their ken to cognitively map beyond the short term minutiae of immediacy or the easily assimilable soundbites of populist or postmodernist slogans;⁶ such ahistorical manoeuvring on the part of theoretical enterprises, however, whether this stems from *mauvaise foi*, as Jameson would maintain, or whether this be symptomatic of the times, as Huysen would more charitably suggest, is a dubious strategy which informs the impasse against which such theorizing must inevitably stumble. Indeed, some recent strains in Cultural or Subaltern Studies, which resort to socio-cultural analyses essentially in order, as David

⁶The expression “populist postmodernist slogans” refers here not to the work, as such, of certain theorists identified with postmodernist thought, but instead to the vulgarisation of such work by well-meaning but misinformed disciples—disciples for whom general formulas tend to serve as a substitute for sustained argumentation, if not as a subterfuge from an active engagement with, or at least a reading knowledge of, the very philosophies they are so eager to debunk but have yet to grasp. In fact, it is interesting to note here that much of such second-rate postmodernist sloganeering actually mimics the main stream media defence of economic neoliberalism. In the latter case, a series of binary oppositions (such as “flexible labour vs. rigidity,” or “Free Market vs. totalitarian governmental intrusion” are so presented so as to appear as the only alternatives from which to choose, yet which are replete with social and historical presuppositions. And of course the question is begged as to which term ought to be selected: who in his right mind would indeed openly favour “rigid” over “flexible,” or “totalitarian” over “free”? Likewise with second-rate postmodernist sloganeering, which presents us with such Manichaeic oppositions as “difference vs. totality” and “dialogic vs. monological.” Although this issue cannot be addressed here, it is interesting to add in passing that many have suggested that the similarity between neoliberal market ideology and certain postmodernist and deconstructionist strains in theory is not coincidental, but on the contrary stems from their structural affinity. In this regard, see for example Xiaoying Wang’s “Derrida, Husserl, and the Structural Affinity between the ‘Text’ and the ‘Market.’” *New Literary History* 26 (1995): 261-282.

Harvey put it, to “reconstruct and represent the voices and experiences of their subjects,”⁷ constitute but so many projects which, however commendable their intentions, and however impeccable their political pedigrees, are doomed to failure if some of the very premisses on which they rest (such as the centrality of experience in self-formation) are far from being transhistorically given but are instead exposed to the vicissitudes of historical change and, like all things historical, susceptible to disappearance or, at the very least, to profound transformation. As such, the difficulties besetting the Thomsonian appeal to experience shift from a conceptual problem to a historical issue.

The point here, however, is not to settle such a historical issue by either celebrating or lamenting the persistence or the erosion of experience as a constitutive element of modern self-formation; the point here is instead to merely *shift the burden of proof*. Rather than *presume* the continuing centrality of experience in matters of self-formation, those who would appeal to experience must instead first demonstrate the extent to which still subsist, today, the very socio-historical conditions of possibility of such a role for experience. And such a burden is, well, quite burdensome—to say the least. Indeed, one such condition of possibility—the future oriented temporality of modernity—has since the 1970s become the centre of much speculation: if there has been one particular issue which has commanded minimal consensus, and this in spite divergent stances on other matters, it has been that modern temporality, along with the narrative

⁷*The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 48.

mediation of its discrepant past and future into the semblance of continuity, is either dead or dying, or at the very least undergoing a fundamental mutation. Because it is in conjunction with the consolidation of modern future oriented temporality that experience assumed a more pronounced role in self-formation, any change in the former can but occasion consequent changes in the latter and, as such, the current status of experience in matters of self-formation must first be at least tentatively diagnosed before experience can be appealed to. It may not be the place here to establish whether experience continues to occupy a central role in issues of self-identity, or whether the future oriented temporality upon which it is predicated has been as functional over the last two decades as it has been over the last two centuries; nevertheless, it is legitimate to at least raise such questions and, in order to do so, to *to have as working hypothesis that what may have held sway for the better part of modernity may no longer be prevalent today.*

2. The Extended Present.

Such a working hypothesis is not arbitrary—particularly with regard to the current status of modern future oriented temporality. After some two centuries of predominance, the future, after all, has not been faring so well over the last two to three decades. Some tell us that the future has already arrived or, as Jean Baudrillard put it in one his more apocalyptically tinged late 1980s essays, that “the year 2000 has already happened,” and

that we must “confront the absence of the future and of the glacial time which awaits us”⁸—a situation in which, as Steven Best and Douglas Kellner add in reference to Baudrillard’s oracular declarations, we confront “a new, futureless future in which no decisive event can await us, because all is finished, perfected, and doomed to infinite repetition.”⁹ Those of a more neo-liberal temper, for whom the invisible hand of the Market is as eternal a law as is that of gravity, tell us that History itself, after a few peripatetic delays, has come to an end, or rather, to *its* end, its *telos*—the Market;¹⁰ others of Marxist persuasion tell us that the transition from diachronically extended Fordism to synchronically organized flexible accumulation has so compressed space and time that the capacity itself for sustained future orientedness has disintegrated over the last two decades;¹¹ we are told by others still that so disjointed and dispersed has become the postmodern sense of self that biographical coherence, let alone future orientedness and the sense of temporal extendedness it demands, have simply fallen prey to generalized entropy. Such an elimination of the future, or rather, of the propensity for future orientedness, not only haunts the corridors of theory and academia but also manifests itself in the recent proliferation of regressive as opposed to future oriented political

⁸ “The Year 2000 Has Already Happened” in *Body Invaders*, Arthur and Marilouise Kroker, eds. (London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1988), p. 43.

⁹*Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1991), p.134.

¹⁰This is of course Fukayama’s infamous (yet strangely influential) thesis.

¹¹Such is David Harvey’s thesis, expounded at length in the now classic and annually, if not bi-annually, reprinted *The Condition of Postmodernity*.

projects—regressive socio-political projects embodied not only by those fundamentalist, traditionalist and nationalist movements which with their tales of decline would have us seek redemption in a return to uncontaminated past origins, but also by various particularist identity-schemes and neo-ethnic tribalisms whose politics of identity are predicated on what Andreas Huyssen has recently diagnosed as a temporal shift in utopian imagination from its futuristic pole towards memory and the past.¹² Barbara Adam, in short, may very well have a point when she tells us in her survey of recent theories of time that “our contemporary approach to the future has shifted from colonisation to something resembling elimination.”¹³ Regardless of how or why modern future oriented temporality has been considerably manhandled as of late, the consensus nevertheless remains, as a piece of graffiti recently scrawled on a Berlin house wall puts it, that “the future is no longer what it used to be.”¹⁴ But while there is of course much disagreement about the actual causes or consequences of what many consider to be the eclipse of future orientedness, these shall not be addressed here. Addressed instead will be a problem internal to the very dynamic of modern temporality itself— a problem which, when pushed to the limits of its own inexorable logic, paradoxically transforms the very future orientedness to which it owes its existence into a futureless extended present: *the*

¹² *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*, (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp.13-35.

¹³ *Time and Social Theory* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1990), p. 140.

¹⁴ *Time: The Modern and Postmodern Experience*, p.50.

problem of the new and the unexpected, and the increased complexity and temporal acceleration to which they give rise.

We have already seen how the unexpected and the new unleashed by an open future have as their corollary the need for complexity reduction, and that reflexivity, when seen as a historical phenomenon rather than as an epistemological issue, has been a response to just such a corollary. Just as the reflexivity of modernity, from historiography to the formation of nations, can be seen as a process whereby the new is heeded while at the same time being contained through its integration within a reflexively revised temporal continuum, likewise does experience refer to the integration of unexpectedness within a supersedable past, a provisional present and an indeterminate future—except that experience refers more specifically to processes of self-formation, that is, to the manner by which unexpectedness prods towards renewed narrativisations of a sense of self. Unexpectedness and the new, in other words, *not only allowed* experience to occupy a more central position in self-formation; lest the economy of modern self-identity lose its viability, and in order to insure that a system (whether social or psychic) differentiate itself from rather than dissipate into its environment, *they also required* the reflexive dynamic of experience as a means of complexity reduction.

The status of the new has considerably changed over the last few decades, however. Indeed, if Daniel Bell could confidently claim, in an observation which has since become commonplace, that specific to modernity as a whole, and to modern art in

particular, is a relentless orientation to the future, a “dominant impulse toward the new and original,”¹⁵ and a search for the disruption of present horizons, and if he could still claim only a few decades ago that the period spanning the end of World War II to the 1970s represents but the extension of the new from aesthetic considerations of the modernist avant-garde, and from a limited elite class, to all facets of life and to increasing segments of the population,¹⁶ these observations can hardly be said to apply to the last three decades. With regard to the arts and architecture, not only is the new no longer the *summum bonum* of aesthetic endeavour, replaced as it has been by ironic pastiche and collages of citations, but likewise in popular cultural productions, from Harlequin Romances to Hollywood blockbusters, does the impulse to innovation yield instead to the repetition of formulae and to citations of the past, as can be seen in the growing popularity of would-be historical films, from *Brave-Heart* to *Titanic*. Even with regard to individual self-identity of the last few decades one can detect, as has done Andreas Huyssen, a shift in temporal orientation from the future to the past, as can be seen for example in the “obsessive self-musealisation *per* video recorder,” and an increased interest in genealogical roots.¹⁷

¹⁵*The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, p. 33.

¹⁶ Bell is of course not alone in maintaining that the 1940s to the 1970s, the *Trente Glorieuses* of Keynesianism or what some call “welfare capitalism” or “Fordism,” represents the percolation to the population at large of that which for the preceding two centuries had been confined to a small elite bourgeois class. See for example Alain Ehrenberg’s *L’individu incertain* (Paris: Calmann-Lévi, 1995).

¹⁷*Twilight Memories*, p.14.

Such a shift is of course somewhat perplexing. “How do we evaluate the paradox that novelty in our culture,” Huyssen wonders, “is ever more associated with the past rather than with future expectation?”¹⁸ This is both the right and the wrong question to ask—and Huyssen is fully aware of this. On the one hand, recent changes in temporality testify not so much to the attenuation than to the *exacerbation* of the new and the unexpected, and this to the point that, paradoxically, the new is no longer new, the unexpected has become what is most expected, and the future has become *passé*. Characteristic of unexpectedness and the new since the 1970s has indeed been their exponential acceleration: over the last three post-Fordist or post-Keynesian decades, the steady expansion of long-term investment and relative predictability and stability in employment have yielded to the instantaneous and unexpected mobility of capital, an exponentially accelerated turnover rate in the production and consumption of commodities and cultural products, and an increasingly rapid obsolescence of goods, services and skills in favour of unbridled innovation—a tendency to be expected of a modern temporality in which, as Huyssen observes,

our fascination with the new is always already muted, for we know that it tends to include its own vanishing, the foreknowledge of its obsolescence in its very moment of appearance. The time span of presence granted the new shrinks and moves toward the vanishing point.¹⁹

So unbridled has become innovation, and so overwhelming has become the new that “a present geared to accelerated innovation is beginning to devour the future,” as Helga

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 5-6.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 26.

Nowotny puts it, for “the future is disposed of as if it were the present, and an extended present is thereby produced.”²⁰ The future in an extended present is neither smothered, as in premodernity, nor a dominant organising temporal phenomenon, as in modernity; instead, it has *exhausted itself* as a result of unbridled innovation. But if by virtue of its very ubiquity the new has eroded future orientedness, it has not, on the other hand, opened the door to premodern forms of past-oriented temporality. For all their apparent past-orientedness, current “returns” to the past represent not the resurgence of the premodern enslavement of the present by an exemplary past, but instead turn out to be but aestheticized *enhancements of the present*, and merely testify, as Harvey notes in his diagnosis of post-Fordist temporality, to an “ability to plunder history and absorb whatever it finds there as some aspect of the present”²¹ : past events in such a temporality indeed constitute a mere repertoire of equally significant events from which can be gleaned citations and references according to present whim, and “through films, television, books, and the like,” Harvey adds, citing Aldo Rossi’s *Architecture and the City*, “history and past experience are turned into a seemingly vast archive which is ‘instantly retrievable and capable of being consumed over and over again at the push of a button.’ ”²² If unbridled unexpectedness and innovation undermine future orientedness, they no less undermine the presence of the past: without a discrepancy between the

²⁰ *Time: The Modern and Postmodern Experience*, pp. 11, 52-53.

²¹ *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 54.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 85.

future and the present, there are few opportunities for perturbing the given and, as such, the past can but present itself as an extension of rather than as distinct from the given.²³ In a temporality both deprived of a divergence between present and future, and bereft of a past that differs from immediate present whim, the future and the past can hardly be said to extend beyond the exigencies of what appears to be an ubiquitous present. There appears to be, to use Kluge's phrase, "an assault by the present on the rest of time."²⁴ Most descriptive, then, of the temporality to be expected from an exacerbation of unexpectedness and the new over the last few decades is not some compensatory resurgence of a premodern past oriented temporality; the new, rather than disappear in favour of the past, has instead become so prevalent that both past and future orientedness have collapsed into what Nowotny has aptly dubbed an "extended present."

What is striking here is that for all the ubiquity of unexpectedness and innovation, from unexpected global events to accelerated cultural and commodity production, the effect should be not the reinforcement but rather the erosion of the very

²³This can indeed be seen no more clearly than in the ambient neoliberal metanarrative of the last three decades, which have edified to the stature of natural law, if not to the heights of theologically sanctioned truth, the market precepts promulgated some two centuries ago by Adam Smith, and this in spite of some two centuries of intervening historical developments which had debunked such a philosophy, from and the revolutionary ferment of 1830, 1848 and 1870, to the New Deal of social democracy ushered in as a corrective to the Great Depression, and which gave us the *Trente Glorieuses* of Keynesian-inspired socio-economic policy.

²⁴ Foreword to Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience*, p. xxxv.

future oriented temporality with which it was once entwined. How did such a paradox come about? After all, the unexpectedness and the new of an open future are coterminous with modernity, as are also the related issues of temporal acceleration and increased complexity— in fact, it is precisely in conjunction with such phenomena over the last two centuries that future orientedness was inaugurated and consolidated, not eliminated and dispersed. The constant threat of being overwhelmed by complexity, that is, by a surplus of possibilities unleashed by an open future, is in other words not specific to the last few decades. What *has* been specific to these decades, however, is not so much complexity and acceleration as such, than it is their *exacerbation beyond manageability*, that is, beyond the capacity for absorbing and processing complexity—a situation in which innovation and change, as J.T. Fraser describes it, become

so rapid as to make their integration into the recent past and on rushing future impossible. The environment created by individuals and societies thus *outruns the adaptive capacities of their creators and leads to a loss of temporal horizons* or, as Professor Nowotny explains it, the extended present.²⁵

If, as Luhmann notes, “by virtue of the restructuring of time which has occurred during the last 200 years, the present has become specialized in the function of temporal integration,” what is characteristic of the present in the temporality of the last few decades is that, “unfortunately, it does not have enough time to do its job.”²⁶ In terms not only of temporality but also of spatiality, Marc Augé comes to similar conclusions in his

²⁵ See his introduction to Nowotny, *Time: The Modern and Postmodern Experience*, p.5. My emphasis.

²⁶ “The Future Cannot Begin,” p. 283.

diagnosis of what he calls the supermodernity of the last three decades: within transitional non-spaces, from waiting rooms and airport terminals to televisually bombarded living rooms, we are so assailed by “buzzwords of the day, advertisements, a few snippets of news” that “everything proceeds as if space had been trapped by time, as if there were no history other than the last forty-eight hours of news, as if each individual were drawing its motives, its words, *from the inexhaustible stock of an unending history of the present.*”²⁷ So predominant has become modern future orientedness that the future has bitten its own tail and has brought upon itself its own demise: by so wagering on the new and unexpected, the orientation to the future has outstripped its capacity for coping with the harvest of what it had sown. *Qui sème le vent récolte la tempête.* As such, the extended present does not represent some “rupture” with or the “other” of modernity—it on the contrary turns out to be but the exacerbation of tendencies *already latent in the very dynamic of modernity.*²⁸ “Rather than entering a period of

²⁷ *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, p. 104. My emphasis.

²⁸ Already before its exacerbation beyond sustainability does the new indeed harbor the germ of its eventual demise, that is, the repression of duration or temporal extendedness. As Osborne notes, the opening of the future by the late 18th century heralded “the tendential elimination of the historical present itself, as the vanishing point of a perpetual transition between a constantly changing past [it is reorganised in light of the new] and an as yet indeterminate future...The dialectic of the new, Adorno argues, represses duration insofar as ‘the new is an invariant: the desire for the new.’ Modernity is permanent transition.” *The Politics of Time*, p. 14.

postmodernity," Giddens notes, "we are moving into one in which the consequences of modernity are becoming more radicalized and universalized than ever before."²⁹

The erosion of modern future orientedness, however, entails more than a mere shift in temporal priorities: the very capacity for reckoning with complexity and for coordinating the past, present and future is fundamentally altered. We have indeed already seen how the future oriented narrative has constituted for the last two centuries the horizon from which selections are made, complexity contained and a diachronically extended sense of self maintained. Whereas in premodernity complexity was held at bay through the sway of the past over the present and future, and this to the point that earlier horizons were retained even in the face of unexpected counterfactual evidence, in modernity on the other hand selective mechanisms shift to the future oriented narrative—acceleration and complexity are to be managed through such narratives as those of the unfolding of national identity, of progress towards *les lendemains qui chantent* or, later, of Fordist or Keynesian developmental visions. Characteristic of modernity, in short, has been that "the future becomes explicit as the horizon for making selections," Luhmann explains, for "*present selections are chiefly made with an eye no longer to the past but to future selections.*"³⁰ Since future orientedness has for the last two centuries informed the operations of selectivity which reorganises the past so as to accommodate

²⁹*The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 68.

³⁰"World time and system history," pp. 321-322.

the new, and since it sheds light on which selections are to be made from an otherwise overwhelming surplus of possibilities, it goes without saying that an erosion of future orientedness can but occasion serious disturbances not only in temporality, but also in the very organisation of a sense of self and a sense of reality, let alone in a sense of agency that might impinge upon and change the given.

With regard to the status of temporality, we can indeed see that without the future, there can be no past, for without future orientedness, there is no selective mechanism, horizon of signification or hierarchizing principle which might allow the past to present itself otherwise than as a senseless aggregate of undifferentiated data. The extended present does not allow for the modern use of the past as a reflexively revisable temporal component within a future oriented narrative. Far from being a source of meaning to be reassessed in terms of potential unexpectedness, the past of the extended present instead becomes increasingly inaccessible except in the form of a repertoire of disconnected brute data, all of which are equally retrievable, yet none of which are specifically selected so as to be reflexively revised in the face of the new—accelerated innovation must indeed reject the past before it is even past, and this not in order to reflexively rework it, but rather to altogether obliterate it. As Henri Lefèvbre put it in his diagnosis of the exacerbated acceleration of late modern temporality, where events proliferate beyond manageability,

When history becomes too long and too encumbered, it produces the same effects as an absence of history. Once, in an ahistorical society with virtually no conscious history, nothing began and nothing came to an end.

Today everything comes to an end virtually as soon as it begins, and vanishes almost as soon as it appears.³¹

Yet neither does the extended present spell the return of premodern *historia magistra vitae* as if, in some compensatory move, the premodern selectivity in terms of the past could replace the lost modern selectivity of the future.³² the past of the extended present, as we saw earlier, hardly holds exemplary force but instead merely provides a repertoire, an archive, to be occasionally pilfered according to present whim. In an extended present, the past is neither unproblematically given, as in premodernity, nor is it any longer to be appropriated in terms of future-orientedness, as in the last two centuries. Temporality has not undergone a mere shift in emphasis—its fundamental operations have undergone transformation.

One of the more salient effects of such a temporal transformation, as has been noted by theorists of modernity and postmodernity from the Frankfurt School and Henri Lefèbvre to Huyssen and Jameson, has been the paradoxical situation of late (or post- or super-) modernity where accelerated innovation is coupled with stagnation, where the proliferation of the new has as its corollary the omnipresence of the same, and where

³¹ *Introduction to Modernity: Twelve Preludes, September 1959-May 1961*, trans. John Moore (London: Verso Press, 1995), p. 165.

³² For more on this, see Huyssen's *Twilight Memories*, where it is suggested that the current obsession with memory, museums and commemoration be seen as symptomatic of a loss of future-orientedness—a loss which has not so much strengthened our sense of history or of historicity, than it has reduced our rapport with the past to that of detached interest in the variegated and disparate material available for pastiche and collage.

unexpectedness becomes expected. Because it both forecloses the past and foreshortens the future, the extended present precludes the possibility that anything distinct from itself might manifest itself otherwise than punctually: without a past distinct from the present, no lasting traces are left behind which might testify to the occurrence of some unsettling encounter with unexpectedness; conversely, without future orientedness, there can be no inclination to let the new perturb the given of current praxis to begin with. For all the proliferation of the new and unexpectedness at hand in the extended present, we end up with a situation, as Sean Homer put in his review of Jameson's *Seeds of Time*, "in which the sheer momentum of change slides into its opposite, into stasis," and in which "contrary to postmodernism's celebration of difference, heterogeneity and radical otherness, social life has never been so standardised, and 'the stream of human, social and historical temporality has never flowed quite so homogeneously.'" ³³ Change, if not the very possibility of envisioning change, cannot fare well in such a temporal context: although the fact of accelerated innovation and change in the extended present may be but an exacerbation of modern tendencies, the result of such an exacerbation is not the reinforcement of the change characteristic of modernity. The latter, as exemplified by the dynamic of the Avant-Garde, indeed maintains a rapport with the past, if only to break with, transform and thus impinge upon if not enrich past and present conventions by proposing new modes of perception. With the extended present, however, the past is

³³ "Fredric Jameson and the Limits of Postmodern Theory." *Centre for Psychotherapeutic Studies Home Page*. <http://www.shef.ac.uk/academic/N-Q/psysc/staff/sihomer/limits.html> (March 8, 1997), p. 17.

rejected before it has a chance to distinguish itself from the present, and the new is discarded before it has a chance to unsettle, let alone to impinge upon, the given. The result is that we end up not so much with change, future oriented or otherwise, than with a *quantitative extension of the given*, as can be seen in various recent discourses, from the economic to the academic: the former tells us that we need but continue to unshackle the given (and thus eternal) laws of the Market from current obstructions in order to allow for the given to yet further extend itself;³⁴ and the latter finds refuge in such categories as "excellence," the "general applicability [of which]," Readings has shown, "...is in direct relation to its emptiness" for it merely clamors for endless excelling for the sake of being yet more excellent, and can propose but a quantitative extension of the given, the purpose, origin and nature of which it has yet to fathom or even address.³⁵ Such a

³⁴ True, it has been argued by some that the current neo-liberal metanarrative of the Market seems modernistically future oriented. As Jeffrey C. Alexander sums it up: "In response to economic developments, different groupings of contemporary intellectuals have reinflated the emancipatory narrative of the market, in which they emplot a new past (anti-market society) and a new present/future (market transition, full-blown capitalism) that makes liberation dependent upon privatization, contracts, monetary inequality and competition." "Modern, Anti, Post and Neo", *New Left Review*, No 210 March/April 1995. p.87. Nevertheless, current economic discourse is so bathed in an aura of inevitability, and advocated with such millennial fervour, that it is akin less to the scientific discourse it presumptuously mimics than to eschatology. This cannot be discussed here at length. For more on the extent to which current economic discourse has assumed a theological guise, consult any recent edition of the *Le Monde Diplomatique*, although of particular interest is Pierre Bourdieu's "L'essence du néolibéralisme," *Le Monde Diplomatique* (March 1998), p.3.

³⁵"The University without Culture?" *New Literary History*, 1995, 26: 468. As Readings further notes, "excellence" is but a "purely internal unit of value, which effectively brackets all questions of reference and function," and thus serves as "the unit of currency within a closed field" (p. 472). It is of course difficult to conceive of how such a category can justify itself otherwise than tautologically.

discourse is likewise to be found in the “new postmodernist self” advocated in certain academic circles, according to which the self, decentered and liberated as it has presumably been from the constraints of oedipally forged libidinal economies and from the incorrigibly totalitarian ways of logocentrism (much as the Market is to be freed from, say, the meddlesome regulating and freedom denying ways of state-enforced environmental and labour standards), can find a sense of purpose in the purposeless “mere intensification of its possibilities,” as Honneth puts it in his diagnosis of postmodernist thought, whereby “human subjects ..independent of all normative expectations and bonds...[can] creatively produce new self-images all the time.”³⁶ At hand in such instances—and there are many more—is a mere quantitative extension of the given, and this much in the manner of the *Aufklärung*, for which an immutable tableau, itself beyond tampering, demands mere self-perpetuation: the market is not to be altered, only unleashed from fetters, and this in order to allow for yet more unfettering in the presumed name of a timeless manifest destiny—the Market; the postmodernist self is not to change, but merely to further its frenetic search for ever-renewed self-stylisation, and this in the name of unhindered aesthetic self-invention which has its *telos* its own self-perpetuation; “excellence” is merely to promote further excellence in the name of nothing else but the fact itself of being yet more excellent.

³⁶ *The Fragmented World of the Social*, pp. 224-225.

In an extended present, then, the modern future oriented notions of growth, change and historiography, which are predicated on the reflexive revision of and impinging upon the past and the given in the face of the unexpected and the new, yield to the stasis of quantitative accumulation and to the self perpetuation of the given. Such a state of affairs is not exactly conducive to the consolidation of temporally extended histories, whether dominant or subaltern, or to the capacity for initiating change, or agency. True, certain bricolage theories of culture *à la* De Certeau have tried to impute to various daily practices the elements of agency and change, and have castigated the *Kulturindustrie* model (often accusingly traced to the Frankfurt School and its alleged offspring) for its unduly apocalyptic if not elitist underestimation of the masses' capacity for "resistance."³⁷ This is a misguided way of framing the question, however: indeed, if the capacity for envisioning and effecting change fares poorly in an extended present, this

³⁷ While it is true that certain cultural theories may overestimate the sway of the media-apparatus over the capacity for critical thought, it is no less true that bricolage theories of culture tend on the other hand to underestimate it. The latter's sanguine overestimation of the "subversive" import of certain daily cultural practices is no less misguided than is the former's propensity for resigned hibernation in the face of a presumably monolithic and impregnable dominant discourse. It is indeed important not to forget, as Nicholas Garham, put it, that "there is a left cultural romanticism, increasingly prevalent in media and cultural studies, that sees all forms of grassroots cultural expression as "resistance," although resistance to what is not at all clear." After all, he adds, "the relative autonomy of the meaning-creating agent and the possibilities of cultural bricolage... are at present much exaggerated by media and cultural analysts. We have to raise the question of how much room for manoeuvre agents actually have within a symbolic system within which both the power to create symbols and access to the channels of their circulation is hierarchically structured and intimately integrated into a system of economic production and exchange, which is itself hierarchically structured." "The Media and the Public Sphere", in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992) p. 372-3.

stems not from the hegemonic sway of the media as such—undeniably concentrated though it be within fewer and ever more monolithic transnational corporate hands; instead, it is at the level of temporality, and not ideology, that agency and change are eroded. As Luhmann rightly suggests in reference to the mass media, “it is not so much the supposed uniformity of opinions as it is *the shrinkage of temporal horizons that restricts the range of possibilities available in other subsystems.*”³⁸ The mass media is not as such the primary culprit behind the restriction of frames of debate or of horizons of possible signification—it is instead the very accelerated tempo with which it produces endless disparate images and units of information which reduces the time at one’s disposal for reacting to them and which, in so doing, narrows the gap between past, present and future required for processing the disparate into temporally extended meaningfulness. As Adam notes, “when instantaneous reactions are required, the difference between the present and the future is eliminated”³⁹—a situation to be expected when, as Eduardo Galeano observes,

Television bombards us with images which are born only to be instantaneously forgotten. Each image buries the preceding one and survives only until the next one. Human events, having become objects of consumption, die, as do things, in the very instant of their use. Each piece of news is without links to others, divorced as it is from its own past as well as from the past of all the others.⁴⁰

³⁸ “The Differentiation of Society,” pp. 247-248. My emphasis.

³⁹ *Time and Social Theory*, p. 140.

⁴⁰ “Mémoires et malmémoires,” *Le Monde Diplomatique* (August 1997): p. 3.

Because it involves neither a return to the past, which disappears before materialising into anything, nor an accentuated orientation to the future, which has been foreclosed, the extended present restricts any divergence between itself and the past or the future. Homogeneity and passivity are not the source, but a symptom, of the problem of a temporality accelerated into stasis. By so permeating not only the media, but our very rapport with time, the extended present promotes, at its best, sporadic and short lived jacqueries as opposed to temporally extended and sustained counter-hegemonic political action and, at its worst, a fatalistic naturalisation of the given: as Eduardo Galeano further notes:

We are conditioned to believe that things happen because they have to happen. Unable to recognise its origins, time projects the future as its own repetition, tomorrow is another today: the inequitable organisation of the world, which humiliates the human condition, belongs to the eternal order, and injustice is a fatality which we must accept or...accept.⁴¹

The extended present, then, has consequences that are not only temporal: no less at stake is the very capacity for envisioning, let alone effecting, change. And this latter problem of course brings us back full circle to the issues which began this entire inquiry: the Thompsonian appeal to experience as a means to buttressing such a capacity for resistance and change, as a means to salvaging agency and devising subaltern counter histories. How indeed does—or rather, how *can*—experience fulfill its expected role in self-formation, let alone foster counter-hegemonic historiography and agency, if the very

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 3.

future oriented temporality of modernity with which it is entwined is itself succumbing to historical transformation? What is the status of experience in an extended present?

3. The Ubiquity of Immediacy and the Punctualisation of Experience.

Experience is closely entwined—to say the least—with the future oriented temporality of modernity: we have indeed already seen how experience, particularly insofar as it is linked to issues of self-formation, names that process whereby the disruption of expectations prompts to a retrospective or reflexive revision of the past and present so as to accommodate and, in so doing, contain the new unleashed by an open future. Unlike premodern temporality, where the convergence between the past and the present always already contained and normalised the unsettling potential of unexpectedness and the new, and unlike the extended present of the last few decades, where the convergence between the present and the future has compromised the very possibility of unexpectedness, the future-oriented temporality of modernity has in contrast structurally encouraged the conflict between expectation and unexpectedness, between the given and the new. And within a modern divergent temporality, experience has not only been allowed, but also been required, to forge and sustain a sense of self—the modern sense of self has after all been predicated on future oriented becoming, on the future differing from the past, on the reworking of the new within the given so as to

integrate, rather than dismiss, the complex unexpectedness of an open future. Should modern future oriented temporality succumb to historical change, it goes without saying that the role of experience in issues of self-formation will correspondingly be altered: as soon as the future becomes *passé*, and as soon as the new no longer prompts to reflexive self-revision, experience can indeed but forego its *raison d'être*.

At hand in the generalisation of an extended present is just such a historical change in the prospects of future oriented temporality and, by extension, of the role of experience in self-formation. Once the past and future fail to distinguish themselves from the present, not only is the unexpected expected, but the new is also reduced to a brute punctual shock bereft of lasting consequences. The new can indeed remain new only insofar as it remains related, however precariously, to the given and the past against which it demarcates itself as new, yet in terms of which it fosters renegotiation and reflexive revision—the new demands in other words not only that the future, past and present be discrepant, but also that they remain temporally coordinated into a minimal relation to one another. In an extended present, however, where the given is not subject to negotiation but instead constitutes the alpha and omega of all possible signification, and where “the present is all-invasive,” as Roger Sue put it, because it “parades itself as the global representation of time *which replaces duration*,”⁴² the minimal temporal extendedness required for the unexpected and the new to foster the undergoing of

⁴² *Temps et ordre social* (PUF: Paris, 1994), cited in Jean Chesneaux, “Le temps, enjeu démocratique” *Le Monde Diplomatique* (September 1994): p. 32. My emphasis.

experience is effectively sabotaged: anything potentially unsettling hardly leads to reflexive revision, let alone bequeath any testimony to such unsettling having ever taken place. Bereft as it is of the means for lending itself to a temporally extended thematisation, incapable as it is of leaving traces within the modern self's psychic economy, the horizon of which it cannot even penetrate, experience can no longer be said to be a process one undergoes but instead finds itself reduced to those brute inarticulate shocks presaged in Walter Benjamin's various studies on experience, narration and the psychic apparatus of modern urban man. In an extended present the unexpected and, by extension, the experience to which it gives rise, are reduced to unprocessed brute stimuli which fail to arouse anything beyond a fleeting disconcerting lapse which is as quickly forgotten as it is produced. The capacity for undergoing experience, let alone any accentuated role of experience in self-formation, can but be seriously compromised.

It is precisely along these lines that the self and experience has increasingly come to be seen over the last few decades. When, as John Urry observes, "the rapid speeding up of time and space in the postmodern period dissolves any sense of identity at all,"⁴³ then it can hardly come as a surprise that a "disjointed and discontinuous mode of experience," Douglas Kellner adds, should be "a fundamental characteristic of

⁴³ "The Sociology of Time and Space," in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*, p. 388.

postmodern culture."⁴⁴ In such a context, it is in fact expected that the unexpected foster the punctual immediacy of shocks rather than the temporally extended mediacy of experience. Various recent cultural theories of course offer differing prognoses regarding the status of experience and its imbrication in cultural, aesthetic and other social spheres; nevertheless, one particular theme has overshadowed the others, namely, *the tendency to favour the immediate and the regional over the temporally and spatially extended*. Such has been the case (for example) of the aesthetic sphere, where various programmatic theories in the 1960s and '70s, such as *Warenästhetik* and Minimalism, maintained that because the tentacular penetration of commodification had extended to all forms of social mediation, including the temporal extension of experience itself, resistance strategies, so the argument ran, had to therefore be devised (so Martin Lüdke's slogan tells us) so as to "attain a maximum of immediate experience with a minimum of social mediation."⁴⁵ Redemption accordingly seemed to reside in the immediate, the punctual or the instantaneous as opposed to the mediate and the temporally extended; and the utopian self proposed (for instance) by Minimalism was, appropriately enough, a dispersed, anti-cartesian and non-biographical subject which, Rosalind Krauss notes, is

⁴⁴ "Popular Culture and the Construction of Postmodern Identities," in S. Lash and J. Friedman (eds) *Modernity and Identity* (Oxford:Blackwell, 1992), p. 145.

⁴⁵ Martin Lüdke, "Der Kreis, das Bewusstsein und das Ding: Aktuelle motivierte Anmerkungen zu der Vergangenheit der Kunst", in *Lesen, Literatur und Studentenbewegung*, éd Lüdke (Oplanden, 1977), p. 152. Cited in Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *Reapparaisals: Shifting Alignments in Postwar Critical Theory*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 171.

“coheres, but only provisionally and moment by moment, in the act of perception.”⁴⁶ But whereas only a few decades ago such a punctual discontinuous self represented but an utopian projection of various aesthetic and social theories of the 1960s and '70s, it appears to have all too well materialized into reality since the 1980s—so much so, in fact, that this shrinking of the temporality of experience into punctual unintelligibility has been reckoned with since the 1980s by hermeneutic, Marxist, cultural and social theory alike.⁴⁷

Whether the reaction to such a state of affairs has been one of jubilation, vituperation, or hibernation, a consensus has nevertheless emerged regarding the extent to which the self of the last few decades, to use Jameson’s formulation of the issue within Husserlian terminology but with a Benjaminian spirit, is one which “has lost its capacity to extend its pro-tensions and re-tensions across the temporal manifold and to organize its past and future into coherent experience.”⁴⁸

Jameson’s above formulation of the late modern or late capitalist status of the self and experience best captures what is at stake: just as the extended present allows for but

⁴⁶ “The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum”, *October*, (No 54, 1991), 8-103.

⁴⁷ See (for example) Gianni Vattimo, *La societa trasparente* (Garzanti, 1989) and Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, vol. III, partII, chapt. 7, for the hermeneutic camp; Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernity or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* and David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* for the Marxist camp; Hermann Lübke, *Zeit-verhältnisse: zur Kulturphilosophie des Fortschritts* (Cologne: Verlag Syria, 1983) for the somewhat conservative camp; Andreas Huyssen also deals with the issue in his recent study, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*.

⁴⁸ *Postmodernity or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p. 25

minimal divergence between itself and both the past and the future, likewise is the modern self increasingly unable to extract itself from a narrow band of time—it is as if the late modern self were somehow trapped within instantaneity or an ubiquity of the immediate. The collapsing of future orientedness into an extended present indeed restricts the time at one's disposal for tending to exigencies other than those immediately at hand. Far from being an eschatologically eternal present or an over-abundance of time, the extended present, as we have seen, is instead a narrowing of temporal horizons in response to so accelerated a rate of turnover and so exacerbated a tempo in innovation that is undermined the ability to allocate resources beyond the short term and the immediate. By so contracting its temporal horizon, the extended present, in other words, has fostered what Michel Freitag calls a culture of immediacy [*culture de l'immédiateté*] “where life loses all references to its own past and any orientation to the future.”⁴⁹ If the late modern self seems at pains to narrate itself into the semblance of continuity, and if the unexpected yields not the temporally extended undergoing of experience but only the punctual instantaneity of the shock, this stems from the erosion the future orientedness which, for the better part of the last two centuries has allowed for the new to emerge, for expectations to run into a conflicting situation and for experience to come about, and which has thus provided the means for complexity reduction without which cannot be sustained a modern temporally extended sense of self.

⁴⁹*Le naufrage de l'université* (Paris: La Découverte, 1995), p. 156

That such a “culture of immediacy” should follow the collapse of future orientedness ought not to surprise: as we have seen, future orientedness over the last two centuries has increasingly constituted the horizon in terms of which complexity is managed and temporality coordinated, and this not only at the level of legitimising grand narratives but also at the level of self-formation.⁵⁰ Once the future fails to sufficiently diverge from an increasingly extended present, and once future oriented narratives thus no longer allow for the new to be worked into a reflexively revisable past, time can but present itself as an aggregate of unsequential and inconsequential instants bereft of temporal duration, as “a series of discrete moments,” as Giddens puts it, “each of which severs prior experiences from subsequent ones in such a way that no continuous “narrative” can be sustained.”⁵¹ And such a dynamic is of course not without effect on self-formation: as Bakhtin noted some seventy years ago, although as a working hypothesis at the time rather than as a description of any state of affairs, without an orientation to the future, “my own givenness loses its yet to be unity for me, and disintegrates into factually existent, senseless fragments of being.”⁵²

⁵⁰ For more on the socio-historical imbrication of the modern self and a future oriented temporality, see *Modernity and Self-Identity*, where Giddens shows how “the modern self forms a trajectory from the past to the anticipated future,” for “the individual appropriates his past by sifting through it in the light of what is anticipated for an (unorganized) future.” *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 75.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 53. My emphasis.

⁵² *Art and Answerability* (Austin: Texas University Press, 1993), p. 126.

This evacuation of the future, then, has very real consequences which resonate beyond the corridors of academia and beyond the thought-experiments and hypotheses of theoretical inquiry. This can be seen no more clearly than in the shift over the last few decades from temporally extended Fordism to the instantaneity of flexible accumulation, from Keynesianism to economic ultraliberalism. The “culture of immediacy,” as Freitag puts it, tallies with the socio-economic developments following the erosion of modernist future oriented Keynesianism, during which the need for short-term planning, instantaneous adaptability to market fluctuations, and the cultivation of short-term economic gains⁵³ gradually fostered, both within and beyond a strictly economic realm, Harvey argues, “the loss of a sense of the future except and insofar as the future can be discounted into the present.”⁵⁴ It is no coincidence that the *Erfahrungshunger* decades of the 1970s to this day should have witnessed what Lothar Hack calls a “new immediacy” whereby “the postponement of drives in the interest of long term success is no longer unproblematically accepted.”⁵⁵ The erosion of future orientedness indeed informs the economic concerns and material well-being of increasing segments of the general population—and no longer just of unskilled labour—as can be seen in the substitution of precarious Mc-jobs and sporadic contractual work for lifelong careers or at least stable, predictable (and thus future oriented) employment. By fostering precariousness, this

⁵³*The Condition of Postmodernity*, pp.286-7.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.291.

⁵⁵Cited in *Public Sphere and Experience*, p. 156.

increasingly generalized phenomenon has disabled of all but short term goals and has cultivated a distrust not so much in Lyotardian metanarratives—the neoliberal narrative of the emancipation of markets has been faring remarkably lately—than in the future itself. Finally, the erosion of future orientedness can be seen at work even in the realm of high finance, where the virulent resistance to a Tobin tax on capital flux (which would stimulate domestic markets) stems less from the interests of those concerned—these would indeed better be served in the long run with the substitution of increased domestic demand for the flagging external demand of now deflated “Asian Dragons”—than it testifies to the incapacity apparently inherent to late capitalism (to use Jameson’s Mandelian expression⁵⁶) to envision the sacrifice of immediate short term gains in the name of long term benefits to be reaped from temporally extended socio-economic policy. *Laissez-faire*, by its very nature, is predicated on immediate returns and not on long-term future oriented development.⁵⁷ Since as a result of such a shift in economic policy, the exigencies of immediate economic survival literally absorb the time of increasing sectors of the general population, it is to be expected that the ability to allocate resources beyond the short-term and the immediate should be compromised. And in such

⁵⁶ Much of Jameson’s theorising on late capitalism is buttressed by the solid historical and economic studies of Ernst Mandel, in particular his *Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1978).

⁵⁷ It is indeed with good reason that Habermas, Nowotny, Harvey and others see a correlation between the erosion of future orientedness and the rise over the last two decades of neo-liberal socio-economic policy.

a state of affairs, it is difficult to conceive how self-formation could have room or use for the temporal extendedness required for the undergoing of experience.

It is this shrinking of temporal horizons which informs the problematisation of the late modern self and not, as some have argued, a general loss of faith in the sequentiality provided since modernity by various metanarratives—a loss which many have argued homologously undermines the lesser narratives of individuals' biographical sense of self. After all, at hand in modernity is not the “invention” of *narrativité* (to use Ricoeur's term)—narrative operations can indeed be said to always already be at work even in the most minimal of cognitive acts; ⁵⁸likewise, or rather, by extension, at hand in late or

⁵⁸ This we already considered in the parenthetical caveat of chapter III. Suffice it to add here that the narrating articulation into continuity of the temporally disparate is not, as such, a problem as far as the immediate environment is concerned—and this for the simple reason that each “present” is present precisely because of, and not in spite of, the manner by which it always already carries with it the immediate past (retention) and future (protention). As has been repeatedly pointed out—and one need not be initiated into the now unfashionable ways of phenomenology or hermeneutics in order to agree with this—the presence of the present has as its condition of possibility, or rather, is possible as an effect, only by virtue of those very temporal elements (in Husserlian terms, the retention of the just past and the protention of the about to be) from which the present or the now distinguishes itself. So although temporality has undergone various significant changes throughout history, this protention-retention dynamic, which many consider to be a narrativising operation, has always been around. What distinguishes modernity from pre-, post- or late- modernity is not the fact of narration as such, or the capacity for retaining the immediate past and the short term future so as to work them into coherence—the ability in other words to construct a horizon out of one's immediate environment; *what does historically change, however, is the extent to which narrative operations can venture beyond the immediate horizon of minimal cognitive acts and encompass instead the distant past and future.* In a similar vein, Koselleck, renown for his historicisation of temporality, nevertheless proposes as transhistorical, if not as anthropologically given, the two (somewhat Gadamerian) categories of *Erfahrungsraum* and *Erwartungshorizont*, while historicising only the manner by which these two

post- modernity is not the sudden loss of such a capacity for narration –neonationalist, neoliberal, neoethnic, and techno-utopian metanarratives of progress or emancipation, although they may lack the decidedly future oriented focus of their modern predecessors,⁵⁹ and while they have been rightly denounced and renounced by a handful of academics, *have rarely fared better* over the last two decades within both the popular imagination and the dominant political discourse, as but a cursory glance over recent turns of events makes all too painfully clear. As such, any loss of faith in metanarratives –which is itself of course debatable–is a symptom or effect of, or perhaps a reaction to , but certainly not the cause of, an extended present. And the current problem of temporality is not so much one of narration than it is one of overburdening time to the point of constricting the horizon of the present to the immediate. As Augé puts it,

From the viewpoint of supermodernity, the difficulty of thinking about time stems from the overabundance of events in the contemporary world, not from the collapse of an idea of progress, which - at least in the caricatured forms that make its dismissal so very easy - has been in a bad way for a long time.⁶⁰

That the past, present and future may be tenuously related to one another, if not altogether engulfed in an extended present, does not entail that narratives can no longer be mustered and deployed. What it does imply, however, is that without the selectivity provided by a future oriented temporality, without a means to reduce complexity, modern temporal

categories interact.

⁵⁹ As we saw in preceding sections, current narratives tend to be but an extension of the present, or a spurious return to the past.

⁶⁰ *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, pp. 30-31.

divergence and extension can so contract that narratives may no longer truly help in the organisation of the self beyond the immediate and the short term .

If, then, the extended present compromises the very possibility of envisioning how *a long term future might differ from what is currently at hand*, and if it likewise fosters the *incapacity for registering change meaningfully and lastingly* within one's psychic economy, then serious misgivings can but be entertained about the possible role, today, for experience in self-formation. The extended present is indeed not without effect on issues of self-formation and experience—in fact, it is of *particular* import for theories hoping to wager on experience in the name of counter-hegemonic politics and strategy: indeed, as Hansen suggests in her review of the work of Negt and Kluge,

‘the assault of the present on the rest of time’ (Kluge) is a key problem of the public sphere because it erodes the temporal matrix of the horizon of experience, the possibility of collective memory, which is the precondition for any counterhegemonic politics.⁶¹

Because the appeal to immediate experience is beset, as we saw in the opening chapter, by both theoretical and political ambiguity, and because experience itself, as a historical component of modern self-formation, is contingent upon historical change and seems, if anything, to be suffering the fate of so many other modern historical phenomena, the question can but be raised as to why Thompsonian -inspired cultural theory so

⁶¹ Foreword to *Public Sphere and Experience*, p.xxxv. Further more, as Giddens notes, without minimal temporal coordination, we have but an “ an external environment full of changes,” with the result that the late modern self becomes “obsessively preoccupied with apprehension of possible risks to his or her existence, *and paralysed in terms of practical action.*” *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 53. My emphasis.

vehemently appeals to experience in the first place. Could the *Erfahrungshunger* appeal to experience turn out to be less a categorical imperative than the expression of a desire-- a desire not so much to harness experience in the name of identity formation, subaltern or otherwise, than to salvage the possibility as such of modern self-formation and experience? Could the insistence on experience stem less from its current centrality in self-formation than from what seems to be its imminent demise--and this much in the manner that religious fanaticism reached its apogee in the mid- 17th century, culminating into the Thirty Years War, precisely at the time when the divine transcendental anchoring of reality, which witnessed no less than the Cromwellian decapitation of a kingly incarnation of divine will, was losing its moorings?⁶² Perhaps the insistence on experience of the *Erfahrungshunger* decades, much in the manner of the queen in Hamlet's play within a play, "protesteth too much" and, as such, is more likely to reveal unavowed motivations by being diagnostically read. It is to just such a diagnostic

⁶² Religious fanaticism has of course always punctuated the European landscape, in one form or another, since the Fall of Rome. But whereas until the High Middle Ages it tended to be directed against either external enemies (the Crusades), or domestic minorities (the campaigns against heretical sects such as the Waldensians and Albigeois), and whereas both political stability and economic benefits were to be reaped by the ruling elite as a result of such adventuring (the self-destructive rivalry of competing noble families were indeed channeled towards the plundering of a common external enemy or a designated internal minority), by the mid- 16th through the mid 17th century, in contrast, religious quarreling led to domestic economic devastation, whether in the German *Länder*, which bore the brunt of the Thirty Years War, or in France which, with its revocation of the *Édit de Nantes*, condemned itself to ruinous economic backwardness well into the 19th century by depriving itself of the burgeoning French bourgeois class--the Huguenots. The point here is that religious fanaticism reached its peak, and this to the point of self-destructiveness, just as the divinely sanctioned legitimation of the given order of things was no longer unproblematic, increasingly supplanted as it was by other, more secular, considerations.

reading of the Thompsonian insistence on experience that we shall now turn. As we shall see, the appeal to immediate experience is not so much a *desideratum*, and still less is it a mere attempt to bypass, through immediacy, the mediacy of ideologically tainted dominant discourse, than it is in fact a symptom of the incapacity to be otherwise than immediate.

4. Towards a Diagnosis of the Insistence on Experience

At hand, then, in the temporality of the last two to three decades is not, as Ricoeur would have it, the exacerbation of temporal divergence beyond the mediating capacities of narratives;⁶³ at hand instead is the contraction of temporality within the narrow horizons of an extended present where a culture of immediacy, not temporal extendedness, becomes the order of the day. It is just this new immediacy, as Hack calls it, which brings us back to our initial problem—the Thompsonian appeal to *immediate* experience. Because temporal extension has increasingly been considered by Thompsonian inspired cultural theory as an easy prey for dominant metanarratives, such theories have frequently argued that immediate experience can momentarily suspend both temporal and discursive operations, only to then allow them to resume their course in

⁶³See vol. III, part ii, chapter 7 of his *Temps et Récit*.

terms of the building blocks of uncontaminated subaltern experience. We have already seen how it is this dialectic of continuity and discontinuity, and not some quest for the unmediated and prediscursive as such, which informs the Thompsonian project. By capitalising on disruptive unexpectedness, the experience to which this project appeals does not stray far either from the etymological and post-Hegelian conceptual history of experience, or from the manner by which experience, as Heidegger phrased it, has “been generally understood.” The Thompsonian project, however, paints itself into an epistemological corner and partakes of the culture of immediacy when it conflates the disruptiveness of experience with its perceived immediacy—a move which, when carried out to its logical conclusion, ends up fetishizing the supposed immediacy of the spatial and the material (such as that of the body), as if such material immediacy were the last enclave of “resistance” to the temporally extended ways of dominant metanarratives, and as if it were the only legitimate ground from which might be erected counter histories or from which might be mustered counter-hegemonic political action. What is of course puzzling in all this is that immediacy should be so insisted upon just as a culture of immediacy already seems all too ubiquitous, and that immediacy should be expected to buttress the temporal extendedness of counter-hegemonic micronarratives. More puzzling still is that the very concept of experience, beset as it has been by ambiguous political ramifications, should be so vehemently insisted upon by theories professing to be politically minded, and that the role of experience in self-formation, subject as it is to the vicissitudes of historical change, should be paraded as the cure to all subaltern ills regardless of socio-historical context. Because the future oriented temporality

presupposed by appeals to experience has yielded over the last few decades to an extended present and a culture of immediacy, and because there has been a fundamental change over the last few decades in the manner by which temporal continuity had been maintained for some two centuries, it is legitimate at this point to wonder whether at stake in certain experience-oriented theories and social movements is less the possibility of foiling dominant discursive mediation with a group's immediate experiences, and less how to then inductively construct counter-histories, than it is *how to construct and sustain extended temporal continuity and narrative mediation at all*.

But what is it that distinguishes the Thompsonian appeal to immediacy from other theoretical enterprises? Temporal concerns and the hope that immediacy may somehow hold the promise of the ideologically irreducible, after all, no less subtend other currents in theory of the *Erfahrungshunger* decades—currents whose common concern with immediacy, by uniting them beyond their otherwise incompatible if not mutually exclusive tenets, suggest that Thompson's (and his successors') wager on immediate experience is not just the result of a virulent Anglo-American empiricist heritage traceable to Locke, but on the contrary points to a more encompassing problem to which even recent currents in German aesthetics, for all its notorious disdain, since Hegel, for anything smacking of premature immediacy, itself also testifies. The *Warenästhetik* of the 1970s (for example) indeed maintained that since temporal mediation itself harbored the potential for reification and commodification, resistance was to be sought in the

immediate and the punctual⁶⁴—a sentiment later echoed in Karl Heinz Bohrer’s attempt, in the 1980s, to re-instate the counter-hegemonic potential of aesthetic experience with the category of “suddenness” (*Plötzlichkeit*) which represents “a discontinuity in the consciousness of time;”⁶⁵ Minimalism was likewise to advocate a dissolute and decentred subject whose disparate punctual experiences, by the fact of their immediacy, could resist the coercive temporal sequentiality of narrativised social mediation;⁶⁶ and of course for that group of French thinkers loosely referred to as poststructuralist, duration and temporal extension are but coercive operations bent on manhandling the singular and muffling heterogeneities, as can be seen from Lyotard’s ephemeral libidinal intensities to Deleuze and Guattari’s celebration, as Peter Dews puts it, of “the schizophrenic fragmentation of experience and loss of identity ...as a liberation from the self forged by the Oedipus complex.”⁶⁷

But although experience oriented theories of the Thompsonian vein and currents in German aesthetics and French philosophy share a concern with temporality, the

⁶⁴ For a concise survey of the debates in German aesthetics since 1965, see Peter Uwe Hohendahl. “The Politicization of Aesthetic Theory: The Debate in Aesthetics since 1965,” in *Reappraisals: Shifting Alignments in Postwar Critical Theory*, pp. 156-197.

⁶⁵ *Plötzlichkeit. Zum Augenblick des ästhetischen Scheins* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1981), p.43

⁶⁶For more on the subjectivity advocated by Minimalism, see Rosalind Krauss, “The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum” *October*, (No 54, 1991),pp. 8-17.

⁶⁷Peter Dews “Adorno, Post-structuralism, and the Critique of Identity,” in Andrew Benjamin (editor), *The Problems of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1989), p.4.

Thompsonian appeal to immediacy differs in one important respect: immediacy is not proposed as a new *summum bonum* that would allow for an anti-oedipal self to punctually escape commodification, or as a *novum organum* that would foster what Dews, in reference to some of the more extreme of poststructuralist excesses, has called “the ontologisation of irreducible plurality;”⁶⁸ it is proposed instead as but a moment (whether “strategic” or not) to which must be appended the retrospective devising of counter-histories without which cannot be harnessed an agent of political change, and without which specificity cannot yield a sense of identity. John Berger indeed tells us that “a people or a class which is cut off from its own past is far less free to choose and act as a people or class than one that has been able to situate itself in history,”⁶⁹ and Thompson notes that “if we stop history at a given point, then there are no classes but simply a multitude of individuals with a multitude of experiences.”⁷⁰ The immediacy advocated by certain strains of cultural theory is not meant to supplant or evade temporal extendedness as such, and even less does it propose a new postmodern self dispersed within punctual immediacy; it wagers instead on non-mediated or immediate experience in the hope that such a disruption of dominant historiography and ideology might assist in the forging and consolidation of subaltern counter histories. Since such experience oriented theories are after all concerned with problems of agency, it is to be expected,

⁶⁸ “Adorno, Post-structuralism, and the Critique of Identity,” p.7.

⁶⁹ *Ways of Seeing* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 33.

⁷⁰ *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 11.

then, that they should have little sympathy for the temporally punctual self proposed by some as a subversive alternative to temporally extended phallocracy or logophilia: a self so dispersed, however deferential it might be to the heterogeneity of the irreducibly particular, isn't exactly amenable to even the semblance of concerted political action—indeed, “...such an agent, in some of its versions at least,” as Terry Eagleton wryly puts it, “would hardly seem self-collected enough to topple a bottle off a wall, let alone bring down the state.”⁷¹

But at hand in the Thompsonian project is not just the proclivity of a certain school of thought for the temporal continuity needed for praxis and agency: by the fact of their popularisation and prevalence in mainstream discourse, let alone their concrete embodiment by new social movements, experience-oriented theories of the Thompsonian vein testify to a generalised social demand for the sustaining, not the “subverting,” of temporal extendedness and continuity. It is indeed significant that while theories of experience of the *Erfahrungshunger* decades have all been concerned with immediacy and temporality in one form or another, it has not been the celebration of immediacy for its own sake which has caught or driven the popular imagination: the *frisson* of libidinal intensities, the titillation of anti-oedipal schizophrenic depersonalisation and *plötzlich* aesthetic experiences have indeed aroused the euphoric enthusiasm of only a very few—an academic few, at that—and have galvanized yet fewer into taking to the streets in its

⁷¹ Foreword to Kristin Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p.ix.

defense or tossing about confetti in its celebration. What *has* galvanised entire populations, on the other hand, and what is seductive about various social movements, whether in the neoconservative-traditionalist vein of national history and foundational myths, in the subaltern vein of counter-histories, or even in the regressive neo-eschatological vein of other-worldly cults, from Born Again Christians to Solar Temple initiates, has been the semblance of temporal continuity provided by such social movements—a continuity without which not only is counter history, tribal history and history *tout court* unlikely, but also without which the very coherence of the self, let alone of the experiences of this self, become precarious at best. As Andreas Huyssen rightly observes, the current obsession with the past—museum mania, returns to Tradition, ethnic tales of origins and genealogy, or even the recent fad of historical films catering to literary classics or to legends—are but “an expression of the basic human need to live in extended structures of temporality, however they be organized,”⁷² and these mnemonic convulsions are but so many signs that “express our society’s need for temporal anchoring when in the wake of the information revolution, the relationship between past, present and future is being transformed.”⁷³ As such, the magnetism of many of the new social movements—movements which stress the specificity of a group’s immediate experiences and clamour for their coordination within local counter-histories—may lie less in the resistance to hegemony they claim to offer than in the semblance of temporal

⁷²*Twilight Memories*, p.9.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.7.

continuity which they provide. Rather, then, than perpetuate the notion that current social upheavals and the politics of identity are but attempts at cultural “resisting,” it is more appropriate to view these movements instead as a response to an increasingly generalized condition, precisely that condition which some academic circles persist in celebrating as the subversive potential of a self which, no longer manhandled by the exigencies of temporal extendedness, can revel in its anti-oedipal dispersal within an ubiquitous immediacy.

That a certain obsession with temporal continuity should so permeate academic and para-academic identity politics ought not to surprise: although the self of the last few decades may not have reached the state of disorganization comically portrayed above by Eagleton, we saw in an earlier section that it has nevertheless become more temporally dispersed and uncoordinated than its modern homologue. An extended present indeed so narrows the temporal horizon and thus so fosters a culture of immediacy that the diachronically extended temporality of modernity yields to an “end of linearity and the emergence of the problem of the creation of simultaneity” in which, Bell notes, “people no longer have a sense of linearity, of beginning, middle and end, fore ground and background”⁷⁴—a situation hardly conducive to the forging of coherent biographical narratives across the temporal manifold. Since, as Jameson reminds us, “personal

⁷⁴Daniel Bell, “The Postindustrial Society”, in *Technology and Social Change*, ed. Eli Ginzberg (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), p. 58, cited in Grant H. Kester, “Out of Sight Is Out of Mind: The Imaginary Space of Postindustrial Culture,” *Social Text* 35 (Summer 1993): p. 77.

identity is itself the effect of a certain temporal unification of past and future with one's present", then the breakdown of such temporal unification, indeed entails that we become "unable to unify the past, present and future of our own biographical experience or psychic life"⁷⁵--and the result of such a failure in what Jameson calls "cognitive mapping" is that individuals, let alone the larger entities of groups and classes, become dispersed into a series of disjointed experiences or a "series of pure and unrelated presents in time."⁷⁶ The paradox of the temporality of what Huyssen, like Jameson, calls Late Capitalism, is indeed that

the more the present of advanced consumer capitalism prevails over past and future, sucking both into an expanding synchronous space (Alexander Kluge speaks of the attack of the present on the rest of time) , the weaker is its grip on itself, *the less stability or identity it provides for contemporary subjects.*⁷⁷

It is thus with good reason that Jameson suggests that the dispersed self of poststructuralism ought to be seen less as a *desideratum* to be cultivated and still less as a subversive entity to be celebrated than as a factual description of how the self is increasingly becoming organised (or rather , disorganised) into a temporally uncoordinated aggregate of the disparate:

to call for the shedding of any illusion about psychic identity or the centered subject, for the ethical ideal of good molecular "schizophrenic" living, and for the ruthless abandonment of the mirage of presence may

⁷⁵Ibid., pp. 26-27.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 27.

⁷⁷*Twilight Memories*, p. 26.

*turn out to be a description of the way we live now, rather than its rebuke or subversion.*⁷⁸

At this point, Lacan's clinical definition of schizophrenia as a "breakdown in the signifying chain, that is, the interlocking syntagmatic series of signifiers which constitutes an utterance or a meaning,"⁷⁹ and Deleuze and Guattari's subsequent edification of this into the regulative ideal of a new and presumably subversive form of subjectivity, seem useful less as a diagnostic tool for psycho-pathology or as an emancipatory ideal than as a suggestive metaphor for the current state of the self.

For Thompsonian experience-oriented theories and their para-academic homologues, then, resistance to dominant mediation is mustered by an *appeal to* and not *the appeal of* immediate experience, and this (so their argument runs) because a group's immediate experiences, which guarantee its specificity, are to be reworked in counter-histories and subaltern micro narratives which, in turn, "empower" a group by articulating its interests and enabling its agency. But just as the punctualized poststructuralist self is more a description of the current state of the self than it is a subversive ideal to be reached, likewise is the Thompsonian insistence on immediate experience less a programmatic statement than it is a symptom of the current state of the self. When invoked as a counter-discursive and thus counter-hegemonic ground for resistance, the perceived non-discursive immediacy of experience, as we saw earlier, becomes readily

⁷⁸ *Postmodernity or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p. 339. My emphasis.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

endowed with the palpable concreteness and spatial extendedness of the material, the very resilience of which is seen as a source of resistance to the meddlesome interference of temporally extended dominant discursive regimes. But this very insistence on non-discursive and material immediacy, and this even to the point of retreating to the perceived irreducible immediacy of material bodily experiences (or, in a para-academic parallel, to the physical marks of ethnicity), underscores the *increased disconnection* of such immediacy from the second term of the Thompsonian equation, namely, that such immediacy lend itself to the mediating operations of temporally extended and coordinated counter-histories. The presumed *spatial immediacy* of the materially concrete can indeed only tenuously lend itself to *temporal mediation*, however local the operation or subversive the manoeuvre, if temporal extension itself has been narrowed, as it has in an extended present, to the point of an ubiquitous immediacy. Since the result, after all, of ubiquitous immediacy and temporal punctuality is that we are left to wallow in an aggregate of the disparate in the manner of Lacan's schizophrenic who, to defer again to Jameson, is "reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers [bereft of signification] or, in other words, a series of pure and unrelated presents in time,"⁸⁰ and since an extended present has increasingly become the dominant mode of temporality over the last few decades, then it seems that the appeal to the immediacy of material experience is less a categorical imperative enjoining us to boycott the ideologically

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 27

tainted schemes of temporally extended discursive mediation than it is instead a symptom of the result, *already at hand*, of an ubiquitous immediacy.

The appeal to immediate experience is not merely a reaction to the swashbuckling ways of dominant discursive regimes at the expense of the hapless subaltern, nor is it a matter of purifying or cleansing mediation by inductively reconstructing it anew, grass roots style, from the material ground (of a groupuscule's immediate experiences) upwards; still less is it an attempt to flee a proliferation of disembodied media images, as Jameson has recently suggested,⁸¹ by seeking refuge in the "impossibly physically concrete" of palpable non-discursive materiality; nor is it a nostalgic yearning for "presence" within a long and ignominious history of metaphysics, as the generic poststructuralist argument would predictably have it. If anything, the insistence on immediate experience instead symptomatically points the inability to go beyond inchoate immediacy, and the wager on immediate experience is thus to be seen less as an attempt to foster the immediate than as a testimony to the growing incapacity of the late modern self and of experience, today, to *be otherwise* than immediate. This is of course to be expected: after all, not only does an extended present narrow the temporal horizon and thus undermine the role of experience in the modern diachronically extended sense of self, but by so undermining future orientedness, which for the last two centuries has assured a horizon from which selections can be made, complexity contained, and a

⁸¹ "On 'Cultural Studies,'" p. 44.

sense of self maintained, it has also eroded the capacity for reckoning with what is temporally distant and extended, whether towards the past or towards the future, and whether in the name of metanarratives or of biographical narratives. As Gadamer put it, “he who is without horizon is he who cannot see far enough and who thus overestimates what is close at hand.”⁸² It is just such an overestimation of “what is close at hand” which informs the Thompsonian appeal to immediate experience.

5. Swallowing the Pill of Historicity–Reprise

An extended present not only undermines the centrality of experience in self-formation; it also raises doubts as to whether the very structure of the modern self can last under the guise that it has for the last two centuries. The continuity suggested by Taylor between the late 18th century and the present spans, at best, the late 18th century to the 1970s—precisely that decade which initiated the shift from the future oriented temporality of modernity to the immediacy of an extended present, from temporally extended Fordism or Keynesianism to the narrowed temporal horizon of flexible accumulation and unfettered economic ultraliberalism, and from the unproblematic presupposition of experience in self-formation to a vituperative defence of and hunger for experience. The

⁸² *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 307.

appeal to immediate experience, then, involves more than a concern for guaranteeing subaltern agency or for changing the given. The very insistence with which this appeal is bandied about by both academic and para-academic politics of identity instead testifies to a more encompassing problem to which it attempts to respond but which it fails to directly name or thematize—the problem as to whether the role of experience in self-formation may no longer be as predominant in the last two decades as it has been over the last two centuries. True, the Thompsonian appeal to experience in the name of agency and change is not entirely misguided, and this on two counts: first of all, we have seen how experience, as a process one undergoes, does indeed change the given, informed as it is by the disruptiveness of the unexpected; secondly, an accentuated role of experience in self-formation does refer after all to a cluster of historical processes specific to modernity, not least of which was of course the increased complexity unleashed by the late 18th century opening of the future. Where the Thompsonian appeal to experience errs, however, is when it both mistakes the recalcitrance of experience for its immediacy, and when it then hastily conflates the historical role of experience in self-formation into the timelessly given and the anthropologically innate.

It is true that experience appears so inextricably entwined with issues of self-formation that such an association seems beyond the vagaries of historical change. Various theories of the novel and the public sphere have for example shown that it is as a result of an interaction between the newly emerged *Intimsphäre* within the bourgeois conjugal family and the budding literary public sphere that the 18th century bourgeoisie

could articulate for itself its own experiences and, in so doing, eventually consolidate itself as a specific class and rise to prominence.⁸³ Others have shown that the early 19th century practice of national literary historiography did much, with their tales of nationhood, to manufacture what Jusdanis calls a “network of shared experiences” which in turn played no negligible role in the consolidation of that other bourgeois phenomenon, the modern nation-state.⁸⁴ What must not be overlooked, however, is that the future oriented sense of individual and collective identity implied in such manoeuvres is not only a historical modern phenomenon which manifests itself with vigour only by the late 18th century— it is also a sociological phenomenon *initially specific to the rising bourgeoisie*. We have already seen in the third chapter that the future oriented temporality of modernity—the very temporality upon which is predicated an increased role of experience in self-formation—initially appeared at the turn of the 18th century within a restricted segment of the population—the emergent bourgeois class. And Habermas has shown in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* that it is only when the mid- to late 18th century bourgeoisie, through the mediation at first of the

⁸³ The best account of these developments remains Habermas’ classic study, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. See especially part II, chapters 4-7. A more recent account of the imbrication of experience within the public and private spheres, which focuses on what it calls “the new technologies and pathologies of the self,” is Alain Ehrenberg’s *L’individu incertain* (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1995). Studies of the novel which present similar arguments are too numerous to enumerate here, but the classic formulation can of course be found in Ian Watt’s *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).

⁸⁴For more on what Gregory Jusdanis calls “the maintenance of national unity through a network of shared experiences,” (p.93), see chapters 2-4 of his *Belated Modernity and Aesthetic Culture: Inventing National Literature*.

literary and later of the political public sphere, began to understand and consolidate itself as a specific class, that emerged a specifically bourgeois sense of self – a bourgeois sense of self which among other things is characterized, as various otherwise incompatible social theories have made clear,⁸⁵ as an interiority opposed to an external world, as a perceived individual entity or inner core in need of future oriented expressive unfolding and development, and as a reflexive self-narration sustained by the integration and processing of the new and the unexpected into cumulative experiences. Such a sense of self and temporality, far from representing a generalized social phenomenon to be vaguely imputed to the advent of modernity, on the contrary turns out to be a specifically bourgeois phenomenon. After all, “the proletariat,” Lowe rightly notes, “...was dragged into the process by the necessity of subsistence. The other classes in bourgeois society, such as the landed aristocracy, gentry and peasantry, as well as the clerics, were precapitalist in experience and outlook, and therefore occupied peripheral positions in the process.”⁸⁶

If it is specifically within the mid- to late 18th century bourgeoisie that were first delineated the contours of what many call “the modern self” or “modern subjectivity,” and if such an initially bourgeois phenomenon has frequently been equated by the history of ideas with the modern self as such, it is nevertheless only gradually over the last two

⁸⁵ See for example the work of Luhmann, Giddens, Taylor, Lowe, Habermas and Lefèbvre—to name but a few.

⁸⁶ *History of Bourgeois Perception*, p. 20.

centuries that this sense of self and temporality eventually imposed themselves upon the rest of the population, slowly percolating downward to an emergent working class, migrating upward to a declining nobility which was eventually assimilated through intermarriage and economic necessity and, finally, expanding laterally to Eastern Europe (and later to colonies across the globe) as a precondition at first for capital accumulation and later for cooperative entrepreneurial ventures.⁸⁷ So while it is true, as Taylor puts it, that "by the turn of the eighteenth century, something recognizably like the modern self is in process of constitution," it is also no less true that those initially under its sway were, as Taylor adds,

drawn from the educated classes of Europe and America, and were even a smaller proportion of these as one proceeded eastward, where these were in turn less significant in their societies. *Our history since 1800 has been*

⁸⁷ In order to manage both turbulent lower classes as well as recalcitrant traditional local ruling elites, and in order to assure free rein to Western European capitalist enterprise, a native bourgeois-bureaucratic class mimicking the ways of their West European mentors had to be and was created within the less industrialized European and North American colonies. In the case for example of the French meddling in what is today called Vietnam, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983), pp. 124-127, where is shown how the aim of the French colonial education system (including the imposition of *quôc ngữ*--a romanised phonetic script contrived by 17th century Jesuit missionaries) was twofold: first, to promote a break with the earlier Chinese influence, if not with the indigenous past itself, by making ancient literature less accessible to the recently colonised population; second, "to produce a carefully calibrated quantum of French speaking and French-writing Indochinese to serve as a politically reliable, grateful, and acculturated indigenous elite, filling the subordinate echelons of the colony's bureaucracy and larger commercial enterprises" (p. 126). Such developments would of course eventually backfire against those who instituted them as the recently created native "bourgeoisies" eventually developed their own sense of independent nationhood and decided that their own economic aspirations were best met by subjugating their populations directly, without the intermediary of their now cumbersome West European and North American mentors.

*the slow spreading outward and downward of the new modes of thought and sensibility to new nations and classes.*⁸⁸

It has been over the last two hundred years, then, that the modern sense of self and time outgrew its bourgeois origins in order to extend itself to the populace at large (in terms both of class, for industrial nations, and in terms of geopolitical proximity, for regions peripheral to these industrial nations). So class specific has been bourgeois future oriented temporality and the sense of self it informs, in fact, that before it became so hegemonic by the early to mid- 20th century so as to be conflated with the modern self as such, it tended to spark violent reactions during periods of revolutionary ferment, as can be seen by the routine shooting of clocks whether in 1830 or 1848, and as can be seen more tellingly still in the first symbolic gesture of the *Commune de Paris* in 1871 which sought to establish a radically new form of non-bourgeois temporality, as Kristin Ross observes, by toppling the *Colonne de Vendôme* --a move bemoaned by the Parnassian poet and *anti-communard* Catulle Mendès, of irreproachable bourgeois sympathies, as an abolishing of history which “makes for a timeless present, an annihilated past, and an uncertain future.”⁸⁹

Alternative forms both of temporality (such as exemplary, cyclical or eschatological time) and of self-formation (such as that of the extended family of agricultural society, or of the caste system of premodern society) indeed persisted,

⁸⁸ *Sources of the Self*, p. 185, 394. My emphasis.

⁸⁹ *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune*, p. 7.

beyond the late 18th century, within the population at large. Future orientedness and the modern self it informs were after all not some cataclysmic mutation which suddenly ensnared a hapless population in its entirety: “if modernity was to mark a condition of experience,” Peter Wagner emphasizes, “then the qualifications required to show its existence were largely absent in the allegedly modern societies during the 19th century, and for a still fairly large number of people during the first half of the 20th century.”⁹⁰ To be sure, with the intensification of enclosures in the 17th and 18th centuries, with the resulting influx of landless migrant workers into burgeoning industrial zones, and with the generalization of functional differentiation as a mode of social organization, the circumscription on one’s identity in terms of function instead of caste began to extend to increasingly large segments of the population. But such a process did not immediately extend the bourgeois sense of self and temporality to these increasing segments of the population: for many during this period, on the contrary, *the migration from the country to the city changed very little with regard to their actual experience or expectations*; one mode of labouring was merely exchanged for another, and as David Landes reminds us, the “factory worker could be, and usually was, as tradition-bound in his expectations for himself and his children as the peasant.”⁹¹ And such tradition-bound milieux, as we have

⁹⁰ Peter Wagner *A Sociology of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 3.

⁹¹ *The Unbound Prometheus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p.9. Regarding this gradual extension of bourgeois future oriented self-identity to the general population, Alain Ehrenberg’s recent work goes so far as to maintain that what in the early 19th century had remained the province of a few *litterati* and a small bourgeois elite—that is, individual future oriented itineraries based, *inter alia*, on expectations of upward social mobility and individual future oriented self-development—was so gradual

seen, hardly encouraged the opening of the future, and still less did it foster an accentuated role of experience in self-formation.

The relation between experience and self-formation ought not to be edified, then, from a historically contingent phenomenon into an anthropologically given constant. Yet it is just such an edification which has been at work in certain strands of subaltern historiography: just as such strands *anachronistically mimic* the sociohistorical vectors at work in early modern nation building by resorting, as Terry Cochran notes, to a Gramscian notion of subalternity which, in the name “of constructing a historical movement and providing for its self-awareness as a historical protagonist,” unknowingly “operates according to the same economy of hegemony as the state,”⁹² likewise do appeals to experience in the name of subaltern “resistance,” agency or specificity presume that the modern sense of self, with its self-reflexive coordination of experiences into biographical narratives, is a universal human condition instead of a historical product, that there is a *necessary* correlation between the cultural articulation of shared experiences and the formation of group specificity and self-identity, and that what once

in its percolation to the population at large that it became a generalized phenomenon only during the *trente glorieuses* of welfare capitalism following World War II, at which point the last vestiges of traditional or premodern sociability and subjectivity yielded to their modern homologues. See Ehrenberg's *l'individu incertain*, pp.18-19 and 85-87.

⁹²Terry Cochran, "Culture in its Sociohistorical Dimension," p.148. This twist is of course not without a certain irony: as Cochran adds, "Retrospectively, it seems ironic that the existing state, the object of Gramsci's critical analysis, was rejected even as its form was to be duplicated."(p. 148).

seems to have applied to the emergent bourgeoisie somehow holds today for the subaltern groupuscule. By thus transposing into a current sociohistorical context or, worse, by naturalizing, that which took place at a specific historical juncture, such a-historical manoeuvring fails to consider the extent to which *may or may not be viable today* those very sociohistorical vectors which, at first for the 18th century bourgeoisie and, subsequently over the last two centuries, for western industrial populations at large, allowed for experience to play a constitutive role in self-formation to begin with. And it is in just such a failure to recognise *the class origins* of an increased reliance on experience for self-formation that the erring ways of Thomsonian theory are at their most flagrant: for all its claims to being historically minded, and for all its initial debt to problems of class (later to shift to ethnic, gender and subaltern issues), the Thompsian notion of experience itself remains beyond the reach of historical and class analysis. And the ironic twist to this is that structures of bourgeois self-formation, temporality and history end up being unwittingly reproduced, on a smaller and more regional scale, within those very counter-histories and micro-narratives which were supposed to preserve and consolidate subaltern specificity.

6. *O Tempora! O Mores!*

The extension over the last two centuries of an initially bourgeois sense of self and temporality to the general population of industrialized nations and, later, of colonialized regions peripheral to these industrialized nations, seems in retrospect so seamless that even those who recognize the historicity of self-formation (such as Giddens) often fail to acknowledge its class origins, and the result has been the conflation of the modern bourgeois self with the modern self as such. But to refer to this self as modern, as has been done for example in this investigation, is not entirely misguided: such a sense of self has throughout modernity so penetrated class distinctions and geographical boundaries, and so successfully supplanted its earlier homologues, that few viable alternatives have survived—and the few that still remain have been declining as rapidly as have been alternative and local economies in the face of globalized economic neoliberalism. The modern self, if not modernity itself, originated in and was propelled by the bourgeoisie; and as Raymond Williams, Bourdieu, Jameson and others have suggested, if it were not for the need for euphemisms following the jaundiced eye with which a few (yet strangely influential) trends in French theory gaze upon Marx, modernity should be called by its true name: capitalism. But the problem of the self, today, is not one of terminological rectitude; it is instead one of history. It is a problem in which, as Taylor has pointed out, the modern self must be seen as

a function of a historically limited mode of self-interpretation, one which has become dominant in the modern West and which may indeed spread

thence to other parts of the globe, but *which had a beginning in time and space and which may have an end.*⁹³

It is to this latter issue that the Thompsonian appeal to experience, for all its imbrication in issues of temporality and subaltern specificity, obliquely yet most insistently points, and it is thus on this issue of self-formation that we must linger—it is here that can be seen what is truly at stake. The Thompsonian appeal to experience is indeed essentially an appeal to a certain historical way of assuring a diachronically extended sense of self. By unknowingly testifying to the growing incapacity, today, to be otherwise than immediate, it also testifies to how the historically contingent modern self may no longer be faring as well over the last two decades as it had over the preceding two centuries. While it may not yet have succumbed to generalized schizophrenia and rhizomic dispersal, as some suggest it should or one day will, the modern sense of self, as we have seen, is undoubtedly ailing: as the future oriented temporality upon which this self is predicated so relentlessly pursues its dynamic to the point of dissipating into a futureless extended present, the disruptiveness of the unexpected and the reflexive revision of the given—experience in other words—can but see attenuated its role in self-formation. This is where, to use Adorno's expression, the truth content of the Thompsonian appeal to experience comes into play: if such an appeal has been so insistent, this testifies not merely to a failure to historicize, nor to sloppy theorizing, and still less to a Machiavellian penchant for political expediency which Spivak prefers to call "strategic essentialism;" more importantly, it testifies to an unavowed but strongly felt need—the need for

⁹³ *Sources of the Self*, p. 111. My emphasis.

maintaining a sense of self in the midst of an extended present where the modern structure of self-formation, now that it has effectively supplanted earlier or alternative modes of identity formation, is no longer faring well, *but has yet to be replaced by viable alternatives that can be lived with.*

The modern self, variously referred to in shorthand as Cartesian, centred, logocentric, phallocratic, or Oedipal, has of course been besieged by various schools of thought—and this not without good reason. The history of the modern self and of modernity as a whole is not an illustrious one, beset as it has been by repression and coercion—although it tends to be forgotten that this is no less true for the history of their premodern predecessors. Moreover, if epistemology is the issue at hand, then any pretensions to truth, let alone to self-transparency, by such a subject could hardly withstand Marxist, Freudian, or Wittgensteinian scrutiny. But should such critiques of the modern self or subject one-sidedly propose, as not a few schools of thought have done since the 1970s,⁹⁴ that such a self rid itself of its logophilic fetters and instead embrace, as Peter Dews derisively puts it, “a blunt prioritization of particularity, diversity, and non-identity,” and “just say yes” to the “schizophrenic fragmentation of experience and loss of

⁹⁴ This is indeed a position specifically advocated by certain strains of French theory from the 1970s to this day, and *is not* presaged, say, by some *avant-la-lettrist* Nietzsche (to whom such theories like to claim lineage). For more on how Nietzsche was all too aware of the dangers, if not the silliness, of such one-sided critiques of the modern self, see Peter Dews, “Adorno, Poststructuralism, and the Critique of Identity,” in *The Problems of Modernity*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 1-22.

identity,”⁹⁵ then the failure to historicize characteristic of Thompsonian inspired cultural theory is merely reproduced in a reversed mirror image: just as the former unwittingly and ahistorically proposes that the subaltern self and counter-historiography mimic the bourgeois model, likewise do one-sided critiques of the self no less ahistorically propose the dispersed self as a timeless moral imperative and *desideratum*. Much as neoliberalism tells us that the true nature of man—the desire to exchange within a generalized “flexibility” bereft of the coercive and totalitarian ways of state interference—will one day flourish if only Luddites and the nostalgically-inclined, with their obdurate clinging to such rigidities as minimal economic security, would forego their pesky archaic ways and instead embrace the exhilaration of unbridled change and flexibility, likewise does the generic postmodernist critique of the self, in more or less sophisticated versions, tell us that the centred or unified sense of self is but a reassuring (but uncouth) fiction owing its existence (or “effect”) to the ontotheological or phallogocentric manhandling, throughout the ages, of fluid becoming and of the irreducibly particular—a situation which can, and must—so we are told—be remedied through the courageous abandonment of our rigid logophilic ways and infantile desire for stability or “decidability” in favour of a more fluid and flexible Nietzschean YEA-saying to Heraclitean becoming.

⁹⁵“Adorno, Post-structuralism, and the Critique of Identity,” pp. 17, 4.

The problems with this latter stance are twofold. First of all, any claim to resisting or subverting the logophilic ways of abstraction, temporal extension and mediation by catering to the singular, the punctual and the immediate, actually backfires: what such a stance, Dews notes, “mistakes for immediacy will in fact be highly mediated,”⁹⁶ and “the hyperconcrete,” as Henri Lefèbvre puts it, “is as abstract as are philosophical generalities.”⁹⁷ As can indeed be seen in the case the Lyotard’s *Économie libidinale*, which Dews rightly suggests can stand as a representative for most poststructuralist critiques of the self,

The notion of a libidinal band composed of ephemeral intensities is an attempt to envisage a condition which, as Nietzsche puts it, “no moment would be for the sake of another.” But if every moment is prized purely for its uniqueness, without reference to a before or an after, without reference to anything which goes beyond itself, then what is enjoyed in each moment becomes paradoxically and monotonously the same.⁹⁸

For all its touted subversive potential, the irreducibly singular merely means, as Sean Homer puts it, that “...we are faced with the monotony of absolute dispersion and

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 13.

⁹⁷ *Critique de la vie quotidienne II: Fondements d’une sociologie de la quotidienneté* (Paris: L’Arche, 1961), p. 184

⁹⁸Ibid., p. 13. Bill Readings, himself otherwise sympathetic to Lyotard, comes to similar conclusions with regard to Lyotard’s ill-fated attempt in *Économie libidinale* to oppose the commensurability of the interchangeably commodifiable with the intense singularity of the event. The result of such an attempt is that “all events would then be indifferently, interchangeably, commensurably meaningless and incommensurable resistances to the organic whole of history.” (*Introducing Lyotard*, p. 104.)

absolute difference"⁹⁹—hardly a state of affairs likely to undermine the hegemonic ways of logophilia of phallocracy.

Secondly, it remains unlikely that the punctual dispersed self, however laudable the intentions motivating its celebration, any more “subverts” the given than does the “unified” self of modernity they hope to dispel. Indeed, as Rosalind Krauss puts it in reference to the Minimalist attempt to resist the “serializing of commodity production,” and to undermine the temporally extended and cohesive modern self with a “subject radically contingent upon the conditions of the spatial field” and with an “insistence on the immediacy of ...experience, understood as bodily immediacy”: such a “Minimalist subject of ‘lived bodily experience’—unballasted by past knowledge and coalescing in the very moment of its encounter with the object could, if pushed a little farther, break up entirely into the utterly fragmented, postmodern subject” and, in so doing, merely “partakes very deeply of that formal condition that can be seen to structure consumer capitalism: the condition, that is, of seriality.”¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, as Felski notes in reference to poststructuralist versions of feminism:

The further issue of the relationship between “postmodernism” and “late capitalism” in turn raises questions which may overlap with and have significant implications for the feminist project. For example, feminist theories which assume the subversive quality of a decentered fragmented subjectivity as in some sense “feminine” or oppositional may merely echo rather than challenge a cultural logic of conspicuous consumption and

⁹⁹“Fredric Jameson and the Limits of Postmodern Theory,” p. 7.

¹⁰⁰ “The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum,” pp. 8-10.

stimulation of desire in which the unified, repressed self of an earlier epoch of bourgeois liberalism is already in many respects anachronistic.¹⁰¹

If indeed, as we saw earlier with Jameson, the dispersed self is more a description of how we now live than it is some subversive ideal to be reached, and if the “repressed self of an earlier bourgeois epoch” is a historical (and thus potentially anachronistic) product for the current situation, then Felski has a point when she asks: “If, as Eagleton has argued, late capitalism has already deconstructed the subject more efficiently than meditations on *écriture*, does feminism wish to assent unconditionally to such a project?”¹⁰²

This is an important question to ask. It must indeed be remembered that the modern self, and the experience out of which it sustains itself in the face of increased complexity and a divergent temporality, are not some timeless ontotheological illusion but instead historical products of late 18th century developments that arose out of a certain necessity—the necessity for survival. This is precisely what Nietzsche, for all the one-sided poststructuralist readings to which he has been subjected, himself tirelessly stresses throughout his work: as Dews sums it up, Nietzsche of course deals with

the aversion of the human mind to chaos, its fear of unmediated intuition, and its resultant attempts to simplify the world by reducing diversity to identity. There is, however, an equally strong pragmatic tendency in Nietzsche, which suggests that this process of ordering and simplification

¹⁰¹ “Feminism, Postmodernism and the Critique of Modernity,” pp. 55-56.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 56.

takes place *not simply because of an “existential” need for security, but in the interests of sheer survival.*¹⁰³

We have indeed already seen how the modern self, following the opening of the future and, with it, the proliferation of unexpectedness, had to devise strategies to stave off overwhelming complexity – a complexity which threatened its very survival or, to use Luhmanian terminology, its sense of difference between itself and its environment. Although the future oriented temporality of modernity has undergone considerable transformation over the last few decades, this has not, however, reduced the complexity at hand, let alone the need for experience in order to palliate its effects: on the contrary, the erosion of future orientedness as a result of accelerated innovation in turn spurs yet more unmanageable complexity. Indeed, if in an extended present the unexpected becomes expected, this stems not from the colonialisation of the future; it stems instead from the failure to undergo experience in such a manner that a reflexive revision of past and present might accommodate the unexpected – the unexpected is no longer worked through and reflexively integrated but is instead allowed to remain at the state of a brute shock. A spiral of mutual reinforcement is thus set into motion whereby an ever-decreasing temporal extendedness allows for the unchecked proliferation of the temporally uncoordinated and unmediated, or the immediate...yet this unchecked proliferation of the

¹⁰³“Adorno, Post-structuralism, and the Critique of Identity,” p. 7. My emphasis. This approach can likewise be seen in the work of Adorno, as Dews has also noted: “Adorno perceives that compulsive identity, *the sacrifice of the moment for the future, was necessary at certain stage of history*, in order for human beings to liberate themselves from blind subjugation to nature” (p. 19). My emphasis.

immediate in turn reinforces the incapacity for temporal extendedness, future oriented or otherwise. And once is lost the capacity for future orientedness, that is, the organising principle of temporal coordination since modernity, time appears as “a series of discrete moments, each of which severs prior experiences from subsequent ones in such a way that no continuous “narrative” can be sustained,” as Giddens put it, and the result is “anxiety about obliteration, of being engulfed, crushed or overwhelmed by externally impinging events.”¹⁰⁴ Complexity in other words reaches such proportions that rather than encourage “yea saying” to Becoming, it instead stimulates the frantic search for temporal continuity, be it in terms of subaltern particularist historiography or, in its more desperate manifestations, in terms of neoethnic tribalism.¹⁰⁵ It would be a mistake, then, to dismiss as nostalgic the misgivings expressed by various historically-minded theorists, from Nietzsche and Henri Lefèbvre to Felski, Dews and Jameson— who hardly have sympathy for capitalism and the modern self with which it is entwined—which can be encapsulated by Lefèbvre’s rhetorical question: “the subject and the self-consciousness historically engendered during the era of bourgeois ascendancy have been for some time in crisis. Yet is this a sufficient reason for altogether dispensing with them?”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 53. My emphasis.

¹⁰⁵ For more on how, as Miyoshi put it, “neoethnicism is appealing because of its brute simplicity and reductivism in this rapidly altering and bewilderingly complex age,” see his “A Borderless World?...”, p. 744.

¹⁰⁶ *Critique de la vie quotidienne III: De la modernité au modernisme (Pour une métaphilosophie du quotidien)* (Paris: L’Arche, 1981) p. 165

In a temporality which is neither past nor future oriented, time stagnates within an extended present. Time has not so much become discontinuous as it has come to a halt, and experience has eroded not so much because of a generalisation of some schizophrenic inability to narrativise, or because of some loss in faith in meta narratives, than because experience, while still a central component of modern self-formation, *no longer enjoys a temporal divergence which might foster it*. Yet because experience has been so vital for a modern sense of self, it cannot be peremptorily dismissed as but the stuff of ontotheological hoodwinking. Although temporally extended experience has undeniably been undermined within an extended present, the modern sense of self has yet to find a substitute for sustaining itself in the face of increased complexity. If indeed the modern self, bereft as it is of the buttressing enjoyed by its premodern homologue through the external determinants of caste, kinship and a divinely ordained cosmic order, must maintain its sense of identity across the temporal manifold, as Giddens has shown, by means of its self-reflexive narrativisation, and if, as Kerby has recently put it, “the quasi-narrative nature of our experience is the condition of possibility of the stories we tell ourselves,”¹⁰⁷ then the erosion of those socio-historical conditions which allowed for the constitutive role of experience in modern self-formation can but entail a corresponding change in the manner by which identity is fashioned and sustained. Without the possibility, through the undergoing of experience, of renewing self narration in the face of the new, complexity can no longer be contained, and the self, deprived of an

¹⁰⁷ *Narrative and the Self*, p.8.

all encompassing premodern past, yet no less deprived of modern orientedness, can but fail to narrativise itself beyond the immediate. Finally, because diachronic self-narration, Kerby notes, must be seen “not only as descriptive of the self but, more importantly, *as fundamental to the emergence and reality of that subject*,”¹⁰⁸ then the result of an extended present is a weakening not only of identity, but also of a very sense of reality: “In an age of an unlimited proliferation of images, discourses, simulacra,” Huyssen rightly notes, “the search for the real itself has become utopian, and this search is fundamentally invested in the desire for temporality.”¹⁰⁹

True, the bourgeois or modern self is coterminous with the rise to prominence of a socio economic order marred, to say the least, by an unflattering history; it nevertheless remains that by so effectively replacing earlier forms of self-formation, this modern self has left behind few alternatives— at least for now. There cannot be a return to earlier forms of self-formation, since the economic base for these have disappeared and, besides, these were hardly less coercive than the bourgeois one which supplanted them. But neither can we revel in the current state of affairs, where we are left with a vacuum which, if abhorred by nature (as Aristotle would say), is no less abhorred by the population at large—and such a vacuum has accordingly quickly been filled by

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁰⁹ *Twilight Memories*, p 101.

wishful returns to imaginary pasts and by spurious substitutes to the modern self: the current state of affairs, as Gopal Balakrishnan, puts it, indeed

does not bring a kinder and gentler world. The transnationalization of the productive forces does not extinguish the desire for stable, clear and authentic 'identities'. As the patterns of contemporary cultural and economic life relentlessly frustrate the desire and need to live in communities, these become 'imagined' only in the bad sense, i.e., disconnected from any sense of social reality, civic commitment and the possibility of transformative collective agency. No longer based on any substantial experiences of a shared political destiny, the longing for national identity becomes a taste for a pseudo-archaic ethnicity cranked out in made-to-order forms by the heritage industry.¹¹⁰

So if Thompsonian appeals to experience have a truth content, this is not limited to its reference to a socio-historically circumscribed phase in human history which may be no longer as applicable today as it had been over the last two centuries. More important still, it points to what has in fact been a perennial need—the need for a sense of identity. Not only is the defense of the punctual state of the self, at best, a theoretical construct abstracted from history (as we have just seen), and at worse, a description of the current state of the self rather than its rebuke or subversion (as Jameson would suggest); more important still, it is not a viable solution—except perhaps in the context of post-symposium chats within a small academic coterie. Implicated as they are within issues of self-identity, the insistence of and the hunger for experiences may after all be very real, and appeals to experience have very real consequences. The sense of self within which, since the advent of modernity, experience has played a constitutive role, may not be the

¹¹⁰ "The National Imagination," *New left Review* (May/June 1995): p. 68.

motor of history, but neither is it a mere superstructural epiphenomenon of some more fundamental socio-economic process, nor even a mere by-product of some metaphysical fetishization of presence. This sense of self is indeed not to be taken lightly, as the recent proliferation of tribalistic convulsions and other identity schemes have made painfully clear. After all, for all the historical change that has taken place since man has graced the Earth with his fitful presence, “what seems truly unchanging,” as Kerby put it, “is not so much the content of this identity, ...but rather the need for and belief in such an identity, which is correlated with our desire to be.”¹¹¹

It is of course always tempting to join in the predictable (but admittedly now tiresome) ritual of prefixing the Big Modernist Concepts with “post,” to vociferate apocalyptic decrees and spew forth oracular declarations, and then to indecorously discard these concepts as but so many dustballs fit for the proverbial trash can of history. True, such cathartic gesticulation, along with its flamboyant rhetorical flourishes, can imbue the more intemperate among us with the titillating sense of being “subversive” and *à la page*; it nevertheless remains, as Rita Felski reminds us, that “the postmodern ideology of the rupture, the apocalyptic appeal to deaths and endings, merely reinforces the very tradition which it is trying to subvert, reenacting one of the most enduring *topoi* of modernity, the radical negation of the past.”¹¹² The premature dismissal of concepts or

¹¹¹ *Narrative and the Self*, p. 110.

¹¹² “Feminism, Postmodernism and the Critique of Modernity,” p. 53.

problems only allows these to subsist all the more tenaciously now that they operate clandestinely behind our backs. What is needed, then, is not that certain modernist concepts be debunked as “false,” but instead that be gauged the extent to which the historical processes or phenomena named by such concepts, for better or for worse, may or may not be still operative today.

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