
Preface

Paik once told a story about buying books in Japan: he succeeded in buying all the most important Japanese philosophical works on the subject of time, in order to study them in the original, only to discover on his return to New York that he didn't have time to read them.¹

By the time we have read all the works announcing the onset of postmodernity, it will probably already be over. Like the crisis theorists of the 1970s, everyone is waiting for the market in postmodernism to collapse. They are likely to be disappointed. Why this is so, is one of the things this book tries to understand – which is not to suggest that the word ‘postmodern’ is an adequate sign for the times, still less for the kinds of time that they encode; nor, in this instance, is it to insist upon an ideological or sociological analysis of its persistence. Rather, it is a more philosophical explanation that is sought. For it is a curious feature of the literature of and on postmodernism that despite its ostensibly – on occasion, ostentatiously – theoretical character, it contains hardly any philosophical writing about the concept at all. Just what the postmodern might mean, philosophically – in the sense in which, for example, thinkers as opposed as Habermas and Foucault share a general conception of the philosophical discourse of modernity – remains almost totally obscure.

This claim is liable to be misunderstood. It is not that philosophers have not written about postmodernism. Lyotard would be the obvious example. Nor is there a lack of philosophical literature that designates itself, or other such literature, ‘postmodern’. What is rare is to find the ideas of postmodernism, postmodernity and the postmodern the object of philosophical attention at the level at which they are constituted, as periodizing concepts of cultural history. The term ‘postmodern’ is commonly used to refer to any of a loosely related set of philosophical positions, all more or less critical of something that

has come to be called 'Enlightenment reason', all more or less post-Nietzschean. Yet most of these positions are compatible with aspects of the work of a far wider range of thinkers than are usually cited, many of whom (including both Hegel and Marx) are assumed to belong on the other side of its divide. For without an account of the philosophically modern – of 'modern' as a philosophical term – let alone the philosophically modernistic, such references are fated to remain little more than empty gestures, labels for the philosophically fashionable, the comfortably up-to-date. If there is a case for viewing Derrida, for example, within the terms of this debate, the balance of such argument as there has been undoubtedly falls on the side of his being a modernist; not a postmodernist, philosophically, at all.²

What follows is an attempt to approach all this from another angle, to pick up some current concerns – about time and history and culture, about the present as change, and history as culture – and subject them to another perspective: a perspective that is best summed up by the phrase, *the politics of historical time*. If Aristotle sought to understand time through change, since it is first encountered in entities that change, might we not reverse the procedure, and seek to comprehend change through time? The aim of this book is to contribute to current debates about historical periodization and cultural change by connecting them up to a philosophical literature on time. Once we do this, two things soon become apparent. One is that the whole network of ideas about the postmodern is firmly inscribed within the problematic of the temporal dialectics of modernity. (It may involve a decisive mutation of the field, but it remains within its parameters nonetheless.) The other is that there is a deeper conceptual logic to be found at work in such categories of cultural self-consciousness than is suggested by the way in which they are usually deployed, as markers for chronologically distinct and empirically identifiable periods, movements, forms or styles: a logic of historical totalization which raises questions about the nature of historical time itself.³

It is no longer the case, as it was more than a decade ago, before the publication of Berman's pioneering work and Habermas's lectures on the topic, that 'discourse and controversy over the meaning of modernity . . . have virtually ceased to exist' in the wake of a triumphant postmodernism eager only to rediscover itself in history.⁴ Yet the revival of interest in modernity has focused more on the idea of reason, and the variety of its social forms, than on the concept of modernity itself. There remains scope for further clarification of what kind of concept modernity is and, in particular, for a more systematic

consideration of the relations between its various aspects than has characterized the English-language literature to date. Chapter 1 undertakes this task in the form of a critique of the failure to attend sufficiently closely to the temporal dimension of 'modernity' as a form of historical time.

'Modernity' and 'postmodernity', 'modernism', 'postmodernism' and 'avant-garde' are categories of historical consciousness which are constructed at the level of the apprehension of history as a whole. More specifically, they are categories of historical totalization in the medium of cultural experience. As such, each involves a distinct form of historical temporalization – a distinctive way of temporalizing 'history' – through which the three dimensions of phenomenological or lived time (past, present and future) are linked together within the dynamic and eccentric unity of a single historical view. Associated with such temporalizations are both particular historical epistemologies (defining the temporal forms and limits of knowledge) and particular orientations towards practice, particular *politics of time*. Modernism and postmodernism – like conservatism, traditionalism and reaction – are interventions in the field of the politics of time. The historical study of cultural forms needs to be rethought within the framework of competing philosophies and politics of time. In this way, the deeper structures that underlie and animate a wide variety of recent work in social and cultural theory might be exposed to critical scrutiny.

From this perspective, the popularity and tenacity of postmodernism as a diagnostic discourse of 'the times' can be seen to bespeak a desire for totalization in the medium of cultural experience which is not currently satisfied by any other critical tendency. Postmodernism inherits the terrain not only of Marxism but, thereby, of classical German philosophy as well: the field of the philosophy of history.⁵ Postmodernism, one might say, is the revenge of the philosophical discourse of modernity upon Marxism for neglecting problems in the philosophy of history. Yet if postmodernism offers a new way out of German idealism, via its 'incredulity towards meta-narratives',⁶ consistency demands that it extend this incredulity towards itself. If there is a single philosophical trait by which postmodernism is marked, for all its avoidance of 'philosophy', it is surely its susceptibility to the corrosive power of this paradox of self-referentiality.⁷

But this is not a book about postmodernism; nor, except in an extended sense, is it about modernism either. Rather, it is a book about time which grew out of a book about modernity, a book about

the philosophy of time which grew out of a book about the culture of modernity: two books, written as one. Yet they are not so different as this description might suggest. For modernity is a culture of time of which nineteenth- and twentieth-century European philosophy has been a crucial constituent part. Whether one is, like Baudelaire, 'weighed down, every moment, by the conception and sensation of time',⁸ or, like the Surrealists, energized and uplifted by its transformative power, it has become increasingly hard to be indifferent to either its simple passage or sudden ruptural force. Time imposes itself as a problem within nineteenth- and twentieth-century European philosophy, in a qualitatively different way from that in which it previously appeared as a paradigmatic example of the unchanging character of philosophical questions, in the new twofold form of the problem of *history* and the problem of *death*.⁹

The specific problem posed by modernity as a structure of historical time concerns its totalizing form. This is the topic of chapter 2. Modernity, it is argued in chapter 1, is a totalizing temporalization of history. Yet what justifies such totalization in the face of the future? Or, to put the question another way, what future is there for an emphatic conception of historical experience after the critique of Hegelianism, within which I include the philosophy of history implicit in the political culture of the Communist tradition? Chapter 2 follows Ricoeur, in approaching this question through a rethinking of the relevance of post-Hegelian phenomenology to an understanding of the narrative structure of historical experience. It suggests that we cannot avoid the totalization of history because of the existential structure of temporalization. Totalization is thus an operation to be negotiated, not forsaken. Debate about historical totalization is always (whether or not it knows it) effectively debate about its forms, meaning and limits, rather than its possibility *per se*. The problem with Hegelianism derives not from totalization as such, but from its specific mode: the combination of the positing of an *immanent narrative* end to history with the claim to *absolute* knowledge. Some other standpoint is needed from which to construct the idea of history as a developing whole. This is found in chapter 2 in an extension of the early Heidegger's analysis of death to the level of historical time.

Furthermore, whereas Ricoeur restricts his phenomenological exploration of narrative form to the confines of poetics, it too is extended here to embrace the ontology of historical time. There is an ontological dimension to historical temporalization which allows us to treat Heidegger's early work as a site from which the conceptualization of the totalizing structure of historical time might set out

anew, freed from the metaphysic of an immanent narrative end. However, if Heidegger offers an ontological (more specifically, an existential) take on temporalization as a totalizing process which is nonetheless *eccentric*, and thus only fleetingly resolved, his argument requires extension to history in a fundamentally different manner from that undertaken by Heidegger himself. It is here that Ricoeur's work is useful once again. For in conceptualizing history as a mediation of phenomenological and cosmological forms, it insists upon a naturalistic dimension to human existence which Heidegger's conception of human existence as *Dasein* (literally, being-there), a self-interpreting being, methodologically excludes.

Chapter 2 develops a modified Heideggerianism in order to keep the question of historical totalization alive in the wake of the collapse of Hegelianism, by reading *Being and Time* in the shadow of Hegel's philosophy of history. Chapter 3 reads Hegel's *Phenomenology* in the shadow of *Being and Time*. For if Heidegger's notion of differential temporality offers the basis for a new concept of historical time, Hegel's notion of recognition is needed to bridge the gap between Heidegger's overly individualistic definition of *Dasein* and the social space of history. Hegel's dialectic of recognition transforms Heidegger's conception of temporality in the direction of Levinas's work, questioning its inherent 'mineness' and depicting it, instead, as the product of temporalization via relations with others. Heidegger's achievement was to uncover the existential structure of temporalization in the anticipation of death. Hegel's allegorical account of the struggle for recognition socializes this picture by locating the source of death (the meaning of death), and hence of time, in the other. Chapter 3 attempts to bring these two arguments together into the coherence of a single view, from which the individual and socio-historical aspects of the process might then be explored in tandem, on the basis of a common conceptual ground. This is attempted in the second half of chapter 3 and chapter 4, respectively: in the first case, via a consideration of the various combinations of Hegelian and Heideggerian motifs in (primarily French) psychoanalytic theory; in the second, with recourse to Walter Benjamin's historical sociology of cultural form.

Psychoanalytical metapsychology offers an account of the temporalization of time for the child by the death drive through primary identification as primary socialization. However, it is indifferent to the variety of temporal forms through which historical experience is constructed for adults through cultural practice – except insofar as they mirror the temporal patterns of unconscious desire. In this

respect, psychoanalysis usurps the ancient role of philosophy as a 'practice of death'.¹⁰ In Benjamin, on the other hand, we have the beginnings of an account of the temporalization of history by cultural form. This enables us to concretize our previous depiction of historical time (the temporalization of history by the anticipation of a timeless end, a *historical death*), in terms of a series of culturally specific representations of ends constituting history in a variety of different ways – as ethics (Levinas), tradition (Gadamer), chronology (historicism) or modernity (Heidegger and Benjamin), respectively. Furthermore, insofar as these forms are themselves the products of historically specific practices, they are possible objects of transformative practice. We are thus able to begin to give a more concrete meaning to the idea of a politics of time. A politics of time is a politics which takes the temporal structures of social practices as the specific objects of its transformative (or preservative) intent. Benjamin's and Heidegger's philosophies are themselves part of their authors' (radically conflicting) politics of time.

Modernity is a form of historical time which valorizes the new as the product of a constantly self-negating temporal dynamic. Yet its abstract temporal form remains open to a variety of competing articulations. In particular, by producing the old as remorselessly as it produces the new, and in equal measure, it provokes forms of traditionalism the temporal logic of which is quite different from that of tradition as conventionally received. Both traditionalism and reaction are distinctively modern forms. Chapter 5 extends the discussion of Benjamin's philosophical and political modernism, begun in the previous chapter, into a comparative investigation of the philosophical roots of the reactionary modernism of Heidegger's fascism. Heidegger's failure to acknowledge the social constitution of existence, identified in chapter 3, is found here to underlie the pure temporal constructivism of his construal of 'authentic historicity' as repetition. For the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, the individual can give authentic meaning to his or her existence only through the appropriation of the (mythic) destiny of a people as the choice of his or her individual fate.

One way back from such mystification to actual historical life is provided by a re-reading of 'everydayness' in *Being and Time* from the standpoint of the idea of recognition. Everydayness is also a notion which Benjamin's work requires, if the ecstatic futurity of its quasi-Messianic 'now' is to be mediated with the temporality of narrative so as to have an effect upon identity and action. The book thus closes by bringing together its readings of Ricoeur, Heidegger

and Benjamin to focus on the possibilities for historical experience embedded in the apparently ahistorical everyday – a concept which is further expounded with reference to Lefebvre's reformulation of Marxism as a critique of everyday life. By concluding with a discussion of Lefebvre, the book both projects itself tentatively forward into the space of cultural analysis, and returns to the trajectory of Western Marxism at one of its most culturally productive, but theoretically fractured, points.

In setting out from a theoretical problem within cultural history (epochal periodization) with tools taken from the history of philosophy, my approach is in part reconstructive, in part diagnostic and critical, and in part constructive, throughout. The book draws its inspiration from a wide range of sources (too wide to allow anything like a comprehensive discussion of its constituent elements), to which it is heavily indebted. But for all its apparent diversity (aptly described by an early reader in terms of the danger of it turning into 'a magical mystery tour of contemporary theory'), it is nonetheless directed by a singular philosophical intent: the exploration of the idea of a politics of time. Hopefully, it offers neither an eclectic collection nor a merely syncretic combination of positions, but a movement towards theory construction through appropriative critique; hence the necessity to keep returning to Heidegger, to grapple with the complexities of adopting and extending arguments from so exclusive a thinker, whose great, early unfinished work (*Being and Time*) remains so fertile a source of both theoretical inspiration and political disquiet.

It is a sign of times, perhaps, that there is so much about Heidegger in this book, and so little about Marx. Yet this may be misleading. For if there is a single figure who stands behind its project, it is Benjamin, whose own work itself remains as radically unfinished as ever – although he would have scorned any help from Heidegger in developing its terms. In letters from the early 1930s, Benjamin outlined a way of thinking about Marxism which has considerable relevance in the current context. He distinguished between Communism (as a political tradition), historical materialism (as a theoretical project), and Marxism (as an orthodox interpretation of the latter, in which the authority of tradition constricts its development by imposing 'the unpractical, unproductive form of the credo'). Benjamin argued that the affirmation of the political tradition (Communism) left the theory (historical materialism) 'a much greater freedom than the Marxists suspect'.¹¹ This is a useful reminder for a period in which the crisis of the political tradition (socialism) is producing as many simple-minded ideas about the theoretically

'outmoded' as retreats to the creed, in both its 'legitimizing' and 'academic' variants.¹²

One thing which Benjamin's writings demonstrate is the amount of philosophical work still to be done in developing a materialist conception of history. Another is the impossibility of doing that work consistently apart from philosophical reflection upon the forms of time-consciousness produced by the variety of historically established social practices which make up any particular present. But if there is a philosophical deficit in contemporary cultural theory (as there is, to a lesser extent, within Marxism), there is a corresponding sociological deficit built into the forms of universality of the philosophical tradition. Marx recognized this, but he misjudged the complexity of the problems to which it leads. One of the aims of this work is to provide some philosophical resources for rethinking the terms of a materialist cultural theory. And if, at times, its narrative takes on the frustrating appearance of a shaggy dog story, I would like to think that this has as much to do with philosophy's logic of presupposition as any resistance to theoretical completion – which is ultimately, of course, little more than a denial of death. Which brings us back to Nam June Paik and his unread pile of the most important Japanese philosophical works on the subject of time. This book is for Paik. For what if there was time to read about time? What might it tell us about the character of our times?

Earlier versions of parts of this work have been tried out as papers or published as sections of shorter texts. I would like to thank the University of Essex Symposia on 'Postmodernism and the Re-reading of Modernity' in summer 1990, for inviting me to present what turned out to be the first draft of chapter 1; an intermediate, shorter version was published as 'Modernity is a Qualitative, Not a Chronological, Category' in *New Left Review* 192, March/April 1992, and in Francis Barker et al., *Postmodernism and the Re-reading of Modernity*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1992. The Deutsche Haus at Columbia University, New York and the Humanities Graduate Seminar at the University of New South Wales, Australia provided me with opportunities to subject preliminary versions of my reading of Ricoeur in chapter 2 to critical scrutiny, in the spring of 1992. A summary of the general argument which follows from that reading was presented to the *Radical Philosophy* conference, 'The Politics of Experience', in London in November 1993. It subsequently appeared as 'The Politics of Time' in *Radical Philosophy* 68, Autumn 1994. The first two sections of chapter 3 were presented as a paper to the

Research Seminar of the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy, Middlesex University, in April 1994. Some of the material on Walter Benjamin in the second halves of chapters 4 and 5 first appeared in 'Small-scale Victories, Large-scale Defeats: Walter Benjamin's Politics of Time', in Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (eds), *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, Routledge, London, 1994 – the argument of which is modified here and considerably extended. The first two sections of chapter 5 develop thoughts first sketched in the concluding section of 'Tactics, Ethics or Temporality? Heidegger's Politics Reviewed', *Radical Philosophy* 70, March/April 1995. Kristin Ross induced me to think seriously about the everyday, despite initial scepticism, with an (unfulfilled) commission to reconstruct its philosophical history. The discussion of everydayness in chapter 5 benefited from presentation of a draft to the Humanities Graduate Centre Seminar, Middlesex University, in November 1994.

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