disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory

Volume 8 *peregriNations* Article 4

4-15-1999

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/DISCLOSURE.08.04

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## Recommended Citation

Claycomb, Brandon; Nicholas, Jeffery; and Smith, Laurel (1999) "History and Nations in the Postmodern Era. *disClosure* interviews Geoff Eley," *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*: Vol. 8, Article 4.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/DISCLOSURE.08.04
Available at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol8/iss1/4

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Jeffery Nicholas, and
Laurel Smith

# History and Nations in the Postmodern Era

## disClosure interviews Geoff Eley

**(20 January 1998)**

Geoff Eley teaches history at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, and is a recognized expert on nationalism from the dawn of the Enlightenment era to the present. Eley is the author of *Reshaping the German Right: Radical Nationalism and Political Change after Bismarck* (London and New Haven, 1980), *From Unification to Nazism: Reinterpreting the German Past* (London, 1986), and *Kontinuität in Deutschland* (Munster, 1991), and is co-author with David Blackbourn of *The Particularities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford, 1984). He has also edited with Ronald Gregory Suny a book entitled *Becoming National: A Reader* (Oxford, 1996).

Eley visited the University of Kentucky campus in January of 1998 to discuss nationalism, with particular emphasis on Germany. He took some time from his busy schedule to discuss various aspects of his work on nationalism with a

*disClosure* interview team. We began with a discussion of an interesting comment in the introduction to *Becoming National*, concerning Eley's call for cultural recovery and the celebration of difference. Our conversation then led quickly to further questions about Eley's position regarding Habermas, and to an elaborate and sometimes personal discourse on how the postmodern era, both in its academic and historic/national guises, has complicated the work of many historians.

## Historical Geneology and Nationalism

**disClosure:** We would like to open this discussion with a question about Germany and its so-called *Sonderweg*, or "special path," to nationhood. You seem to suggest in some of your works that this phrasing implies an illegitimate ideal of how a nation *should* develop.

**Geoffrey Eley:** Exactly. My resistance to calling Germany's history peculiar comes from the conviction that national histories need to be disengaged from developmental schemas that imply sequential movement from lower to higher stages. As you point out, I've spent a lot of time dismantling the extraordinarily well-entrenched comparative framework that sees German "misdevelopment" in relation to a particular idealization of British and French history. And if we follow the logic of that critique through, then this presumption of an ideal form of nation-building, or of the nation, makes no sense. Part of my default approach is some notion of combined and uneven development. Whichever particular examples we choose, the global or transnational contexts will always exercise a profound impact on how processes of national state formation and political development are able to work themselves out. So the implicit logic of developmental approaches to these questions, which treat each nation as a discrete entity, seems to me flawed. Of course, it's really hard to get out of that trap.

**dC:** You mean the trap of an evolutionary schema?

**GE:** Yes. Very difficult.

**dC:** But even if one avoided an evolutionary perspective, keeping in mind your skepticism about treating nations as discrete entities, what are we to make of ethnicity? Because ethnicity is cited now, not only by observers, but by participants in struggles for nationhood such as those that have occurred in the former Yugoslavia. So doesn't ethnicity need to fit into the framework of nation-forming as that which is proposed to make a particular nation distinct.

**GE:** Well, that's really part of the problem, you see. If you look at the history of nationalism, it's actually a very short history. And ethnicity has only played a part in that history relatively recently, taking over in the late nineteenth century for the political values of citizenship made





common parlance by the French Revolution. That's not to deny that ethnicity plays a role in the sort of struggles you're talking about, but I would want to be as specific as possible about the particular valencies of the appeals to ethnicity. I'd want to see how the primacy and exclusivity of ethnic loyalties have been secured, how ethnic identifications have been mobilized so effectively in former Yugoslavia (to use your example) that now they appear to have displaced other solidarities and antagonisms from the field.

**dC:** What kinds of change are the post-communist parts of the world facing?

**GE:** There are two main points about post-communism to keep in mind. First, the regional framework of transnational politics in the former Soviet Union must be understood not only in relation to the forms of Russian hegemony and the old Soviet imperium, but also via the frameworks of interregional cooperation and consciousness. Second, that kind of transnational context has been replaced by a series of other nascent logics such as marketization and European integration. Basically, the collapse of those regimes and the political traditions that carried them has opened up a space in which all sorts of things can happen, most importantly new national identifications. The reintroduction of national politics is the most obvious new departure.

**dC:** How do these new nationalisms relate to cultural identities?

**GE:** The kind of historical genealogy I want to create for understanding where nations and nationalism come from begins with popular sovereignty, national self-determination, citizenship, and democracy. But in addition to these characteristics there are a whole culturalist set of languages for understanding nations. Nations are not only composed of citizens but people who bear the same culture as well (whether we think that through in terms of ethnicity or something else).

**dC:** Does that mean one nation, one ethnicity?

**GE:** No. This assumption can be historically dismantled. Initially, in the context of the French Revolution and the Enlightenment, nations were defined by citizenship, and nationalism was associated with popular sovereignty and a political category of citizenship. Ireland, Poland and Greece are good examples of this. In a lot of ways, Greece is the most interesting case: the inventors of Greek nationality thought in terms of a Balkan-wide identity. This projects a political future completely blind to cultural differences. So only further into the 19th century does this notion of Greece, or of nation-building more generally in Europe, get grounded in arguments about a cultural identity linked to language, religion, territory, and ethnicity.

How we answer this question also depends on which particular world-historical moment we're looking at. Figuring out the relationship between a cultural formation (like ethno-national identification) and the longer drawn-out developmental processes (whether we do that in terms of capitalist development and the logics of economy, or in terms of class-formation, or by the creation of unitary societies by some other analytic), is incredibly complex, and how we characterize this relationship (between culture and economy, or culture and society) will also be influenced by the dialectics of boundedness and territorialization within an international state system. Judging the valency of ethno-national solidarities will require very different approaches depending on when we enter this wider process of global development, between the French Revolution and now. For me, the best way of handling these questions of general history is to think in terms of European-wide moments of concentrated change. By this I mean those fairly rare conjunctures when European history is genuinely European, when the landscape is being remade, in all possible dimensions: political, legal, social, cultural, intellectual. So the key notion is one of continental, transnational, convulsive revolutionary change, where constitutions are actually being created, states are being reshaped, and everything from territorial changes and institutional innovations to fundamental political realignments and the fashioning of new social blocs is taking place. This is what I'd call a "constitution-making moment", where the transformations are generalized and societal, and where the making of new constitutions in the literal sense usually has a central place.

**dC:** Could you explain a little more about what you mean when you speak about "world historical moments" and the "transnational?" How do these moments fit into your methodology? And do they occur often, or only very rarely?

**GE:** There are only a few such periods during the past two hundred years or so. I would include the French Revolution, the 1860s, the periods at the end of the First and Second World Wars, and most recently the years 1989-92. Those are the points from which we can develop a larger contextual argument for Europe as a whole in this transnational sense, which makes it much easier to handle the meanings of nationhood in a particular place. If we do that, then the terribly abstract definitional discussions that tend to develop when we're dealing with nation, ethnicity, and all the related concepts, are much easier to sort out. So when you ask me, for instance, How should we handle these questions in the breakup of Yugoslavia, I want to step back and consider in the first instance this transnational arena of change, and give those processes of dissolution their conjunctural and Europeanwide contexts, to explore them on a transnational scale. I'd want to consider





the unraveling of a contemporary set of structures in light of the logics instituted during the previous moment of transnational change, which in this case means the moment of the foundation of states at the end of the Second World War. We'd then need to elaborate our analysis of 1943-47 via the histories of anti-fascism, postwar radicalism, the dynamics of social and economic reconstruction, the normalizations of the Cold War, the regional hegemonies of the USSR and USA, and so on. It's quite complicated, just getting started. You can't begin with any one piece and presume to get an understanding of the whole. So it seems to me that we get furthest in producing both persuasive narrative about national history and a comparative conceptual framework for that kind of work if we situate our questions within this sort of world-historical frame. These major moments of transnational change constitutionally lay down the set of coordinates for how politics can proceed in particular national settings, for the next several generations, actually, until we come to the next transnational moment of change.

**dC:** Would it be appropriate, then, to say that the most recent moments of transnational change set the stage for the nations of Eastern Europe to enter into modernity? Or is that way of talking something your terminology is designed to avoid?

**GE:** I'm pretty hesitant about using those terms in that way. Modernity in this context is a hugely problematic term, because it implies exactly a movement from lower to higher. And it seems to me that however persuasively we can historicize a conception of modernity in that sense, as a useful way of conceptualizing the two centuries between the Enlightenment, the French Revolution and today, that usage has been comprehensively destabilized by the theory developments of the last two decades as well as by events in the world, the events we've been trying to theorize by postmodernism. So even if it made sense to conceptualize the last two hundred years through a notion of the modern, that framework has been cast into enormous disarray by both theory development and by the very transnational change you're suggesting might be an appropriate object of inquiry within that framework.

**dC:** So, would you be wary of using terms such as *modernity* in all cases?

**GE:** Yes and no, because in a sense it's become possible to historicize a notion of modernity from the vantage point of the present much more easily now than, say, thirty years ago. When I came into all this in the 1960s, notions of modernity and modernization already seemed incredibly problematic, because they were almost inevitably embedded in frameworks of "modernization theory" of the ahistorical and technocratic kind dominant in the 1950s and 1960s. We already realized that

this incredibly schematic and inevitablist understanding of where history was headed was difficult to maintain. These developmental schemas were also horribly contaminated by the imperialisms behind them. So it was axiomatic for many of us back then that this way of thinking about history made no sense, either in politics or in theory or in history. Modernization theory, and the usefulness of the terms "tradition" and "modernity", were seriously discredited. And the standpoint from which that critique was developed was a Marxist one principally.

So from that point of view, it's been interesting to see social theory, and to some extent historical work, recur to this older ground. I can understand it in a variety of ways. I think the crisis in Marxism opened a space in which this approach to theorizing the origins of the contemporary world could return. The discourse of postmodernity has also brought these issues back on the agenda, because it requires some serious effort at theorizing what precedes the "post", and so the modern of modernity has found its way back onto the agenda of social and cultural theory. Yet, whether we take Giddens or Bauman or Alexander, or any of the other social theorists increasingly holding the central ground in critical social science, this return of the modern as the key term for understanding the contemporary world and the project of social theory is no less problematic than it was thirty years ago, particularly when we look at the conceptions of origins that are implied. For instance, Giddens talks about modernity in relation to Enlightenment and the French Revolution in extraordinarily question-begging ways. Of course, Giddens is a highly sophisticated and seductively lucid and authoritative thinker. But once we push past the theory discourse itself, to the histories from which modernity supposedly came, we find that we're reentering very much the old historical arguments about the Enlightenment and French Revolution we were in thirty years ago. There's a kind of naiveté about the historical referents for this incredibly sophisticated theory discourse around the modern and modernity, which is very ironic.

There's also a disjunction between a theory discourse of that kind and what historians are thinking about. Of course, there are parts of the profession where those notions of the modern and modernization have never been abandoned in the first place, including a powerful and centrally positioned figure like Lawrence Stone (who for several decades was a key voice in *Past and Present*, and dominated a vital and prestigious institution of the profession, the Davis Center at Princeton, and who polemicized against "postmodernism" from an older ground of social science history). But we now have a situation in which a language of tradition, traditional society, and modern society can lapse





back into place. As historians, we've not begun to reengage questions about development and about how to conceptualize the history of the last three to four hundred years. That's in part because no one's discussing the transition from feudalism to capitalism any more either, and that was the main alternative schema that was available for conceptualizing these grand historical processes of change before modernity discussions fell out of style.

**dC:** Your answer raises several questions itself. First, what brought you into these questions thirty years ago? What about the concepts of modernity and nation that got you involved here first? And have you really given up the notion of modernity yourself? Why not follow Habermas on this point, rather than figures such as Giddens?

**GE:** Well, Habermas hasn't engaged with these questions of history in the grand sense—not since the public sphere book, at least (*Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 1989). That's not completely true, because obviously his continual engagement with political questions of the present is all about historicizing the present. But there's a real disjunction between the discussions we find in the various volumes of his political essays that appear intermittently and his works of grand theory. In the latter, there's been little interest in returning to the questions of historical change that he began his career with. That book on the public sphere is so interesting to historians, and others interested in what happens between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and the twentieth century, because it builds a theoretical framework from a very careful historical approach. He's never done that again. And he doesn't really engage with these questions of the emergence of modernity in historical terms schematically either. So I'm not sure Habermas is the one to save modernity, at least for historical discussions.

But to answer the first part of your question, when I began as a historian I was a pretty committed Marxist in the sense that the overall understanding of change in history in terms of historical materialism made sense to me. My point of entry into my own immediate field, Germany in the later nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries, was guided by what we had available as theoretical Marxisms in the late sixties and early seventies. But now I've dealt with the crisis in Marxism by stepping back from these grand historical conceptions of change. If you go back to the *Peculiarities of German History*, I published an essay called "In Search of the Bourgeois Revolution" as a kind of supplement to that book that eventually came out in the late 1980s. That was a point where I was still reasonably comfortable with those big terms: the bourgeois revolution, the transition from feudalism to capitalism, and the project of historical work that one could take from those famous formulations in Marx from the 1859 *Preface*, which is the pri-

mary text everyone always used to return to, in terms of the contradictions between forces and relations of production. It's one of the clearer and more sophisticated statements in Marx describing the base-superstructure framework and how you can translate that into projects of historical analysis. That essay that came out in the late eighties was the last point at which I was comfortable conceptualizing my work, whether in the German historical context or elsewhere, in that kind of way.

Everything that's happened since, in theory and in the world, has made it very difficult to proceed in that way, and it's very unclear to me how we should deal with those questions now. The critique of grand narratives has made it enormously complicated. For instance, nobody among those who would have called themselves Marxists twenty years ago talks about the transition debate any more, the transition from feudalism to capitalism, whereas when I came into history in the late sixties and early seventies. That's where many of the interesting questions were located. As I was learning about the big debates among European historians, between the ages of 18 and 25, these were the exciting controversies—the general crisis of the seventeenth century, the rise of the world system, the formation of absolutist states, the social interpretation of the Reformation, as well as the transition debate and the nature of bourgeois revolutions—I cut my teeth on. In the meantime, any attempt among historians to understand big political processes of change (like the rise of absolutism, the political instabilities of the seventeenth century, or the French Revolution) in relation to societal processes of development and crisis (like the growth of capitalism) has been undermined. The social interpretation of the French Revolution has been systematically assaulted. There's no shortage of post-Foucauldian grand narratives of social power and governmentality for ordering the histories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it's true, but this new cultural history has very little interest in the relationship of politics to social forces in the classical sense, and in any case Foucault had his own unreflected assumptions about the relationship of capitalism and the rise of the bourgeoisie to the production of the modern. Historical sociologists (Charles Tilly, Michael Mann, John Hall, many others) have continued the classical tradition of writing about state formation, but by now there's very little engagement of historians *per se* with this project.

As I mentioned earlier, these notions of modernity have come back in social theory, and one of the things I've been trying to do in the last decade or so is to figure out how they can be sensibly historicized. Otherwise, they just won't prove tenable for long. So I've spent a lot of time with the theory discourse of the postmodern, and with those areas of social and cultural theory that have been circulating around these con-





ceptions of the modern and modernity, and I've been trying to historicize them for my own purposes.

**dC:** And has this reformulation process greatly changed how you understand history?

**GE:** To an extent, yes. I suppose that's a consequence of my oscillation between the kind of genealogy that would begin this discussion in the period of Enlightenment and the French Revolution, and the kind of genealogy that's more post-Foucauldian and would begin that discussion around the end of the nineteenth century, with the emphasis on notions of social discipline. Yes, theoretical times have changed, and we have all had to change with them.

## Postmodernity and The Public Sphere

**dC:** So it sounds like you have linked up with a postmodern discourse. Do you embrace postmodern discourse wholeheartedly, or is there some questioning of it for you?

**GE:** Sure, I was extremely excited by the postmodernity discussion. It does seem to me to capture a moment of genuine contemporary change in precisely the sort of world historical terms we've been discussing.

But having spent really so much time trying to figure out the moment of modernity that logically preceded this one of postmodernity, one of the effects of that is certainly to unsettle pretty seriously the power of those terms of postmodernity to describe something that's new and specific to the present, because there is enormous anticipation in cultural history, earlier in the twentieth century. So figuring out what the contemporary moment of change is, how to conceptualize it, is also made more complicated by the work I want to do, in trying to understand the moment of modernity that logically precedes the present. And I still think that there's something fundamentally important that's been happening at the end of the twentieth century in terms of globalization; post-fordism would be a good place to start. Whether postmodernity remains a good way of thinking about that contemporary moment of change, I may be less sure of than I was ten years ago.

**dC:** You just mentioned the "enormous anticipations in cultural history." Habermas' *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* locates itself within cultural history. Your essay on that book addresses some problems with the public sphere, but you seem to embrace the idea in the end. Can you say something about why you find that useful. It seems that a postmodernist would be concerned with how Habermas' notion of the public sphere as a bearer of public opinion seems to avoid the question of public action and behavior and focuses on ideas only.

Do you see any problems with this limited descriptive possibility?

**GE:** Well, the really useful and exciting thing about Habermas' idea of the public sphere to me always had to do with how it was grounded in arguments about cultural formation and political development in highly materialist ways. If you go back to the public sphere book, the argument begins with these notions of transition from feudalism to capitalism, and he has a particular model of the formation of commercial society for understanding those transformations. But it begins with those big processes of societal change, the growth of markets, the development of commerce and all the institutional developments that they presuppose in terms of the organization of markets, of communications, of the creation of newspapers. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* is very grounded in these kinds of arguments. So what I liked about the Habermas notion of *Öffentlichkeit* and the public sphere was that it definitely implied a social history rather than just an argument about ideas. And a lot of the stuff about associational life and the circulation of ideas inside a particular infrastructural environment of social organization and social exchange is right there in the public sphere book.

**dC:** Looking back on *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, how do you view it as a Marxian historian?

**GE:** You know that my essay was originally produced for a conference that accompanied the English translation of the public sphere book, in September 1989, and part of my charge was to provide some of the historicized argumentation for that conference. So it was pretty interesting going back to that book and finding that it so impressively grounded in relation to the historical work then available, which wasn't all that much, since this was the late 1950s and early 1960s. One of the most striking things for me, when I was doing that work, was the degree to which one could take the best social historical research and writing that's been done in the meantime, say on eighteenth-century Britain, and redescribe it in terms provided by Habermas' book, and thereby reformulate the questions posed by Habermas given his historical argumentation. But returning to the earlier concern about the public sphere glorifying ideas, it's never about ideas for me, divorced from these kinds of social histories. The beauty of the concept is that it contained an argumentation about the emergence of modern politics, in particular of liberalism and radical democracy—these key terms of modern political life—that's precisely grounded in materialist social history and a broader conception of public action.

**dC:** From what you have said here, it seems as if you are trying to embrace both postmodernism and modernism. Let's turn for a moment to





the notion of modernity here. In your writings, particular in the *Peculiarities* book, the notion of modernity seems to play some role in the development of nations. Do you still find the concept of "modernity" useful in this sense?

**GE:** Let's say yes for the moment. One of the problems of the notion of "modernity" thirty years ago was that it implied the end of history, that this was the point at which society was stabilized in some terminal sense. It implied a set of *desiderata* that could be understood in economic, political, and cultural terms. So long as we explicitly and carefully historicize the meaning of this term "modernity," in a definition that presupposes incompleteness and instability and reversibility, it seems to me that maybe it's okay; then it has demonstrable usefulness in understanding the histories of Europe and the rest of the world in the period after the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, and it's certainly present and obviously very much articulated with notions of progress. Progress is obviously a much more problematic term, loaded with the difficulty of teleological direction. The problems with the notion of modernity reflected exactly this kind of teleology in the worst sense of the 1970s—teleological thinking was the worst pitfall for my kind of Marxist in the seventies, the last thing we ever wanted to be accused of! So I think these notions of modernity and progress are present in the kinds of histories we're worried about right now, in this conversation on the nineteenth century. So provided that we historicize in the right way, the concept of "modernity" is salvageable. But, as I said earlier, that's very difficult to do.

**dC:** This notion of the public sphere is obviously tied up with Habermas' conception of modernity (even though he has abandoned that notion of *Öffentlichkeit* itself). How, then, does the public sphere itself fit into the development and evolution of nations? I'm not sure I want to know so much about the term "public sphere" but the actuality of public spheres in the construction of nations. For example, in one of your writings, you talk about a connection of the intelligentsia with the development of nations. Does the public sphere link the intelligentsia with the mobilization of the lower classes?

**GE:** Well, the usefulness of the term "public sphere" for me was always to do with opening up a space in which we could talk about politics that was not subsumed in the conventional institutional understanding of how politics takes place, particularly for the ordinary work-a-day historian, who might be very sophisticated in her or his handling of empirical work, but recalcitrantly anti-intellectual when it comes to explicating assumptions or the use of theory. There's a tendency in historical work that's not explicitly informed by theory in one way or

another to present politics as located in the political process narrowly understood—parties, legislatures, government. And I think that is still a problem. That is an abiding problem of our contemporary understanding of politics too, in terms of commonsensical understandings. What I've always liked about the term "public sphere" as a theory term, as a framework that we can take from Habermas, is that it provides a way of conceptualizing an expanded notion of the political. It forces us to look for politics in other social places. That is useful not only for producing these histories of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. It is also useful for activating people's sense of their own citizenship now.

**dC:** You mean the term public sphere is useful even today in terms of ...

**GE:** In terms of being able to say: Look, the "public sphere" is a space between state and society in which political action occurs, with real effectivities, whether it's in terms of local effects or building a sense of political agency, or behaving ethically in one's social relations and allowing some notion of collective goods to be posed, and thereby contributing to wider processes of political mobilization. It's one way of making connections between what we think and do in everyday life, including the personal sphere, and the world of politics, when in popular perceptions politics has been degenerating more and more into a word for corruption and self-interestedness and a machinery of privilege, influence and wheeler-dealing beyond realistic popular control. It's a way of restoring intelligibility to the political process in that sense, and of reclaiming politics for a realistic discourse of democracy. And that's pretty useful in a context where there's depressingly extensive cynicism about the ability to have any kind of political effect, where the degree of disaffection and cynicism and sense of disablement, politically, or in relation to notions of one's agency as a citizen, when that sense of disablement is so extensive. And I should say here that we owe this ability to remake the connections between everydayness and politics especially to feminism, and all the ways in which feminist theory and politics have turned the relationship of the personal and the political inside out since the explosions of 1968. It's feminism that's activated this relationship and allowed Habermas's idea to be redeployed so valuably over the past decade.

So this term "public sphere"—as the starting point for the kind of argumentation we've been alluding to, about what politics is, where it takes place, and how it can be understood, as a space available to ordinary people and not just the official politicians—this term is a pretty useful term for re-energizing a sense of citizenship that's active and can make a difference, whether it's the public sphere of particular institutions like universities or professions, or local public spheres. So when I said that the public sphere makes more sense as a structured setting, where con-





testation and negotiation can occur, that's the kind of thing I had in mind, whether it's historically in relation to the late eighteenth early nineteenth century, or any intermediate point between then and now we want to look at, or whether it's today.

**dC:** Thus the notion of everyday politics and the possibility of them unfolding in the public sphere is kind of an antidote to the cynicism?

**GE:** Thinking about it in terms of an answer to cynicism is a good way to think about it. It's a good way of arguing it, in the kind of situations we find ourselves in—whether it's in a school board, or in a university, or in the sort of political process more conventionally understood, in relation to parties and elections, or the articulation of interests, and the presentation of demands at a level of government and governance. And as I said, feminists pioneered the importance of making everyday life an object of politics, whether it's in the family or the workplace, or sexuality and personal relations, or all the situations in which pain and pleasure are produced, and the notion of the public sphere is a very good way of getting from these contexts to an idea of political agency and action. That's why it's such an important term for me, and obviously it's linked to notions of civil society, as well as a way of trying to conceptualize the ground on which and from which political action can take place.

**dC:** You have a very optimistic way of conceptualizing the public sphere. Consider instead the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by Horkheimer and Adorno. Wouldn't they analyze the public sphere as they do the culture industry, and dismiss it as an arena constituted by discussions that will never have any substantial effect. The public sphere would just be another means of keeping the masses happy because they are under the illusion that they can have some effect on the government and the state of affairs of the world. So, if you still consider yourself a Marxist, how would you respond to this sort of charge?

**GE:** It's always a matter of trying to locate, theorize, and specify the spaces of possibility within which change or political action can take place. It's pretty hard to be the kind of optimist that you were just describing. You'd have to be pretty naive if you thought this process of getting from the description of the public sphere I just laid out to actual change was a straightforward one. But at the same time, it seems to me that the Frankfurt School pessimism that you just invoked has always been a mandarin standpoint of superior knowledge that is terribly arrogant. That doesn't mean those Frankfurt School-informed notions of the culture industry and repressive tolerance aren't useful. But they do dismiss popular culture and everyday life as arenas for genuine democratic agency, and thereby preserve an Olympian place for mandarin

intellectuals. As you can tell, Lukacs' quip about the grand hotel of despair is one that I still have a lot of sympathy for.

**dC:** So Horkheimer or Adorno blasted Jazz as empty expression, lacking the possibility for positive political action. But today that just sounds like pompous dismissal of popular cultural activity and performance because it doesn't qualify as art. Do you think the postmodern turn has amended this conception of popular culture as impotent, kitschy everydayness?

**GE:** Yes. One of the most important consequences of postmodernism and cultural studies is their willingness to take popular culture seriously as a site of political action and engagement, really for the first time in the history of the Left. Going back through the last century of the history of the Left, it's extremely hard to find any willingness to engage seriously with popular culture in such a way. Even if you go back to the period of the formation of socialist parties, you don't find the attempt to get inside popular culture and appreciate its positive capacities until at least 1968. And postmodernism and cultural studies are certainly the academic heirs to the heritage of '68.

**dC:** Yet some forms of postmodernism also seem to demand the abandonment of grand history, metanarrative, and even the possibility of radical social change. Doesn't that suggest that postmodernism also questions the possibility of political action in everyday activity, perhaps as much as Horkheimer and Adorno, although for different reasons?

**GE:** Well, I'm not sure the one follows from the other. On the one hand, we have reason to be skeptical about grand narratives, in large part because of the difficulty of establishing clear causal relationships in terms of the models of determination that were available to us in the Marxist tradition. So this skepticism is about political change of the most fundamental and far-reaching kinds, whether in the context of revolution or long-run structural processes of social development and change. Consequently, theorizing that relationship now that base and superstructure frameworks are no longer persuasive has fallen into disrepute. We've all backed off from that.

However, that doesn't mean that large-scale political change no longer occurs. And one of the extraordinary things about living through the last decade has been the reminder that big changes do happen, after all, and we shouldn't be fooled by the inevitable disappointments of the messiness and limited nature of the democratic advances immediately registered after 1989 in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe into concluding that everything has stayed really the same. Quite aside from the dramatic legal and constitutional changes of 1989-90 themselves, profound transformations are proceeding behind people's backs, in ways that will only become intelligible gradually and over the longer term. More immediately, the social disordering produced by marketization, and the other negative consequences of postsocialist transition are certainly the more visible. In Western Europe, the meanings of capitalist restructuring and constitutional change (through the Single Europe legislation, Maastricht, and EMU) for everyday life and practical citizenship are even harder to grasp. But beyond the structural changes in East and West, the *imaginative space* of politics has also been profoundly opened up, and the conditions of possibility for thinking differently about political action and popular improvements are already being assembled. The end of Communism also means the *end of anti-Communism*, and in the absence of that enormous constraint forms of radicalism become potentially viable once again.





On the other hand, therefore, this reemphasizes the importance of those moments of transnational change—constitution-making conjunctures—we talked about earlier on. We need to remember the complex European-wide dimensions of the events of 1989-92. The resulting institutional changes at the European level are still developing, in terms of post-socialist transition in Eastern Europe, the strengthening of European integration through the 1992 legislation and its further installments; the monetary union; forms of incipient federalism; the reconfiguring of NATO, and so forth. These developments have had profound consequences and implications for how politics can be conducted within national and local settings in Europe. Not only is there massive political change taking place in the present, there are also obviously ways of theorizing and understanding and analyzing those changes in relation to capitalist restructuring.

This can be done both in transnational terms and in very specific local contexts, since local economies have become so demographically and structurally transformed. Take for instance the massive changes here in Lexington over the past twenty years: You've got this huge Toyota plant and an expanding local population, with all sorts of implications for how social life and local politics have to be thought about. (As it happens, the local economy where I grew up in Britain, between Burton-on-Trent and Derby, where Thatcherism gutted an older industrial economy during the 1980s, has also been restructured by the construction of a massive Toyota plant). These are obviously changes of huge magnitude. Whether such changes occur locally, nationally, or transnationally, we have to think through the forms of political action and agency that might connect to those structural changes and transformations. And the Public Sphere seems to me an excellent way of thinking about this field of possible connections, which also ties in with the

contemporary project of the Left's rethinking popular culture along postmodern lines. We don't get very far in specifying the kinds of politics that work in this new environment if we just stick with the strategies and concepts that are given to us by the tradition, whether Marxism, other radicalisms, or social democracy. On the other hand, if we acknowledge that politics is located elsewhere now, that doesn't mean that all of those given concepts and strategies are obsolete. I certainly don't think, for example, that class has become an inoperative term of politics. It's the *insufficiencies* of those given terms that need to be faced and rethought.