Comment on Presidential Address

Postmodern Melancholia

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In his presidential address to the Law and Society Association, Joel Handler describes recent changes in the character of social protest and the scholarship that seeks to understand these resistant practices. In his description, Handler depicts a world in which all that was once collective and effectual is now fragmented and futile. Not that long ago, he suggests, we had real (ideological/class-based) social movements and vital communities that were documented by scholars in optimistic stories of resistance and protest. But time passed and we became postmodernized: destabilized and uncertain, ironic and listless. Where once we challenged oppression and power en masse to the flourish of trumpets, now we are just so many flatulent individuals.[1]

On its face, the story of change that Handler tells is as sad as any of the so-called postmodern narratives he criticizes. Yet, the question that frames and animates his address—"What is the value of postmodernism for transformative politics?"—reveals a latent optimism. His ambivalence seems to reflect a particular construction and understanding of the postmodern—an understanding that positions Handler precariously straddling both sides of the postmodern debate.

On one hand, asking us to assess postmodernity in terms of its "value" (i.e., usefulness or desirability) implies that postmodernity (or the kinds of resistant practices identified as "postmodern") is a strategic option for subordinate or marginal groups. Otherwise, why bother asking? As an option, indi-

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[1] Responding to James Scott's use of an Ethiopian proverb ("The wise peasant bows deeply and silently farts"), Handler observes, "Progressive forces need trumpets, not farts" (p. 727).

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viduals can *decide* whether to challenge power and oppression through the silent, momentary, subversive tactics represented in the stories of Mrs. G. or Millie Simpson;[2] *or* to resist collectively and overtly, depending on which strategy was most effective. According to this view, postmodernity is less about constraint than about choice (postmodernity itself being one such choice). Ironically, the sadness and frustration Handler expresses throughout his address is buoyed by the underlying optimism of his question; for while he is clearly disheartened by the choices that have recently been made in regard to strategies of protest and scholarship, he remains hopeful that different choices *could* be made: he exhorts us to bundle up our fractured selves, hire a trumpet player, and write a meta-narrative. Thus, in asking us to consider its value, Handler seems open, if not to the possibilities *of* postmodernity, to the possibilities of getting *out* of postmodernity.

The optimism of Handler's question ("What is the value of postmodernism?") is challenged, however, by his own melancholic response to it. The conception of the postmodern as representing possibility and choice is at odds with more materialist accounts of the postmodern condition as a pathological consequence of late- or post-Fordist capitalism, a position Handler articulates later in his address (Harvey 1990; Jameson 1984). According to this materialist interpretation of postmodernity, what we identify as postmodern, whether it is EuroDisney or the micro-revolutionary practices of Mrs. G., reveals less about the powerless and their choices than about those in power and how choices are constrained and denied. The point is not that those challenging power from below have, from a strategic point of view, made the wrong decisions; rather, this materialist conception of postmodernity asserts that those who would challenge power are now up against something altogether different. Focusing our critical attention, then, on strategies of resistance may deflect attention away from the *real* story: the changing organization of power.

Handler seems caught between these two views of the postmodern condition: on the one hand, it is a way of operating or a style (e.g., of art, architecture, protest, or scholarship) that we can, through an act of will, decide to cast off; on the other hand, it is condition of life to which we are shackled. Handler's ambivalence is reflected in the historical narrative he constructs. Alternating between both images, Handler traces the postmodern condition, in particular our current preoccupation with the text, to changes in the social order, the failure of European Socialism, and a general crisis in left-wing politics. At the

[2] Mrs. G. is described by Lucie White (1990); Millie Simpson is the woman whose legal experience Susan Silbey and I described (Ewick & Silbey 1992).

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same time, the solution he offers is based on a reversal of that causal and historical logic: he suggests that one way to recuperate left politics is *to choose* to abandon the text and other postmodern preoccupations.

Being an ambivalent postmodernist myself, I sympathize with Handler's confusion and frustration when he asks, What is the value of postmodernism for transformative politics? Being an ambivalent empiricist (a case of countervailing ambivalences), I would like to suggest that one way out of this impasse is to ask some different questions, questions whose answers might help us resolve some of the ambivalences provoked by the debate over the "value" of postmodernism. First, we need to ask, What is the relationship between the contemporary stories of protest and the material and social practices that they claim to represent? Second, What is the relationship between everyday practices of subversion and extraordinary forms of protest?

A Diaspora of Power and Resistance

What, if any, is the connection between the contemporary stories that are being written about resistance and the social practices described in these stories? Handler poses a similar question (p. 724) when he asks, "What accounts, then, for the difference between the stories written today and those of two decades ago?" But he quickly retreats from this question when he immediately reformulates it and asks "Why the attraction of discourse theory or deconstruction politics?" The reformulated question serves as the answer to its original. In rephrasing the question Handler reveals his conviction that the difference in the stories of today is due to a change in scholarly style within the social sciences (or "the attraction of discourse theory"). An answer that Handler does not seriously consider but one with much graver consequences, and thus worthy of consideration, is that the change in the stories of protest reflects more than current intellectual fashion. Perhaps what makes these contemporary stories so sad is not that we *write* them but that people are actually *living* them.

It is possible, in other words, that the micro-revolutionary practices illustrated in the stories of Mrs. G. or Millie Simpson are becoming more common. If this were the case, what we would be observing and what we would need to explain is why, and with what effect, individuals are increasingly resorting to these kinds of subversive practices instead of engaging in concerted, collective challenges to the organizations, persons, and groups that oppress them.

Foucault has provided us with a theory of power that would account for such a change in the form and shape of resistance.

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He described the transformation in the exercise of power as "a reversal in the political axis of individuation" (1979:44) whereby disciplinary control circulates "through progressively finer channels, gaining access to individuals themselves, to their bodies, their gestures, all their daily actions (Foucault 1980:151). Instead of the spectacular displays of power embodied in the sovereign, dramatized by the scaffold and played before an assembled audience, power is now invisibly and anonymously inserted into daily life. Moreover, this change in the character of power has implications for the possibilities of resistance. In particular, power that is public and visible is more vulnerable to collective forms of resistance and rejection by the audience that is assembled to view it. "Instilling awe was the intended result, but protest and revolt were also incited at these public demonstrations. . . . The site of power could easily become the site of social disturbance, or even revolt" (Dreyfus & Rabinow 1983:146). By contrast, the technical, faceless, and individuated forms of contemporary (postmodern/disciplinary) power defy the possibilities of revolt or collective resistance (Simon 1988). The spatial and temporal restructuring of the world in a disciplinary regime disables the very communities that were once the site of social disturbance (Mitchell 1990).

Although he is no Foucauldian, Harvey (1990), too, attributes the political incapacitation decried by Handler to a transformation in the character of power. According to Harvey, for instance, postmodernity is a reflection of the "flexible accumulation" characteristic of late capitalism. In place of long-term, large-scale and fixed capital investments in mass-produced systems of production that was characteristic of Fordism, flexible accumulation stresses flexibility with regard to labor (e.g., reliance on part-time or temporary labor,) production (e.g., small-batch production), and consumption (e.g., rapid turnover of styles and extensive market segmentation). Significantly, these transformations have had predictable disruptive effects on the balance of class power and the possibility of collective action,

> [T]he more flexible motion of capital emphasizes the new, the fleeting, the ephemeral, the fugitive, and the contingent in modern life, rather than the more solid values implanted under Fordism. *To the degree that collective action was thereby made more difficult—and it was indeed a central aim of the drive for enhanced labour control to render it thus—so rampant individualism fits into place as a necessary, though not a sufficient, condition for the transition from Fordism to flexible accumulation*. (Harvey, 1990:171; emphasis mine)

Harvey describes a world in which capital is dispersed, fragmented, and flexible; consequently, labor and markets are fragmented, unorganized, and thus politically incapacitated.

At times, Handler, too, observes that changes in economic

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and social life may have reduced the capacity of individuals to engage in collective forms of behavior. Describing labor market conditions that have created a large, permanent class of unemployed and marginally employed, Handler writes, "People who cannot establish a meaningful connection to the labor market not only suffer from grinding poverty but are also excluded from the community" (p. 726).

Surely, being excluded from a community deprives people of the recurrent social interactions and shared experiences that are generative of collective protests. Thus, according to these accounts power has fundamentally changed and so, too, have the possibilities for resistance.

Before we dismiss these contemporary stories of subversion, then, we need to consider to what extent, in documenting these silent tactics of resistance, we are bearing witness to a change not just in how people resist but in the oppressive social relations against which that resistance is directed. This leads to my second question: What is the relationship between these everyday subversions and more strategic attempts to bring about social change?

The Genealogy of Protest

The relationship between ordinary subversion and extraordinary resistance may be what is at the heart of Handler's question regarding the "value" of postmodernism. If so, his melancholy obviously derives from his belief that there is no connection: that the everyday poaching, evasions, appropriations, and sabotages cannot generate significant social change. Indeed, for Handler, such behaviors may be worse than irrelevant to social change; they may actually prevent or delay it by diffusing the pain and anger of powerlessness and diverting the energies that might be spent launching a frontal attack on oppression. This view is underwritten by a number of assumptions regarding social movements, assumptions that are, however, increasingly being scrutinized.

Traditional sociological analyses of social movements, for instance, have been based on a number of rationalist assumptions about protest groups, among these that such groups have clearly defined interests and that collective action is calculated to realize these interests. Gusfield (1981) has described this model of social movements as linear in that it depicts movements in terms of discrete associations of people whose activity is seen as using means to gain some end. For theories based on this linear model, the switch that turns on rebellion or protest—by mobilizing the group to seek these (preexisting) interests—is the maturing of "consciousness," or a recognition of collective interests (Tilly 1991:595). Under such assumptions,

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the goal of these theories consists of determining the presence or absence of this thing called consciousness and systematically identifying the mechanisms that lead to its "awakening."

Much contemporary scholarship challenges these linear and rationalistic assumptions regarding action and history. As Tilly (1992:595) has observed, "For an advocate of [this traditional] view, a first encounter with its postmodern equivalents upends the world." What is specifically upended in this recent work is the ontological distinctiveness and causal priority of "interests" or "ideas" or "consciousness" over "action" (collective or otherwise) (Fantasia 1988; Marshall 1983; Mitchell 1990).

By collapsing the distinction between ideas and action, contemporary scholars deny the revelatory or causal moment in social movements (when the scales fall from the eyes and consciousness is "switched on"). In place of this, consciousness is understood to be not a form of revealed wisdom but something that is constructed through social interaction; it is not an attitude or an idea but "a way of operating," enacted in social practices. Social movements and social change are seen as forming and developing reflexively, over time, rather than as discrete, linear events.

> A more fluid perspective toward the meaning of movement emphasizes the quickening of change and the social sharing of new meanings in a variety of areas and places. It is less confined to the boundaries of organizations and more alive to the larger contexts of change. . . . The perspective of fluidity emphasizes the cultural side of movements—the transformations of meaning—and the interactive side of consequences—the less public aspects of life. (Gusfield 1981:323)

Instead of focusing our analytic attention to the purported moment when oppositional consciousness is stirred and on the immediate consequences, this longer-term view of social movements raises questions about how, in the course of daily confrontations with power, individuals develop a consciousness of an opposing Other, of being up against someone or something; of how we invent and or try out forms of practical resistance; of how we share stories, proverbs, jokes, and advice on the necessity and means of resistance; and how, in the course of all this, we develop a consciousness of "we." Regarding the relevance of everyday life in the process of challenging domination and hegemony, Hunt (1990:313) has observed:

> It is important to stress that counter-hegemony is not some purely oppositional project conceived of as if it were constructed "elsewhere," fully finished and then drawn into place, like some Trojan horse of the mind, to do battle with the prevailing dominant hegemony. . . . [C]ounter-hegemony . . . has to start from that which exists, which involves starting from "where people are at." Such a conception of counter-

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> hegemony requires the "reworking" or "refashioning" of the elements which are constitutive of the prevailing hegemony.

In short, if we are to understand social change, either the incremental or the revolutionary, we must begin by examining "where people are at" and seriously consider the role of daily acts of resistance and subversion in the constitution of consciousness and, thus, in the formation of collective movements.

Conclusion

In the 1940s, Theodosia Simpson worked as a stemmer for Reynolds Tobacco Company in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.[3] Most of the 10,000 workers in this facility were black women who, like Simpson, worked in the hardest, dirtiest, and most dangerous jobs under supervisors who were described as "no better than chain-gang overseers."

For almost 20 years, various unions had attempted without success to organize the workers at Reynolds. In 1943, Simpson and a few other workers began meeting with representatives of the Agricultural Packing and Allied Workers of America. After initially failing to sign up more than a handful of co-workers, Simpson eventually found a way of mobilizing union support. Here she describes how she was able to do this:

> We wore uniforms that buttoned down the front. One day I tore all the buttons off my dress and buttoned it up with union buttons and went to work like that. The foreman didn't know what to do about it. So he just asked if I would go home and change uniforms please, and he paid me for the time I was gone. Then a memo came out the next day. No pins in your clothes. No pins, no earrings, no rings but your wedding rings. They were afraid this stuff would get into the tobacco; that was the excuse they gave. After that I was able to get people to sign up, when they saw that I didn't get fired for it.

Through the literal "*refashioning* of elements constitutive of the prevailing hegemony" (Hunt 1990:313), Theodosia Simpson ripped the buttons off her uniform and replaced them with union buttons, buttons she had tried to distribute earlier without success. The "desecration" of her dress and the incorporation of the union buttons transformed her uniform, the material sign of her subordination, into a potent symbol of resistance. Theodosia's subversion momentarily stunned power ("The foreman didn't know what to do about it"). She did not find but created an opening for others to join her. Through her subversion, she demonstrated to those watching that power is not monolithic and can be ruptured in many different ways.

[3] This account is taken from Korstad (1980). Coincidentally, Theodosia Simpson has the same last name as the pseudonymous Millie Simpson.

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What two decades of organized union activity had failed to accomplish, Theodosia Simpson achieved in one day.

Theodosia Simpson's story reminds us that the evasions, appropriations, deceptions, and other guerilla tactics of protest described and highlighted in postmodern scholarship are not historically unprecedented. Although, as I suggested above, these tactical resistances may be more common today, it was, after all, an Ethiopian proverb that Scott quotes at the beginning of his book about class relations in a Malay village, suggesting that the poachings, appropriations, and ruses of the powerless have been routinely practiced for a long while.

It is possible, then, as Handler suggests, that these contemporary stories of subversion from below reflect, at least in part, a change in what academics find to be interesting and persuasive scholarship—a change in what we define as evidence, where we look for it, and how we interpret it.

Speaking of everyday practices, de Certeau asks, "Of all the things everyone does, how much gets written down?" (1984: 42). What may be more important than *how much* gets written down is *which* behaviors get documented. We are more likely to notice, record, and study the overt, collective, but relatively rare protests that punctuate social life than we are to notice the daily forms of protest. It is a distinctive quality of these mundane resistance practices that, if successful, they are likely to elude our gaze. Thus, it would not be surprising if social scientists had, in collecting our data and constructing our theories, been overlooking these subversive practices all along. Indeed, the point of such tactics—what makes them at all effective—is that they are often invisible, silent, or ambiguous. They represent a mode of resistance that does not announce itself as such and, therefore, is less likely to be noticed or avenged by those in power. By fixing our gaze squarely on these practices, Handler's question provokes us to seriously consider their role in challenging and unsettling power.

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