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Abstract: This paper argues that postmodern approaches to anthropology typically display certain characteristic logical errors and are based on questionable assumptions about human thought and desire. Further, the liberationist moral stance taken in postmodern discourse tends toward the excesses diagnosed by Hegel as `the law of the heart', that is, a romantic solipsism that ignores the ambiguity and limits of human existence. The moral and theoretical problems of postmodernism are linked to the anomie of contemporary society, which presses beleaguered intellectuals toward privileging
interpretivist modes of thought. The article concludes by questioning the emancipating potential of postmodern theory that places imagination at the center of anthropological inquiry, and argues instead for a reconsideration of the fundamental constraints and potentials of the human condition.
`All our dignity consists, then, in thought. By it we must elevate ourselves, and not by space and time which we cannot fill. Let us endeavour, then, to think well; this is the principle of morality' (Pascal 1941:116).

Every field of science passes through intellectual phases, and anthropology – always deeply ambiguous and anxious about the nature of its knowledge base – has been more susceptible to fads than any other. But what is unusual in the current postmodern trend is its denial of the groundings of the discipline itself – a radical critique that has bewildered and confused many ordinary workers in the field, who are dismayed by the blizzard of references to literary scholars, rhetoricians and French philosophers which inundate contemporary anthropological publications. Theoreticians of more orthodox bent have tried to hold the fort against the rising storm. Reyna, for instance, has forcefully demonstrated that postmodern dismissals of science are ignorant of scientific method and are based on logic that is post hoc and ad hominem (1994). Pursuing another line of defense, Adam Kuper (1994) has shown the fallacies of the postmodern assumption that ethnography can only be conducted from the inside out, and has called for anthropologists to move away from literary models toward more sociological types of analysis. Elsewhere, Gellner (1992) has spiritedly argued that postmodern rests more on wishful thinking and rhetorical excess than solid research.

In this article, I will follow in this debunking tradition, using material from a few typical articles by recent
anthropological practitioners of postmodernism to outline some of their characteristic arguments. Then I will show some logical quandaries that are implicit in these claims. This is straightforward enough, but what I wish to do next is perhaps more unusual; that is, to consider the moral stance implicitly or explicitly presented by these theorists. This has ramifications that are problematic in the extreme, as I will show, relying primarily on Hegel's (1967 – original publication 1807) dissection of the `law of the heart' for my critique. Next, I employ Durkheim's concept of anomie as a key to an understanding of the source of the postmodern trend in anthropology, and conclude by calling into question the liberating potential of a theory that places imagination at the center of the anthropological endeavor.

The Postmodern Claim

One standard argument made by postmodernists opposes the `essentializing' of categories - especially the categories used by anthropologists in their study of culture. As I have written elsewhere (Lindholm 1995), this radical critique of traditional anthropology has been taken to its logical end point by Abu-Lughod, who proposes that the very notion of culture should be discarded, since its use must inevitably `make these "Others" seem simultaneously more coherent, self-contained and different from ourselves than they might be.... This in turn allows for the fixing of boundaries between self and other' (Abu-Lughod 1993: 7). She argues further that the self-other distinction
will always be hierarchical because the self is sensed as primary, self-formed, active, and complex, if not positive. At the very least, the self is always the interpreter and the other the interpreted' (Abu-Lughod 1993: 13).

Influenced deeply by the anti-Imperialist and anti-Orientalist rhetoric of Said (1979), Abu-Lughod suggests that it is destructive, oppressive and wrong to typify other persons as having a distinct cultural heritage which can be studied, grasped and compared, or even, it seems, to imagine others as separate from ourselves. Instead, she calls on anthropologists to write against generalization and to reveal, through multiple narratives, how `people strategize, feel pain, contest interpretations of what is happening - in short, live their lives' (Abu-Lughod 1993: 14). Narrative accounts of ordinary existence are better - more true and more moral - than any theoretical formula or comparative claim.

If Abu-Lughod is correct in stating that the concept of culture is in its very essence immoral and hegemonic, it follows then that the training and accreditation of anthropologists as professionals who have acquired the capacity to interpret cultures are equally immoral and hegemonic. The most rigorous postmodernist writers follow this logic, and condemn disciplinary procedures for promoting specialized professional knowledge - even though they thereby erode their own positions as teachers, writers and researchers.

It seems then that for the most consistent of postmodern writers, academically trained anthropologists who follow
accepted professional practice are necessarily guilty of aggression, elitism, inhumanity, polarization and a lack of creativity. Moreover, their work is censured as irredeemably flawed because their claims to knowledge derive from an outmoded Enlightenment project that wrongly assumes the capacity of detached reason and objective analysis to reveal the underlying patterns of human actions and beliefs. In the archetypical postmodern reading, such analysis is revealed to be not the search for truth it pretends to be, but rather a mask hiding the reality of power-seeking and self-aggrandizement on the part of the analyst, who dominates and oppresses those analyzed. Anthropological theory is therefore to be understood as simply one amongst an infinite variety of epistemic systems marshalled for the legitimization of power, and its claims to superior insight are false, as well as imperialist and authoritarian. At best, its practitioners are dupes, fooled into believing in the scientific value of a knowledge system that actually serves to enslave and objectify others; at worst they are hypocrites, who hide from themselves and their `subjects' the desire for domination that actually animates their research.

The more correct path then is to accept and embrace the relative nature of truth as a multiple product of the imaginative perceptions and interpretations of equal and creative individuals, with no privileged space for the analyses of the anthropological researcher. This is the position tentatively taken by Geertz in a famous essay (1984) and then wholeheartedly embraced and expanded in Clifford and Marcus's
There, in his influential programmatic statement, Rabinow says that the postmodernist author must be

`so committed to a doctrine of partiality and flux for which even such things as one's own situation are so unstable, so without identity, that they cannot serve as objects of sustained reflection' (Rabinow 1986: 252).

Quoting Clifford, Rabinow notes with satisfaction that in this giddy whirl of shifting boundaries and multiple voices, ethnography will be `invaded by heteroglossia' which will provide `a utopia of plural authorship' where the anthropologist is merely one among many independent voices, none any more (or less) convincing than the rest. (Rabinow 1986: 286).

The characteristic postmodern argument for relativism has been perhaps most cogently and comprehensively stated in a series of articles by Shweder, an influential figure in psychological anthropology. Following his reading of the philosopher Nelson Goodman (1972), Shweder argues that there can be no a priori way to give preference to any attribute of an object over any other attribute, nor is there in principle a limit to the number of attributes any object may be said to reveal or contain. In this wide sense `all things are equally alike and equally different' (Shweder 1984: 41), because they all have an infinite number of attributes. It follows that it is the way these attributes are perceived and coded by the observer that gives an object its supposed reality. But the nature of any codification is also potentially infinite. Therefore, `there are as many realities as
there are ways "it" can be constituted or described' (Shweder and Miller 1991: 156); and because realities are ineluctably multiple there can be `no standards worthy of universal respect dictating what to think or how to act' (Shweder 1984: 47) iii. Following this chain of reasoning, Shweder concludes:

`We may well live in a world where from a logical point of view all things are equally alike and equally different, a world where all previous events are necessary and none is sufficient to cause a subsequent event, a world where the best logical advice you can give a friend is that if you don't know where you are going almost any road will take you there.' (Shweder 1984: 41).

What is significant is Shweder's effort to link his relativizing and deconstructive project to a search for a higher spiritual reality. This transcendentizing tendency is not atypical in postmodern circles - recall the evocation of `utopia' in Rabinow's quotation from Clifford - and indeed it may be a necessary psychological consequence of imagining oneself to be living in a world where `everything is equally alike and equally different'. But Shweder makes his argument more definite and therefore more easily debated than the often fuzzy discourse of many other postmodern authors. He achieves this clarity by specifically paralleling postmodern anthropology to the eighteenth century Romantic effort to break away from the scientific rationality of the Enlightenment in order to move beyond the limits of the mundane world and to reach a higher level of consciousness. Postmodernism, he says, is the new
expression of this powerful and liberating romantic inclination. He states his case as follows:

`The whole thrust of romantic thinking is to defend the coequality of fundamentally different "frames" of understanding. The concept of nonrationality, the idea of the "arbitrary", frees some portion of man's mind from the universal dictates of logic and science, permitting diversity while leaving man free to choose among irreconcilable presuppositions, schemes of classification, and ideas of worth.' (Shweder 1984: 48).

According to Shweder, by allowing its acolytes to realize the arbitrary nature of reality, and to cross boundaries into the imaginary worlds they wish to live in, postmodernism has given them access to a higher plane of knowledge, forbidden to ordinary people who are locked in the chains of their own culture-bound perceptions.

`Transcendence and self-transformation are possible but only through a dialectical process of moving from one intentional world into the next, or by changing one intentional world into another' (Shweder 1991: 99).

The ideal anthropologist is an `artful realist' who can accomplish the task of shape-shifting across cultures, realize that all truth is partial, and be freed from the constraints of reality as it is ordinarily understood. Postmodernism then is a kind of carnival, iv where adepts play games with tropes and signifiers in a world that is endlessly malleable and open to those lucky few who have the proper non-judgmental credentials.
Shweder's ploy of using the very paradigm-questioning logic promoted by the Enlightenment to demonstrate the fragility of the Enlightenment project itself is nothing new. This move has a long intellectual history, and is perhaps best associated with Pascal and Hume. But they had different ends in mind than those espoused by postmodern theorists. Pascal, by questioning the power of abstract reason, hoped to frighten his readers back to the verities of faith. Hume, in contrast, pleaded for a government that could adequately control and channel the irrational passions of its citizenry. What is truly new is that neither of these are credible options for postmodernists, who repudiate both traditional faith and state power as unwarranted limitations on what they value most: total freedom and creativity as absolute goods. In this, they resemble their great precursor, Nietzsche. 

The amorphous universe of postmodern liberty sounds rather threatening to those timid souls who may want reliable road signs to guide them when they venture out into a capricious and arbitrary universe where everything is equally alike and equally different. But not to worry: even if we do not know where we are going or why, and even if the signals are continually changing, we do know the right way to behave en route. Certain moral precepts – at minimum the absolute demand not to accept absolutes (Nietzsche's transvaluation of all values – even the value of truth itself) – are generally taken as given by postmodernists. But very un-Nietzschean indeed is the liberal egalitarianism also taken for granted by postmodernists, who
tend to assume without question that we should not judge others or impose domination, distinction and hierarchy on them. Such judgements and impositions, it is presumed, would immorally limit the powers of others who have agendas equally as valid as our own. Within those accepted, though rarely analyzed, ethical constraints, the job of the postmodern researcher, as a psychologist closely associated with postmodern social theory writes, is to

`play at the margins of the acceptable - unsettling and reconstituting the language of representation so as to undermine the traditions and carve out a new domain of intelligibility.... In this context erosion and emancipation are close companions' (Gergen 1990: 590-1).

Postmodernists therefore are not merely theorists or researchers. They are engaged in a far more serious business: the liberation of human consciousness. By taking over the role formerly held by now discredited Marxists in leading the struggle to break asunder the fetters of the past in order to maximize human freedom and creativity, the postmodern social scientist, and especially the anthropologist (whose own world view has already been challenged and `relativized' by cross-cultural experience), takes the lead. But where the Marxists wished to change the concrete relations of production, postmodernists attack the social production of significance, undermining epistemic hegemony by inventing oppositional and corrosive meaning systems.
This is accomplished not by battles in the streets, but by heroic acts of (re)interpretation. Of course, these acts of interpretation must be personal and subjective, since, according to the premises of this school, interpretation in principle cannot be grounded on any `objective' reality, and therefore must emanate from one's own individual insight; nor can theoretical discourse refer to or be drawn from the ethnographic material itself (that would be an assertion of the analyst's authoritative power over the other), but can only be directed negatively against the dominating practices of Western cultural authority and positively toward the most appropriate ways to present the liberating multiplicity of the human experience. A convincing (if obscure) literary style is a prerequisite for this effort, since, as one practitioner puts it, `facts are not separable from their literary embodiment. Rather, their very "factness" derives from the way in which they are related' (Burke 1993: 6). Rhetorical skill, regardless of the material being described, therefore becomes mandatory for effective research, and ethnography is reckoned worthwhile insofar as it exemplifies the free play of the imagination of the author while simultaneously proclaiming the essential humanity of the Other. This can be done by means of selectively recording narrative, or through expressive novelistic techniques, or by introspective analysis of the ethnographer's own responses to the fieldwork situation, or by quoting recent literary criticism, or by a combination of these and other techniques to produce writings that, however opaque, somehow
`challenge the capacity of anthropological generalizations to render lives, theirs or others, adequately' (Abu-Lughod 1993: xvi).

What is the upshot of this effort? Rosaldo is typical of postmodern anthropologists in his idealistic hope that these new methods will produce polyglot anthropological texts celebrating `new forms of human understanding' where `nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned' (Rosaldo 1989: 216). Within this inclusive and nonjudgemental creative genre, people will not be objectified and dehumanized but revealed `as playful persona whose whimsical fantasies join together old things in new ways.... crisscrossed by multiple identities' (Rosaldo 1989: 216). As a result, a new, more open and humane anthropology will blossom - a carnival discipline where sportive identity transformations are de rigueur among fun-loving anthropologists and their equally entertaining subjects.

Some Logical Problems of Postmodernism

What is wrong with the picture of anthropology presented by these postmodern authors? Aside from rhetorical excess, a lot. For instance, consider the quandaries that must follow if we take seriously the postmodern call for the disintegration of all boundaries (including the boundary between self and other), and the elimination of all judgements. If such a disintegration were humanly or linguistically possible (which it patently is not), it is hardly evident that the results would be appreciated or desired by the others whom we wish to dissolve: would they in
fact want to deny their own separate cultural identities and ours, hegemonic though these identities may be? It is also not the case that differences and values are always felt to be invidious or that hierarchy is always regarded as evil. Nor is it possible to discuss or even imagine any moral position whatsoever if discrimination, comparison and categorization are condemned as invalid. This very censure itself rests on an implicit distinction from and comparison to an ideal world pictured as without distinctions, comparisons and categorizations. In fact, it is painfully evident that we can no more disintegrate the difference between self and other or eliminate judgement than we can think without language, and therefore, as Clifford reluctantly admits, we `cannot yet do without' the notion of culture (Clifford 1988: 10). Nor, despite Clifford's hopeful `yet', is it likely that a sense of cultural distinctiveness ever vanish among the the people whom anthropologists study. And once the concepts of culture and of distinction have been admitted, then generalization, typification and comparison must necessarily follow, whatever idealistic visions are afloat among academics anxious to deny their own disciplinary precepts.

Similar problems plague the postmodern hope of achieving a kind of transcendence by `constantly moving from one objective world to the next, inside and then out, outside and then in, all the while standing back and trying to make sense of the whole journey' (Shweder 1991: 68). This mystical aspiration is based on a premise of open and limitless choice in a universe where
all things are `equally alike and equally different'. But the absence of significant distinctions that is postulated exists only in the one-sided realm of a purely formal philosophy which privileges linguistic categories and intellectual abstraction, while for ordinary human beings understanding of what is most crucial in daily life is decidedly not arbitrary, but is always a result of existential givens. As an example, a hammer can be described in a million ways, but what it is for us in its use is another matter entirely, and is realized when it is seized intuitively as an object `ready to hand'.

Even across cultures, it does not take much effort for someone who has never seen a hammer to quickly grasp, in a literal sense, its proper function. Of course, it could be argued in response that there are an infinity of possible uses that might be intuited for any object. In principle, a hammer could be a wall decoration. Similarly, it is clear that what is important and noticed about an object varies according to circumstances. For example, the salient feature for the person being chased by a tiger is its jaws; the apple is delicious for the hungry. But after escaping the tiger and after eating the apple a realignment of perception is likely. The tiger's eye or the apple's redness now may be the features most likely to be described. Yet a contextual shift in descriptors does not prove Shweder's point, since only those aspects of a thing that have deeply concerned us in an encounter are central to our classification of the object; these aspects are primary in our definition,
while other attributes are secondary. Some objects - like shelter, clothing, simple tools, for example - are immediately understood for what they are, while others (like angry tigers) that threaten our lives or (like delicious fruits) can assuage our hunger also clearly have a motivated existential priority, easily and immediately grasped when conditions require recognition. The forms of these objects may vary greatly, but only within the range of their significance to us; nor are they 'equally alike and equally different' in any except the most abstract and meaningless sense. Try using a shirt to plough a field, or taking shelter beneath a digging stick, or stroking an angry tiger, or using an apple for building block. Now, if this is so of our relationship to significant objects, it is even more true of what Heidegger calls our being-in-the-world, as all human beings are inevitably and everywhere motivated by the existential reality of death, the problem of finding meaning in life, and especially by the demands and constraints set by equally self-aware persons whose desires and fears are as compelling for them as our own are for us. Above all else, they are the capitalized Others - both generalized and specific - from whom we must distinguish ourselves and to whom we must relate ourselves. Our confrontation with these distinctive and active others provides the fundamental tension of human life, as we recognize ourselves in their eyes, yet also find our self-certainty challenged by their autonomy. 'The determinate form of this process of relating,' Hegel writes, 'is knowledge' (1967: 139). Such knowledge, though infinitely
varied, is hardly indiscriminate and unmotivated, nor does it float free of typification and analysis. The task of anthropologists, it would seem to me, must be the relatively modest one of discovering the possible range and content of these existential relationships - a discovery that can only be made by empirical research into the values and priorities motivating other cultures - and our own.

So far I have argued that postmodernism, despite brave oratory, stands on shaky logical ground. However, this inadequacy is not fatal. Social science practitioners rarely take serious account of the bases of their first premises, and the logic used to develop these premises is usually not very rigorous. What is important is that new theories provide a novel and productive means of describing and understanding about the actual processes of social life. It is true that postmodernism has led, in the worst cases, to self-indulgent personal accounts, to `epistemological hypochondria' (Geertz 1988: 71) and to a kind of journalistic anthropology in which both theory and data are eschewed in favor of self-congratulatory rhetorical flourishes. But the best practitioners have paid needed attention to previously ignored alternative narratives and have developed a healthy critical stance toward the validity of anthropological research. These are constructive contributions, worth emulating.

Moral Paradoxes and `The Law of the Heart'

What is really wrong with the picture of the world presented by postmodernists is the moral perspective that stands
at the core of the postmodern project. Typically, as I have tried to illustrate, postmodernists take it for granted that creativity and freedom of the imagination are ultimate virtues to be maximized. In so doing they accept the central values of the Enlightenment world they seek to displace. It was Kant, after all, who called for a rigorous overturning of the intellectual authority of tradition in favor of maximizing the creativity of the individual – sapere aude (‘dare to be wise’) was the warcry of the Enlightenment. But although romantic postmodernism shares Kant’s ambition, it lacks the faith in reason (not to mention the religious belief) that gave Kant his moorings. For postmodern thinkers, the anchor of the active intellect and the role of God-given limits have been replaced by a quest for transcendence through aesthetic appreciation – a turn toward play and imagination that threatens to disintegrate the study of external reality in an unbounded realm of personal interpretation. Within this universe of expressive subjectivity, everything ceases to be different, and is likely instead to become the same – namely, a reflection of the momentary mood and taste of the viewer. This paradox has been satirized by Hegel as ‘the abyss of vacuity.... the night in which, as we say, all cows are black’ (Hegel 1967: 79). The postmodern critique therefore celebrates with enthusiasm a situation that it is not at all clear we ought to applaud. Motivated by a laudable zeal to realize the potential of the individual as a creative and autonomous actor, postmodernist theorists have imagined a world of infinite possibilities, where
the creative anthropologist enjoys the pleasure of trying on and taking off cultural masks at will. As Shweder writes, in this happy place

`polytheism is alive and well. Its doctrine is the relativistic idea of multiple objective worlds, and its commandment is participation in the never-ending process of overcoming partial views'. "The challenge is always to feel eager to move on to some other worldview' (1991: 68, 66).

But once all the masks are off, where is the actor? And how does this tenuous figure decide which mask to wear next? These questions are not addressed by Shweder or other postmodernists, yet they lie at the moral heart of their enterprise. The emancipatory worldview articulated by postmodern thinkers has already been analyzed by Hegel, who termed it the `law of the heart'; that is, a faith in the transformative power of personal imagination and feeling. He understood this view to be characteristic of the mystical Romantic school that I, following Shweder, believe to be the underlying faith that animates the relativistic and protean postmodern impulse. ix According to Hegel, those carried away by this Romantic vision see the world as unjust insofar as it constrains and distorts the full expression of the imaginative feeling self. The actual content of that expression, as noted above, cannot be defined - it is simply an expansion, `a never-ending process of overcoming partial views' (Shweder 1991:68), accompanied by a dissolution of all distinctions.
For Romantics of this type, achieving freedom of the heart and of imagination is not simply a personal quest, but has universal significance, since by becoming inwardly free of the false constraints of culture and tradition one realizes the relativity of morality and opposes the oppression that moral regulation enforces on others. As Hegel writes:

``Reality is thus on the one hand a law by which the particular individuality is crushed and oppressed, a violent ordinance of the world which contradicts the law of the heart, and, on the other hand, a humanity suffering under that ordinance - a humanity which does not follow the law of the heart, but is subjected to an alien necessity' (Hegel 1967: 391).

To overcome the alien necessity of the world, the Romantic (in eighteenth century and postmodern guise alike) believes in the power of the creative realization of the inner self. In the contemporary idiom, this is precisely the struggle to transcend boundaries and to move beyond the particular cultural contingencies that enchain the free play of the imagination. Again, the actual content of this imaginative play cannot be described - this would restrict freedom and the creative play of the aesthetic impulse, which is an absolute good not only for oneself, but for all humanity.

Unhappily, despite its emancipatory thrust, the law of the heart contains deep contradictions. In the first place, it tends to ignore or negate the objective reality of human cruelty and violence - the `slaughter bench' of history, as Hegel called it.
If recognized at all, oppression and brutality are automatically taken to be a consequence of authority and elitism, of enforced boundaries that divide persons, and of the oppressive weight of an inhumane enlightenment science. Get rid of these, and human beings will spontaneously realize themselves in a joyful mutual recognition of one another’s worth.

Of course, it would be pleasant indeed to believe that a new, liberating anthropology will indeed actually free us to take on different roles in the polyglot border crossings of a porous, playful and decentered postmodern world. However, it is highly unlikely that objective realities of authority, distinction, opposition or science will vanish in the near future, and neither pious hopes nor intellectual gambits will make them disappear any the quicker. Nor is it likely that anthropology now or in the any foreseeable future can have anything more than the most peripheral role in liberating the consciousness of either the rulers or the masses.

More to the point, even were social conditions to favor its adoption, the postmodernist motivational model does not offer any alternative moral base upon which we can erect a plausible opposition to the hegemony of Western values and institutions, if we in fact agree they deserve to be abolished or superceded.

For one thing, as already noted, the high-sounding goals of tolerance, reciprocity, freedom, pluralism, creativity, equality, and self-expansion pursued by postmodernists are in fact the standard goals of Western liberal society itself, and are not alternatives at all. Secondly, these goals are without
substantive content. Rather, they are grounded in a faith that has as its sole motivating credo the rejection of restraint and authority of all sorts: `The realization of the immediate undisciplined nature passes for a display of excellence and for bringing about the well-being of mankind' (Hegel 1967: 392). From this stance, choice becomes the greatest of all goods, since we ought to be free to become whatever appeals to us, with the only caveat being that we must give others equivalent freedom. But how do we know what we wish to be? Only ever more free, more tolerant, more creative. The endless demands for contentless amplification must end in the desperate desire simply to be more - to absorb the world! Thus Hegel's joke about black cows in the night is also a warning about the loss of self in the abyss of desire without limit or content. Such an extreme overvaluation of individual choice presupposes that the laws, customs and necessities of the world are, in their very essence, obstacles to freedom. Worse, the desires of others, insofar as they do not immediately reflect or augment the desires of the expansive self, are felt to be alien and destructive, so that the lovers of absolute freedom and tolerance angrily strive to sublate and cancel the reluctant others who do not accept their visions of the world. As Hegel writes: `The heart-throb for the welfare of mankind passes therefore into the rage of frantic self-conceit' (Hegel 1967:397). The ultimate logical consequence of the law of the heart is, paradoxically, narrow-mindedness and a self-righteous war of the conquering feeling self against the world. That many
who hold this belief system are themselves liberal, tolerant and kindly does not obviate this logic; it only shows that human beings are not logical.

**Anomie and the Intellectuals**

Let me conclude by attempting, in the mode of Hegel's historical anthropology, to demonstrate the connection between postmodern idealism and present social conditions. Of course, the dream of liberation from the constraints of culture and its mores through the playful exercise of the creative imagination has a long history that can be traced to Gnostic roots. But the proximate historical source lies in the gradual erosion of the traditions of the European world by the forces of modernity, a process which, as Hegel remarks, left people searching for `the restoration of that sense of solidity and substantiality of existence' that had been lost (Hegel 1967: 72).

The advances of Enlightenment science, Hegel saw, did not offer the certainty that had irretrievably vanished with the disintegration of the stable worlds of the past. As a result, there was a wide-spread revulsion against the fragmentation and soullessness of the Enlightenment project. People desired `to run together what thought has divided asunder... and restore the feeling of existence' (Hegel 1967: 72 emphasis in the original). In other words, the embrace of experience as a value in itself that is so characteristic of romanticism and postmodernism is a predictable consequence of the disenchantment and disintegration of the world that goes hand in hand with modernity. Romantic thinkers responding to this new reality denied the validity of
systematic thought and the objective limits of a newly contingent and partial external universe in order to search for ultimate meaning within themselves, in their own aesthetic sensations and reactions.

The dissolution of limits and distinctions and the free expansion of the creative self that constitute the law of the heart also has a sociological name: anomie - a state in which there is no legitimate end to one's desire, no goal, no conclusion. As opposed to alienation, which is a crisis of social disintegration that ensues with the collapse of the traditional order, anomie occurs when the moral regulative power of society is dissolved by the explosive multiplication of the goods produced by a capitalist economy. In this situation, people who have already lost their social roots begin to believe they are creating themselves through their own successes in the ever-expanding marketplace. They learn to value novelty and freedom of choice above all, despising any form of constraint on their capacity to make selections from a constantly changing menu of goods and values which the economy labors to produce, multiply and distribute.

Without moral limits on production and consumption, the proliferation of merchandise breeds an endless accumulative frenzy. The psychology of this condition, a prerequisite for successful capitalism, has been classically outlined by Durkheim, who observed that, under anomic conditions, "the more one has, the more one wants, since satisfactions received only stimulate instead of filling needs" (1951: 247). Where the
continual expansion of one's desires becomes the highest goal, craving replaces ethics, since one finds one's value and identity through appetite and consumption. This is the systemic source of what MacIntyre (1981) has called the dominant philosophy of our time: 'emotivism' - a reliance on personal desire as the sole incentive for action. The postmodern image of individuals as artists manufacturing their own identities is therefore not a critical negation of capitalism, but its reflection and apotheosis - a point made with great theoretical sophistication by Harvey (1989).

According to Durkheim's argument our age is not the age of liberation, but of the absence of goals and limits, and it is precisely this absence which drives the entrepreneurial cycle of never-ending capitalist expansion. In this demanding environment the intellectual does not stand apart. Rather, academics are required to be among the most enterprising of entrepreneurs, manufacturing 'cutting-edge' theoretical arguments to accumulate ephemeral positions of status and power in the fast-paced and ever-changing marketplace of ideas. Anomic anxiety is heightened by the inherent instability of academic authority: while entrepreneurs can know their position vis-a-vis their competitors by simply comparing bank accounts, scholars have no objective markers by which to measure themselves or decide how the future will evaluate their work, nor can they ever achieve enough absolutely to ensure an irrefutable place in their discipline. Never secure in their reputations, constantly in need of new intellectual ammunition,
running hard to keep up with constantly shifting fashions, some academics are understandably attracted to a postmodern ideology that places a premium on the absolute power of interpretation to manufacture and even liberate the world.

From this new perspective the crumbling of the grand regulatory structures of the Enlightenment is viewed as praiseworthy. These old restrictive forms will be replaced, it is hoped, by a festival of multiple circulating fictions, lacking coherence and without legitimacy. In the new world of liberated imagination, fact and fantasy mingle; according to Baudrillard (1986), sentimentality and nostalgia become the only emotions possible in the postmodern age, while kitsch and pastiche are the appropriate forms of art. Ironic and bemused intellectuals and aesthetes are the central figures in this universe of the future; they put on their varied carnival masks in order to celebrate the end of history, the collapse of all norms, and the triumph of multiplicity and creativity. According to postmodern thought, the anomic world is a world of whimsy and play among the ruins of old certainties.

Unhappily, the newspaper headlines do not bear out this halcyon vision. Instead of being made up of infinite and ultimately interchangeable cultural texts playfully rearranged and represented by amused and amusing academics, the real world appears to be largely populated by people whose motivations are far less refined. Perhaps, in fact, the much-desired present-day disintegration of the old markers of cultural and moral significance and the escalation of mass violence are not
unrelated. As Arendt prophetically warned, instead of being amused, real people are far more likely to be enraged and bewildered when `the distinction between fact and fiction... and the distinction between true and false... no longer exist' (Arendt 1968:172).

Without a moral base, without faith in reason, and without the limits imposed by traditional social relationships, atomized human beings may not celebrate their new amorphousness by participating in a wonderful orgy of aesthetic reinterpretation, but rather they are far more likely to become `one great unorganized, structureless mass of furious individuals' (Arendt 1968: 13). The paradigm case is the rise of Nazism, where a whole nation of people immersed themselves in an all-encompassing social movement that offered them both absolute rules to follow and scapegoats to slaughter. For Arendt, as for many other observers, the 20th century specter of ethnic cleansing, genocide, racism and the pervasive brutality of tyrannical regimes correlates with a deep popular hunger for standards to replace those traditions and identities that have been lost in a chilling amoral universe.

The reason for such a reaction is clear enough. As Hegel knew, human beings have a deeply rooted existential need to posit identities for themselves; to distinguish themselves from outsiders and simultaneously to find a kinship with those who are deemed closest. It is only through a process of manufacturing differentiation and resemblance that we constitute ourselves and others in a moral human community. Such a
dialectical construction of identity is necessarily fraught with anxiety and ambivalence and often may erupt in hostility, as `we' seek to envelop `them', or vice versa. But the dialectic of self and other, we and they, is nonetheless constitutive of both subjectivity and collectivity. The erosion of identities occurring today, I have argued, is not liberating, but terrifying, and is likely to lead to a heightened desire for reintegration, often at any cost, and thus to increased violence against enemies accused of breaking apart the community. The ideology of postmodernism reflects our contemporary disrupted state of being, but in doing so without a critical perspective it mistakes the nature of the human condition, and promises joy where there is little to be found. x

If the postmodern celebration of the unfettered individual has its moral and psychological pitfalls, what then remains? Perhaps we are left only with the cold comfort of science and Enlightenment rationality - an ideal without much passionate intensity, but at least one we can rely upon. Whether this ideal offers us solace for life's trials is a matter only individuals can decide; but at any rate it has the advantage of undermining the belief that we are the centers of the universe - a delusion which, it seems, has reappeared in the moral certainties of the contemporary solipsistic sensibility of postmodernism.

At the same time, perhaps it is possible for our discipline to give more credit to the human urge for transcendence. Though we cannot and ought not make any claims to offer realization of
that ultimate goal ourselves, we can rightly consider our enterprize as a step along the way, since our task is to study and debate exactly what the conditions of human life actually are, both in their cross-cultural multiplicity, and also in their universal existential reality. It is a task that requires a willingness to argue about what it means to be a human being. That is what this paper has attempted to do.

6967 words

NOTES:

The original version of this paper was prepared for the 1995 AAA meetings for a session entitled `Enduring Traditions in Anthropology'. This session was brought together by Herbert Lewis, Paula Rubel and Abraham Rosman. I thank them and the other participants for their ideas and encouragement in writing this piece. I would also like to thank William Jankowiak and Gary Palmer, as well as the two anonymous reviewers for the JRAI for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this work. Simon Harrison also made some editorial marks suggestions that were very much appreciated.

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i Of course, a postmodernist might well argue that there is no archetypical postmodernist, only a multiplicity of personal perspectives, and that my very attempt to categorize reveals my inability to grasp multivocality. But that claim would simply validate mine.

ii It is hard to say what such an ethnography would look like. Perhaps it would consist of vagrant snippets of texts, jokes, and ruminations collected at random, as fragmented and compelling as a Menippean satire - but so far such a text remains a dream - a utopian dream for postmodernists and perhaps
something of a nightmare for those less enthusiastic about the new age. Of
course, someone would have to compile such a collection and make choices as
to arrangement, so the problem of agency can never be wholly submerged,
unless arbitrary selections by a computer can eventually substitute for
authorial taste.

In this shifting and unreliable environment, even personal identity
becomes highly problematic and contingent. Hence the contemporary
anthropological interest in the vague notion of culturally construed selves -
forgetting the fact that construal is an interpretive act that requires a
critical active agent as well as a text to be construed.

An image made more specific in the works of Baudrillard (1986) and

Oddly, Shweder takes Nietzsche as the figure representative of the
triumph of analytic and reductionist Enlightenment thought - surely one of
the least likely individuals in Western history to be put into that
particular role!

See Geertz (1988) for the paradigmatic statement of this perspective,
and Gellner (1992) for a response.

This famous example is taken from Heidegger (1962:95-99).

Of course, culture and context can alter recognition of such objects.
For instance, apples may be forbidden fruits, or not recognized as edible,
but such facts do not alter the basic point that knowledge is motivated not
random.

See Shweder (1984). I am not claiming here that Hegel should be taken
as an exemplar for future anthropological research, only that his
psychological insights have relevance for the point I wish to make. Hegel
himself was deeply Romantic in the sense that he sought a transcendental synthesis of human experience through his philosophical system. His portrait of the pitfalls of Romanticism developed from his arguments against his more mystically inclined contemporaries. For him, the triumph of the Spirit was conducted within, not outside, the trajectory of history, and is an apotheosis of the power of reason and systematic thought within the context of culture. Hegel was also especially critical, as we shall see, of thinkers who remained insensitive to the suffering and struggle of what he called the "Golgotha" of the human spirit. See Abrams (1971) for more on Hegel and his relationship to other Romantic writers.

X For more on this see Lindholm (1990). I should make it clear here that I am far from claiming that people with firm identities and strong cultural traditions are pacifists, or that nationalistic wars and ethnic hatred are postmodern inventions. My point is that the undermining of identities is as dangerous as, if not more dangerous than, the essentializing of them, and that the latter is in fact very often a reaction to the former.