What Was Post-Modernism?

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The concepts of the post-colonial and the post-modern are perhaps most consistently defined in terms of their difference from and their difficult and ambivalent resistance to modernity. It is a logic of periodization that ties them together, or more precisely a logic of anti-periodization, defining them emply through a retrospective negation. Even so open-ended and paradoxical a conception of period, however (the "post"), runs the usual dangers: of reducing a disparate set of political or cultural circumstances to a more or less unified temporality with an ultimately spiritual essence. My concern in this paper is primarily with the concept of the post-modern, but the moral is meant to apply more broadly.

For one of the driving difficulties of any attempt to think post-colonialism and post-modernism as specific epochal structures is the temptation to conflate the cultural and the political with the economic. Jameson does this quite deliberately (post-modernism is "the cultural logic of late capitalism"); others do it almost despite their own better intentions, as in the case of Schulte-Sasse, who, after carefully distinguishing "social" modernity and post-modernity from "cultural" modernism and postmodernism, then casually adds that "postmodernity and postmodernism refer to qualitative changes in society and their cultural manifestations" (6). The word "manifestations" gets the idea quite wrong because it sets up a mechanically causal relation between a primary and a derived realm, and thereby leaves no room for discontinuity or any more complex causality.

The problem lies both with the exclusion of the cultural from the social or the socio-economic, and with the expressive logic that then reduces it to a simple function of the more powerful pole. This creates a problem in part because it then becomes an easy matter to attribute some of the effects of complex social movements to the more limited cultural or political realm.

In order to clarify matters you might want to distinguish between three conceptual moments: modernism (a bundle of cultural practices, some of them adversarial); modernization (an economic process with social and cultural implications); and modernity (which overlaps with the modernization process, but which I understand as a philosophical category designating the temporality of the post-traditional world). The same distinction of ontological levels holds good, mutatis mutandis, for postmodernism, post-modernization, and post-modernity. The point is not to grant
autonomy to these moments but to make possible their more complex and contradictory articulation.

Of these, the crucial and most powerful moment is that of modernization. This is the force that has torn apart our world, given it the shape of a modernity without precedent, and imposed upon it a relentless universality.

Contemporary accounts of modernization are dominated by the Weberian concept of rationality (this is as true of the modernization theory developed in the postwar period by empiricist social science as it is of Adorno and Horkheimer’s Aufklärung, Habermas’s Zweckvernunft, and Foucault’s discipline). In broad terms, and allowing for significant theoretical differences, modernization is conceived as a more or less systemic process with some of the following components:

- the formation of a homogeneous economic domain through the extension and integration of commodity production and exchange;
- a shift from the closed time of feudalism to the open-ended, dynamic, and godless time of capitalism (specifically, the future-directed temporality of the return on capital and thus of capital accumulation);
- the gridding of space and time into calculable units, and the restructuring of work through the agency of decentralized disciplinary systems;
- the elaboration of mediated rather than direct relations of exploitation of surplus value, and the autonomization of the ethical self as the basis of contract;
- a movement from ascriptive and localized groupings based on kinship and community to highly differentiated social and economic roles performed within functional groupings and supported by a developed education system;
- the increasingly central role of the national state and its bureaucracy in the regulation of the market, the provision of infrastructure support, and the administration of social relations;
- extensive urbanization as part of a shift from agricultural to industrial production, and the extension of the communications and transportation networks;
- the development of machine technology, and the central productive role of scientific knowledge;
- the secularization and autonomization of the spheres of science, art, and morality.

My list is loaded to emphasize that I think modernization can be understood in terms of the forms of instrumental rationality generated by the logic of capital; other lists would put their stress on apparently more autonomous modes of rationality (scientific, ethical, administrative, disciplinary . . . ). Most such lists have in common, however, two structural features. The first is the unification of very heterogeneous
processes within the concept of the modern, which in itself lacks any unitary logic other than the temporal. The second is that this unification is secured by means of binary opposition to another term, that of "traditional" societies. Here too the apparent unity of the term disappears as soon as we recognize the great variety of social structures classified as pre-modern; the fact that modern and traditional social structures are by no means mutually exclusive; and the extent to which the concept of the "modern" extrapolates from the model of industrially advanced Western societies (cf. Desai).

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I have assumed the priority of the socio-economic process of modernization over the cultural and philosophical concepts of modernism and modernity; but it is arguable that this separation, and this priority, are inherent in the structure and the historical force of the concept of the modern itself. For quite precise reasons, which I shall discuss later, the concept of the post-modern seems to me not to be structured in this way. It is, nevertheless, organized in a similar manner through a potentially infinite set of binary oppositions. This is to say that it obeys a discursive rather than a descriptive necessity: its function is that of a logical operator, establishing categorical polarities which then allow — in a tautologous and self-justifying circuit — the construction of fictions of periodization and value. These fictions have no content other than the structure of binary opposition itself.

At the same time, however, we must recognize that this discursive necessity has a definite historical location. It responds to the inner contradictions of a modernism which has gone on too long. The temporality of modernism requires its own obsolescence: a modernism that failed to age, that didn't demand to be superseded, would be a contradiction in terms. Hence the necessity of a successor to modernism, but hence also its definition solely in a chronological form ("post") which refuses all indications of content. The paradoxical result of this is that, since this "post" must be a real alternative to modernism, it must be based upon a different temporality: not that of novation but that of stasis. It must be the end of history (hence the post-modern preoccupation with apocalypse). In its determination to succeed modernism, however, it corresponds entirely to a modernist logic. Habermas writes that, since the nineteenth century, "The distinguishing mark of works which count as modern is 'the new' which will be overcome and made absolute through the novelty of the next style" (4). In this sense post-modernism is precisely a moment of the modern, a "next style." Its founding gesture is a modernist destruction of the modern, a destruction which is logically entailed by the modernist programme itself. As Lyotard notes, we may suspect today that this "break" is more like a repression (that is, a repetition) of the past than it is an overcoming of it (121).

Another way of putting this would be to say that the concept of the post-modern responds to a narrative necessity. This is what modernist artistic production looks like
in Lyotard’s heroic formulation — it is “a sort of long, persistent, and deeply responsible labour directed towards enquiry into the presuppositions implicit in modernity” (124–25) — a salvational project. Modernism, that is to say, is a rigorous programme which leads to a predetermined end; it has the pathos of a necessary trajectory. The modernist artist (Duchamp, Mies and Corbusier, Schoenberg and Webern, Mallarmé, Joyce, Kafka) is the one who explores the given material with absolute commitment and to the point of silence or madness. But this narrative continues, not with a simple succession but with a dialectical reversal: having reached the point of absolute aporia, having taken the exploration of the material to its end, the modernist project becomes both complete and irrelevant. The intervention of post-modernism at this point would involve not a linear succession but a change of ground. Losing faith in both the purity and the futility of modernist practice, post-modernism takes up the discarded or marginalized materials of modernism (figure and representation, for example, or humour and directness of enunciation), and exploits them with a quite different kind of rigour. The parallel with the strategies we associate with the post-colonial is, I hope, clear.

The problem with such an account is that it continues to reduce the heterogeneity of modernism to a paradigm of closed epochal unity. Placing a marked break between epochs, it reinforces the ideal-typical opposition between non-contingent historical unities, and thus cannot deal with the possibility that so-called post-modernist texts remain centrally within the “sentimental” aesthetic of modernism. Following Paz’s definition of modernism as a “tradition against itself,” Calinescu argues that post-modernism therefore by definition cannot escape this paradigm: “Even the ‘post’ in post-modernism appears to be an unconscious tribute to modernism and to its dialectic of transitiveness and negativity. Insofar as modernism always aspires toward its own dissolution, post-modernism should be seen as one of the most typical products of the modernist imagination” (168). Were it to be qualitatively different, post-modernism would have to be grounded in a quite different temporality, and would thus have to be the paradoxical reversal of its own act of rupture. It would have, not to initiate but to find itself within a stasis which would perhaps be that of a neo-classicism (and in this case its most representative form would be the advertisement, the genre which is most fully reconciled to the order of things and reads it as utopia), or else that of a frenzied renewal which, in a parody of modernist *ostranenie*, occurs in such short waves that it negates itself. This is to say that the post-modern is caught between contradictory imperatives:

- to change/to be still;
- to be historical/to be the end of history.

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Much of the imprecision of the concept of post-modernism stems, then, from the difficulty of assigning temporal limits to cultural modernism, and — to complicate
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matters — from the different datings used in different cultural spheres. The beginnings of literary modernism are usually dated from around 1900 or a bit later. Roberts puts the decisive break in 1914, and describes it in terms of the transformation of the cultural market ("High art since 1914 is no longer bourgeois but produced by and for intellectuals"[54]). Certainly it seems clear that the moment of literary modernism had passed by about 1930, to be replaced by forms of writing whose relation to the modernist moment is still in need of clarification. Levin’s essay of 1960, "What Was Modernism?" could speak confidently of modernism as a thing of the past, just as Trilling could speak in Beyond Culture (1965) of a fully accomplished and entrenched institutionalization of modernism. In the visual arts, however, a quite different periodization obtains: here the term modernism tends in current usage to mean the period from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s, associated with the dominance of the New York School and with Greenberg’s "formally reflexive" conception of modernism. It is arguable that this dating corresponds to the institutionalization of the "critically reflexive" art of the modernist avant garde: as Newman (from whom I borrow this opposition) argues,

Many of the arguments which assume Greenberg’s theory of modernism and assert a postmodernism using post-structuralist categories may in fact be retheorizing a pre-Greenbergian modernism. This is an attempt to maintain a reflexive radicality, a questioning of the institution of art, and an emancipatory ethic — art as a contribution to knowledge and social self-awareness; but without a utopian conception of historical development and, in most but not all cases, without any commitment to a specific political project. Looked at critically, this might be seen as an attempt to maintain the stance of a modernist avant-garde in conditions where this is no longer possible or appropriate, and to do so through critical discourse. (32)

In architecture, finally, modernism refers to the more monolithic structure of the International Style, which has a quite different, non-oppositional relation to the culture of corporate capitalism, and which has undergone a more continuous development from the 1920s through to the 1970s. Indeed, it is in the case of architecture, which has been the privileged domain for the theorization of post-modernism, that these two problems, that of exemplification and that of periodization, most dramatically converge. The difficulty lies in the very terms of the opposition between the modern and the post-modern that is established here — that is, with the assumption of its generalizability. Does architectural Modernism in fact have anything to do with the other modernisms, does it share a common problematic or even a common temporality, or does it have a quite different rhythm and dynamic?

One way of establishing a correlation between architectural Modernism and other domains of aesthetic production would be in terms of a conflation of modernism with modernity. The central categories in such a model would be a certain mode of rationality and a certain complicity with the modernization process. Adorno’s is perhaps the most explicit account we have of both of these features: the modernist
work of art is characterized by its rigorous commitment to the inherent rationality of its material (however “irrational” this might be in another sense) and to the progressive development of this rationality through a critique of obsolescent forms. The more or less advanced state of the material is directly correlated with the more or less advanced state of the forces of capitalist production. And the dynamic of the work of art is that of an exploration of the autonomous domain in which the material is elaborated (cf. Bürger). An extrapolation of these features to architecture would describe architectural Modernism in terms of a claim to atemporal universality; a self-reflexive relation to architectonic space, including exposure of the materials and especially of the skeleton; an expressive (“functional”) relation between inside and outside; and a willed autonomy with respect to the urban context. This formal separateness of the Modernist style is what Portoghesi calls a “dam carefully built around the pure language elaborated in vitro on the basis of the rationalist statute” (10).

Similarly, Krauss’s description of the function of the grid in modernist art could be directly transposed into a description of Modernist architecture:

In the spatial sense, the grid states the autonomy of the realm of art. Flattened, geometricized, ordered, it is antinatural, antimimetic, antireal. It is what art looks like when it turns its back on nature. In the flatness that results from its coordinates, the grid is the means of crowding out the dimensions of the real and replacing them with the lateral spread of a single surface. In the overall regularity of its organization, it is the result not of imitation, but of aesthetic decree. Insofar as its order is that of pure relationship, the grid is a way of arrogating the claims of natural objects to have any order particular to themselves; the relationships in the aesthetic field are shown by the grid to be in a world apart and, with respect to natural objects, to be both prior and final. The grid declares the space of art to be at once autonomous and autotelic. (9–10)

In their reliance on this principle, the organisation of artistic and of architectural space display clear structural parallels. On the other hand, however, it seems to me important to stress the very marked differences between the two domains. Modernist architecture is integrated into the capitalist mode of production and into a capitalist rationality in a way that is simply not true of other domains, which remain at once complicit with and deeply antagonistic to the logic of modernity. This is in part a question of the different functional relationship of architecture to capital, but it does suggest the difficulty of imposing a universal historicity on distinct and unevenly developed domains of the social.

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It is post-modern architecture that constitutes the central exemplificatory instance in Jameson’s 1984 essay on the cultural logic of late capitalism. Portman’s Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles doesn’t exactly exemplify the populist and vernacular thrust of post-modernism, since, rather than opening itself to the “tawdry and commercial
sign-system of the surrounding city” (81), it withdraws into its own self-contained space, recreating the outside city in miniature. In this one might think that it resembles the aloof disjunction of the High Modernist tower from its surrounding cityscape, but Jameson argues that it corresponds, instead, to a new kind of collective practice and to a new (refusal of) politics: the Bonaventure “is content to ‘let the fallen city fabric continue to be in its being’ (to parody Heidegger); no further effects, no larger protopolitical Utopian transformation, is either expected or desired” (81).

This “peculiar and placeless dissociation of the Bonaventure from its neighbourhood” (82) is emphasized not only by the occlusion of entrances but by the way the building’s glass skin repels its surrounding (giving back only “distorted images” in a deliberate play of illusion). We are confronted here not only with a refusal of relationship but with a turning inwards of signification. The escalators and elevators, for example, function in the first instance as self-regarding symbols: they “replace movement but also and above all designate themselves as new reflexive signs and emblems of movement proper”; and in this they represent “a dialectical intensification of the autoreferentiality of all modern culture, which tends to turn upon itself and designate its own cultural production as its content” (82). In the same (self-referential) movement the operation of reference is foiled: as the elevators rise “the referent, Los Angeles,” is spread out beneath; but once you get to the cocktail lounges at the top the city is “now transformed into its own images by the glass windows through which you view it” (83).

In all this, and in the creation of the “hyperspace” of the atrium, the Bonaventure offers “something like a mutation in built space itself” (80), to which the human sensorium is as yet inadequate: the organicist metaphor, which derives ultimately from the passages on the historicity of the five senses in Marx’s 1844 Manuscripts by way of Benjamin’s meditations on the experience of the modern city and of modern warfare, defines post-modernity as an evolution which bears strong marks of also being a fall.

There are two major problems with Jameson’s discussion. The first is the assumption that there is a general “logic” of late capitalism, and that architectural post-modernism thus represents a definite break both with Modernist architecture and (which comes to the same thing) with the logic of an earlier phase of capitalism. This totalizing assumption is disputed by Davis (amongst others), who suggests a different periodization of the urban “renaissance” in relation to the rise of new international circuits of speculative and rentier capital; and a different context for buildings like the Los Angeles Bonaventure in the relationship between a highly capitalized downtown and surrounding urban decay.

The second problem has to do with Jameson’s choice of a signed masterpiece (Portman’s Bonaventure Hotel) as his main example — an unusual choice, given the claim that post-modernism is subversive of the signature and of authorial originality. To emblematize the monumental is as problematic a procedure when you’re talking
about the built environment as it is in discussing literary texts, and it has the effect of
marginalizing other kinds of building. Now, it seems true that the aestheticization of
city space, and especially decayed inner-city space, has been one key feature of
"post-modern" urban transformation (and it has to do with certain interesting transfor-
mations in the structure of late capitalism and of contemporary class formations: that
is, it has to do with new, "culturalized" forms of marketing). But, as Zukin notes (440),
it is already characteristic of architectural modernism to treat urban space in the
aestheticizing terms of signature and saleable creation. It is within a modernist
framework that "the marketing of design as both a spatial and a cultural commodity"
begins, and "the production of superstar architecture derives from the same speculative
building activity that generated high modernism." Indeed, if the paradigmatic shift
from modernism to post-modernism is seen to consist only in certain stylistic trans-
formations in the form of modelling of the signed monument then very little would
seem to have changed.

The more meaningful shift is one of focus. The concept of post-modernism takes
on life when it becomes a way of disrupting the hierarchical distinctions between
important and routine architecture, between architecture and the rest of the built
environment, and between spatiality and social structure. In this altered perspective
(one which has particularly marked the discipline of geography in the last decade) it
becomes possible to ask questions about the urban infrastructure as a whole, and
perhaps especially to ask questions about the construction of architectural series: that
is, about the intensification of the "modernist" derealization of place through the
building of non-localized environments. Much of the literature here (Relph's concept
of "placelessness," Boorstin's "pseudo-place," Baudrillard's "hyperreality") is
moralistic in tone, but it should in fact be possible to use a fairly neutral vocabulary
to describe the form of spatiality of the shopping mall, the resort, the air terminal, the
theme park, the motel.

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But once you speak of such non-localized spatial series it becomes difficult to
separate the "real" places (or the real non-places) from the representations of places
that are coextensive with them: the "locales" of film and television, for example, or
the self-contained world of advertising. Equally, it becomes impossible to detach the
description of place from the description of the forms of social organization that sustain
post-modern spatiality: the feminization and casualization of low-paid work, the
increased reliance on migrant labour, deindustrialization and the shift of production
to the Third World, the commodification of information and the rise of a new class of
information-industry workers, the replacement of human by non-human labour and so
on. The force of the concept of post-modernism here lies simply in its imperative to
conceptualize both a new configuration of the cultural domain (in particular the
blurring of boundaries between high and low culture and between commercial and
non-commercial art) and a changed relation between culture and economic production.
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The most interesting attempts to theorize the changed economic conditions which might, in one sense, be said to underpin post-modernist cultural production, but which in another sense have transformed the relationship of apparent exteriority between the cultural and the economic, are the recent elaborations of a cluster of roughly overlapping concepts describing a shift in capitalist production: the "post-Fordism" of the Regulation School (Aglietta, Billaudot and Gauron, Piore and Sabel, Boyer, Lipietz); Harvey’s “flexible accumulation”; Lash and Urry’s “disorganized capitalism”; and the more dispersed concepts of post-modernization and flexible specialization. With varying degrees of assuredness these concepts attempt to construct the terms of a general shift — Harvey dates it precisely from 1972 — in the regime of capital accumulation and regulation. A summary of these terms would look something like this:

- with the massively increased productivity of information technologies, capital becomes “hypermobile and hyperflexible, tending towards deterritorialization and delocalization” (Robins 149). This process accentuates the uneven geographical and sectoral development of production and of the division of labour;
- there is a consequent tendency towards the disaggregation of large-scale industrial production and a move to dispersed production units to take account of local political and market circumstances, especially the price and conditions of labour;
- none of this implies a decentralization of economic power; rather there is a paradoxical combination of dispersed production, on the one hand, and on the other of centralized control of capital accumulation and of the circulation of information. New patterns of corporate organization are developed, in which monopolistic integration is complemented by the fragmentation and specialization of laterally linked units;
- the achievement of economies of scale is progressively abandoned in favour of the achievement of economies of scope; the diversification of demand in highly segmented and rapidly changing mass markets is met by the emphasis on “niche” markets, by increased product differentiation, and by a more rapid modification of product ranges (in contrast to the standardization of production in a Fordist regime);
- the new service classes of professionals and information workers acquire increased industrial prominence and increasing political and ideological influence;
- a substantial informal sector (a black economy based on casual work performed by non-union labour, sweatshops, migrant workers, and a feminization of low-paid work) develops over the last two decades; the model of welfare capitalism is in decline, and politically engineered transfers of wealth articulate an increasing gap between the poor and the rich (cf. Cooke);
the flexibility of international capital and the constant threat of withdrawal of capital from politically unstable or hostile regimes, together with the weakening of organized labour in its defensive reaction to the strategic mobilization of capital, impose absolute limits on socialist strategy;

- inter-urban competition, developed as a response to the increased mobility of corporations, gives rise to the subsidization of corporate presence and to the renovation of the cities as centres of consumption and culture; there is an upsurge in the renovation and gentrification of inner-city areas;

- the "aestheticization of everyday life" is realized as a practice of differentiation of commodities and of places (with place now increasingly marketed as a commodity on the basis of its specific difference and/or its "authenticity"); Zukin (438) speaks of "an increasing commercialization of the social category of design."

This list is problematic in its agglomeration of economic, political, and cultural aspects of post-modernization, and there are important qualifications that must be made to the generality of the model. Robins, noting that accounts of post-Fordism are "increasingly congealing into a new orthodoxy of optimism" (147), cautions both against the assumption of an organic epochal transition and against a disregard of the fact that "so-called flexible specialization combines organizational and functional disintegration or disaggregation with the continued integration of control and co-ordination" (153). Rustin questions the model's adequacy to account for survivals of "mass production" modes and indeed for regressions to apparently superseded strategies (he cites the use of unskilled labour in the hotel industry, and the return to mass formula programming in the television industry). What seems to be emerging, he argues,

is not one "progressive" mode of information-based production, but a plethora of co-existing and competing systems, whose ultimate relative weight in the system is impossible to predict. Since socio-technical systems do not develop completely autonomously, but only in response to cultural definition, conflicts of social forces, and political decision, it is dubious in principle and possibly misleading in fact to make linear extrapolations from what might seem to be "leading instances," or current trends, to the shape of the whole system. (58)

For my purposes it is crucial to refuse the deduction of post-modernist cultural practice from the economic categories elaborated here, whilst recognizing that the relation of the cultural to the economic has nevertheless significantly changed.

In these terms, the key aspect of post-modernization is the last one listed, which describes the increasing integration of the aesthetic (in the form especially of advertising and design, but also of architecture, of music and Muzak, and indeed of all the arts from the "highest" to the "lowest") into the marketing of commodities. Zukin takes as emblematic of this process the totalizing strategies adopted by Benetton and
MacDonalds in developing “a total ‘look’ that merges product, production methods, a specialized consumption experience, and an advertising style” (437). But the integrating tendencies of a regime of flexible specialization affect not only the relations between cultural and economic production, but also the spatial ordering of production.

The salient features of a post-Fordist regime are in this respect those which concern the rapidity of motion of capital between nations and sectors, its ability to set nations and regions in competition against each other, and its ability to undercut the price and conditions of labour by means of extraterritorialization. A prominent example is the establishment in the 1970s of sweatshops in Taiwan, Korea, Singapore, and Hong Kong which directly competed with or displaced the First World base factories operated by the same corporations; but against this movement should be balanced the reverse process by which sweatshops and outworking systems based on migrant and female labour are established in the heart of the metropolitan society.

The result of this new speed and flexibility of capital is neither a colonial order of direct domination nor a neo-colonial order of indirect domination of one nation-state by another, but a world system — which we might call precisely “post-colonial” — in which dominance is exercised by international capital through the agency of dominant nation-states and regions but in large part independently of their control. It is in something like these dimensions that I think it is possible to frame — without reducing them to a singular temporality — the concepts of post-modern and post-colonial cultural production.

NOTES

1. I would also want to stress that the systemic nature of modernization has to do with the systemic logic of capitalism. Harvey describes it this way:
   The transition to a capitalist mode of production was signaled by a shift from the production of capital and labour surpluses by process external to the circulation of capital to an internalization of surplus production within the circulation of capital itself. That shift was also signaled . . . by a role reversal in which rent, interest, merchants’ profit, state powers and functions, and the production of built environments became servants of capital accumulation and subservient to its dominant logic. (Urbanization 195)
2. Cf. Rosen, 92: “Modernity arises as a ‘project’ . . . The subsequent rejection of modernity is then simply a re-enactment of the institution of modernity.”
4. The final two chapters of Edward Soja’s Postmodern Geographies, for example, mention the Bonaventure as a “concentrated representation of the restructured spatiality of the late capitalist city,” and then analyse the spatiality of Los Angeles in terms of financial and industrial agglomeration and the internalization of the local economy; large-scale immigration and the growth of an informal economy; deindustrialization and a post-Fordist reindustrialization accompanied by a
savage disciplining of labour; reliance on defence technology; the recomposition of the labour market through deskillling and an increased reliance on low-paid, non-unionized immigrant and female labour; and spatial restructuring through disagglomeration and decentralization, but also through renewed urban concentrations — the "downtown renaissance": and the rise of the "outer city." Cf.Dear.


6. Harvey, for example, speaks of (cultural) post-modernity as "nothing more than the cultural clothing of flexible accumulation" ("Flexible Accumulation" 279).

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