EDITORIAL

To speak of 'modernity' is to invoke one of the most volatile and contested terms in our current political lexicon. Though it sometimes merely serves as a deceptively simple synonym for the constitutive forms and processes of contemporary societies, this rather bland usage obscures two substantially different emphases or tendencies in the concept's complex genealogy. In its Enlightenment origins, to be 'modern' was to participate in a progressively unfolding narrative of advancement, marked by the growth of knowledge, economic prosperity, and political freedom in the West, a pattern that would eventually spread throughout the globe. However, this confident vision always had a disquieting underside, an uneasy sense of the corrosive power of the forces unleashed by modernity. According to this view, 'modernity' connotes a world of extremes and sudden, unforseen reversals, a world in which whatever was once certain and secure has now been thoroughly undermined, a world relentlessly pushing beyond its own limits. To a large extent the political horizons we have come to inhabit are now defined by the tension between these two versions of modernity, and no-one – even in the new social movements based on race, gender or sexuality – can claim immunity from the ideals and terrors generated by them. Today, more than ever, 'all that is solid melts into air' – but if these words from *The Communist Manifesto* continue to resonate for us, ironically it seems that Marxism too must be included amongst the casualties of the modern era.

'Who speaks for modernity?' has therefore become an increasingly urgent question. And often the answer hinges on an attempt to straddle the gap between modernity's threats and promises, blending right-wing anxieties with the pursuit of a newer, better, and brighter future. Thus when Newt Gingrich exhorts his fellow Americans to join 'the conservative revolution', he is appealing both to the hi-tech cornucopia of an already over-hyped information age *and* to a political crusade aimed at ending the long-lamented pathologies of welfare dependency by abolishing the welfare state itself, a package perfectly epitomised by his impromptu call for special tax-breaks for ghetto families buying lap-top computers. Yet the phrase 'conservative revolution' is by no means unique to Gingrich, and its history leads us back into extraordinarily murky waters. As Peter Osborne points out in *The Politics of Time* (1995) the term was first deployed in the late 1920s to name 'the politics of radical reaction' that flowered in Germany after the First World War and its untimely resurrection in the 1990s invites us to reconsider what Paul Gilroy, writing in this issue, calls 'the specificities of fascism', reminding us again of 'how swiftly an exceptional brutality can be triggered from the seeming stability of normal interaction.'

In recent years a number of writers have drawn attention to the cultural-political paradoxes of modernity through their work in a variety of

different fields. Stuart Hall, for instance, has analysed Thatcherism as 'a form of *regressive modernization*' and Jeffrey Herf has sought to depict the nationalist ideology of the Third Reich as a species of 'reactionary modernism' – to name only two of the most influential exemplars of what we believe to be an increasingly important trend in cultural studies and cultural history. We have taken our title for this issue of *New Formations* from Alison Light's book *Forever England* (1991) in which she coins the term 'conservative modernity' as a way of characterising English society in the inter-war years when popular modernism and a lively traditionalism went hand in glove to produce a new political insularity. Appropriately, then, the articles published here cover a wide range of topics: gender, sensibility, and the public sphere in the 1790s; the contradictory legacy of psychoanalysis for contemporary cultural politics; black revolutionary conservatism and the crisis of black politics; the political history of British Conservatism; the problem of German exceptionalism and the origins of German Fascism; the peculiarities of English modernism viewed through the optics of class and ethnicity; Argentinian populism and the fascination of Eva Peron. If these essays frequently pose uncomfortable questions, it is not the least of the paradoxes of modernity that, for all its turbulent dynamism, there are few easy answers.

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