

# Knowledge Production beyond the Limits of Modernity

# What is Modernity ?

- ‘Modern’ as a term denoting periodisation first appeared in nineteenth-century history and sociology, and meant to distinguish the then present that had its beginnings during the Renaissance.
- The ‘Modern’ era with a new spirit of inquiry and critical consciousness of Renaissance humanism evolved further through the ethos of Newtonian Physics to the Age of Enlightenment that provided the next century its foundation of Reason.
- In the turn of the twentieth century the term ‘Modern’ was coined in literary and art criticisms to refer to stylistic departures in literature and art. “Modernity” hence referred to the new aesthetic aspect that distinguished the literature and art of departures. ‘Modernism’ became the name given to the new trend in literature and art.
- ‘Modern’ literature and art represented deviations from the conventional norms of conception, techniques of execution, ways of expression, constitution of imagery, and nature of form and content, across genres.

# Beliefs of Modernity

Modernity is founded on the belief that there is a stable, coherent, knowable, conscious, rational, autonomous, and universal self, the operation of which has nothing to do with the physical conditions or differences

This accomplished self of modernity knows itself and the world through reason, or rationality, posited as the highest form of mental functioning, and the only objective form

Reason is the ultimate judge of what is true, and therefore of what is right, what is good, what is legal and what is ethical. In a world governed by reason, the true will always be the same as the good and the right, and there can be no conflict between what is true and what is right

Freedom consists of obedience to the laws that conform to the knowledge discovered by reason.

# Science and Modernism

- Critics of literature and art who viewed 'Modernism' as a new trend in literature and art did not recognise the fact that 'Modernism' was science carried forward to and rendered plausible in literature and art. 'Modernity' was the intellectual quality of science expressed in culture
- Societies under 'Modernism' equated knowledge with science, and contrasted it with imaginary narratives. Superior knowledge was scientific and its contrast, the imaginary narrative was inferior due to its primitiveness and irrationality associated with women, children, primitives, and the insane
- To 'Modernism' Scientific Knowledge was 'truth', and always leading towards progress and perfection as it was based on reason and objectivity
- In 'Modernism' Science thus stood as the model for any and all socially useful forms of knowledge.
- 'Modernism' viewed a 'man' 'modern' if he is educated in Scientific Knowledge and hence objective, realistic and rational

# Knowledge Production in Modernity

- The basic presumption about production of knowledge in 'Modernity' was that it was an objective exercise by a rational self for providing universal truth about the world, regardless of the individual status of the knower.
- Another presumption was that all human institutions and practices can be analyzed by reason and knowledge of objectivity, produced and improved.
- The knowledge/truth produced with the rational objective of knowing the universal self will always lead towards progress and perfection through improvement.

# Expression of Knowledge in Modernity

Language, or the mode of expression used in producing and disseminating knowledge, was believed to be rational also. To be rational, language must be transparent; it must function only to represent the real/perceivable world which the rational mind observes.

It was believed that a firm and objective connection between the objects of perception and the words used to name them is possible

Language was taken to be transparent and words, to be serving as true representations of thoughts or things. Words were understood to be having no other function.

Modern societies believed in the directness and precise nature of communication based on signification, i.e., signifiers always signify the signified and that the signified is real

# Order of Knowledge in Modernity

- Modernity is fundamentally about order, rationality and rationalization, creating order out of chaos. The assumption is that creating more rationality is conducive to creating more order, and that the more ordered a society is, the better it will function or the more rationally it will function
- Because modernity is about the pursuit of ever-increasing levels of order, modern societies constantly are on guard against anything and everything labelled as "disorder," which might disrupt order.
- Thus modern societies rely on continually establishing a binary opposition between "order" and "disorder," so that they can assert the superiority of "order."

# Structure of Knowledge in Societies of Modernity

- Structure of knowledge in societies of 'Modernity' was construed exactly as what science did about the structure of its knowledge
- Totality, stability, certainty, objectivity, linearity and orderliness were properties of knowledge in modern societies. Francois Lyotard equates stability with the idea of "totality" or a totalized system. He argues that the primary form of knowledge in 'Modernity' depended on "grand narratives" or "master narratives"
- A "grand narrative" is the most enlightened (rational) form of knowledge that can and will lead to universal human welfare. For instance, in the world of Communists Marxism is the grand narrative, the most humanist social formation and in America democracy is the grand narrative, the most enlightened (rational) form of government respectively, which can and will lead to universal human happiness. Every belief system or ideology has its grand narratives, according to Lyotard
- The ways that modern societies go about creating categories labelled as "order" or "disorder", "linear" or "non-linear", "stability" or "instability" have to do with the effort to achieve Certainty
- Every attempt to create "order" always demands the creation of an equal amount of "disorder" to show that "disorder" is chaotic and bad, and that "order" alone is rational, real and truth
- Marx's Grand Theory exemplifies the structure of knowledge in the society of 'Modernity'

# Limits of Knowledge in Modernity

- **Limitations of knowledge and knowledge production in modernity are the same as what post-Einsteinian science has identified and put forward as the limitations of Newtonian – Einsteinian science, as explicit in the epistemological shift of Science to New Science, which began with Max Planck, whose Quantum physics shattered certainty and predictability of science by proving that both ‘position’ and ‘velocity’ cannot be measured at the same time with same accuracy.**
- **Heisenberg’s Principle of Uncertainty turning scientific knowledge into ‘no theory of certainty’ exposed a major limitation of scientific knowledge and thereby deprived the knowledge in ‘Modernity’ of its foundation**
- **Bohr’s Complementarity Principle and Godel’s thesis of ‘Undecidability’ turning scientific knowledge further uncertain and tentative, made the stability claim of the knowledge in ‘Modernity’ a myth**
- **Feynman acknowledging imprecision as an inevitable aspect of scientific communication disproved the belief of societies in ‘Modernity’ that language can be rational and transparent representing a firm and objective connection between the objects of perception and language of communication**
- **With Heisenberg, Bohr, Godel and Feynman showing scientific knowledge has limitations such as ‘uncertainty,’ ‘imprecision’ and ‘unknowability’, the claim of knowledge in societies of ‘Modernity’ to be free of limitations became false**
- **Heisenberg confirming that the action of measuring affects the accuracy of the measurement and Schrodinger concluding that object-subject split a figment of the imagination, made the objectivity claim of knowledge in ‘Modernity’ unfounded.**
- **In short, Post-Einsteinian science depriving scientific knowledge of its finality, certainty, precision, linearity, objectivity and stability made claims of knowledge in ‘Modernity’ hollow**

# Structure of Knowledge beyond Modernism

- Obviously under the intellectual influence of New Science and epistemological insights of constructivism, production of knowledge beyond modernism sought to overcome the limitations of the structure of knowledge in 'Modernity' by rejecting grand theorisation, totalisation, logocentrism, linearity, finality, certainty, objectivity and stability based on context-free universals.
- Postmodernism then is the critique of grand narratives, the awareness that such narratives serve to mask the contradictions and instabilities that are inherent in any social organization or practice.
- Postmodernism, in rejecting grand narratives, favours "mini-narratives," stories that explain small practices, local events, rather than large-scale universal or global concepts. Postmodern "mini-narratives" are always situational, provisional, contingent, and temporary, making no claim to universality, truth, reason, or stability.
- In postmodernism, there are only signifiers. The idea of any stable or permanent reality disappears, and with it the idea of signifieds that signifiers point to. Rather, for postmodern societies, there are only surfaces, without depth; only signifiers, with no signifieds.
- According to Jean Baudrillard, in postmodern society there are no originals, but only copies--or what he calls "simulacra." You might think, for example, about painting or sculpture, where there is an original work (by Van Gogh, for instance), and there might also be thousands of copies, but the original is the one with the highest value (particularly monetary value). Contrast that with cds or music recordings, where there is no "original," as in painting--no recording that is hung on a wall, or kept in a vault; rather, there are only copies, by the millions, that are all the same, and all sold for (approximately) the same amount of money. Another version of Baudrillard's "simulacrum" would be the concept of virtual reality, a reality created by simulation, for which there is no original. This is particularly evident in computer games/simulations--think of Sim City, Sim Ant, etc.
- Finally, postmodernism is concerned with questions of the organization of knowledge.
- In a postmodern society, however, knowledge becomes functional--you learn things, not to know them, but to use that knowledge. As Sarup points out (p. 138), educational policy today puts emphasis on skills and training, rather than on a vague humanist ideal of education in general. This is particularly acute for English majors. "What will you DO with your degree?"
- Not only is knowledge in postmodern societies characterized by its utility, but knowledge is also distributed, stored, and arranged differently in postmodern societies than in modern ones. Specifically, the advent of electronic computer technologies has revolutionized the modes of knowledge production, distribution, and consumption in our society (indeed, some might argue that postmodernism is best described by, and correlated with, the emergence of computer technology, starting in the 1960s, as the dominant force in all aspects of social life).
- In postmodern societies, anything which is not able to be translated into a form recognizable and storable by a computer--i.e. anything that's not digitizable--will cease to be knowledge. In this paradigm, the opposite of "knowledge" is not "ignorance," as it is the modern/humanist paradigm, but rather "noise." Anything that doesn't qualify as a kind of knowledge is "noise," is something that is not recognizable as anything within this system.

# Politics of Postmodern/Post-structural Knowledge

- Lyotard says that the important question for postmodern societies is who decides what knowledge is and who knows what needs to be decided. Such decisions about knowledge does not involve the old modern/humanist qualifications, to assess knowledge as truth (its technical quality), or as goodness or justice (its ethical quality) or as beauty (its aesthetic quality). Rather, Lyotard argues, knowledge follows the paradigm of a language game, as laid out by Wittgenstein.
- By discarding "grand narratives" (like the liberation of the entire working class) and focusing on specific local goals (such as improved day care centres for working mothers in your own community), postmodernist politics offers a way to theorize local situations as fluid and unpredictable, though influenced by global trends.
- Hence the motto for postmodern politics might well be "think globally, act locally"--and don't worry about any grand scheme or master plan.

# Post-structural Knowledge

- Post-structuralism's core is a reflexive particular self that is aware of the tentativeness, the slipperiness, the ambiguity and the complex interrelations of texts and meanings.
- Post-structuralism is marked by a rejection of totalizing, essentialist, foundationalist concepts.
- Poststructuralism sees 'reality' as being much more fragmented, diverse, tenuous and culture-specific than does structuralism. Some consequences have been,
- poststructuralism's greater attention to specific histories, to the details and local contextualizations of concrete instances;
- a greater emphasis on the body, the actual insertion of the human into the texture of time and history;
- a greater attention to the specifics of cultural working, to the arenas of discourse and cultural practice;
- a greater attention to the role of language and textuality in our construction of reality and identity.

# Post-structuralism

- Post-structuralism contests the concept of 'man' as developed by enlightenment thought and idealist philosophy. Rather than holding as in the enlightenment view that 'individuals', are sacred, separate and intact, their minds the only true realm of meaning and value, their rights individual and inalienable, their value and nature rooted in a universal and transhistorical essence -- a metaphysical being, in short -- the post-structural view holds that persons are culturally and discursively structured, created in interaction as situated, symbolic beings. The common term for a person so conceived is a 'subject'.
- Subjects are created, then, through their cultural meanings and practices, and occupy various culturally-based sites of meaning (as family members, as occupationally and economically and regionally defined, as gendered and of sexual orientation, as members of clubs or clients of psychotherapy or presidents of their school parents' organization, and on and on -- every site evoking a different configuration of the self, different language uses, different foci of value and energy, different social practices, and so forth).
- Subjects are material beings, embodied and present in the physical world, entrenched in the material practices and structures of their society -- working, playing, procreating, living as parts of the material systems of society.
- Subjects are social in their very origin: they take their meaning and value and self-image from their identity groups, from their activities in society, from their intimate relations, from the multiple pools of common meanings and symbols and practices which they share variously with their sub-cultural groups and with their society as a larger unit.
- Post-structural understandings of persons are sometimes referred to as 'anti-humanist', because they are opposed to the Humanist idea that persons are isolate, unified, largely immaterial beings, and that humanity is transcendent, universal and unchangeable in its essence. To be anti-humanist is not to be anti-humane, however, but to have a different philosophical and ideological understanding of the nature of the person.

# Knowledge Production under Post-structuralism

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- Post-structuralism derives in part from a sense that we live in a linguistic universe. This means, in the first instance, rejecting the traditional aesthetic, phenomenalist assumption that language is a 'transparent' medium which hands over experience whole and unproblematically; in a 'linguistic' universe 'reality' is only mediated reality, and what it is mediated by is governed by such things as:
- the way language works, by difference for instance;
- the world of discourse which governs our knowledge and way of speaking about the subject under discussion: we can imagine only what we can symbolize, speak of only what we have language for, speak only in the ways our rules of discourse allow us to;
- the workings of the 'master tropes' (a trope is a way of saying something by saying something else) of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony;
- the structure of ideology, which attempts to 'naturalize' power relations and our sense of how the world is configured;
- the various cultural codes which govern our understandings of our selves, our place, our procedures;
- the idea that any cultural construction of meaning will privilege some meanings or experiences and deprivilege others, but that there will be traces of the deprivileging or suppression of some experiences, and by looking at the cracks, the silences, the discontinuities which ideology attempts to smooth over, we can deconstruct or demystify the cultural meanings;
- the idea that we think in terms of certain tropes, and construct meaning in terms of genres, so that meaning is pre-channelled in certain typified, identifiable ways, which ways reveal more about their construction of meaning than about any 'reality' beyond the rhetorical constructs.

# Discourse and Knowledge Production

- To put this briefly, we live in a world of language, discourse and ideology, none of which are transparent, all of which structure our sense of being and meaning.
- All meaning is textual and intertextual: there is no "outside of the text," as Derrida remarked. Everything we can know is constructed through signs, governed by the rules of discourse for that area of knowledge, and related to other texts through filiation, allusion and repetition. Every text exists only in relation to other texts; meaning circulates in economies of discourse. This understanding does not mean that all reality is textual, only that what we can know of it, and how we can know, is textual, constructed through discourse, with all its rules; through symbols, linguistic and otherwise; through grammar(s).
- In Foucault's terms, the production of discourse, the (historical, material) way we know our world, is controlled, selected, organized and distributed by a certain number of procedures. Discourse is regulated by rules of exclusion, by internal systems of control and delineation, by conditions under which discourses can be employed, and by philosophical themes which elide the reality of discourse -- the themes of the founding subject, originating experience, and universal mediation. Discourses are multiple, discontinuous, originating and disappearing through chance; they do not hide the truth but constitute its temporary face. Foucault is post-structuralist in his insistence that there is no great causal flow or plan or evolution of history, that what happens is mainly by chance.

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- The Derridean concept of *différance* links up with Freudian suppositions and Marxist ideas to highlight concepts of repression, displacement, condensation, substitution and so forth, which, often by following metaphoric or metonymic links carefully, can be deconstructed or revealed; what is 'meant' is different from what appears to be meant. Meaning disguises itself. This is essentially structuralist, one of the reasons why 'post-structuralism' cannot be understood without structuralism.
- Texts are marked by a surplus of meaning; the result of this is that differing readings are inevitable, indeed a condition of meaning at all. This surplus is located in the polysemous nature of both language and of rhetoric. It must be kept in mind that language is what is (for us as cognizant beings), that our sense of reality is linguistically constructed. Consequently the 'meaning of it all' is continually differing, overflowing, in flux.

- A 'text' exists as read. This 'reading' is formed, conducted, through certain mediating factors:
- the present structures of discourse, hence understanding, including the present conceptions of the discourse structures of the time of the 'writing' of the text.
- the traditions of reading, and the oppositions which those traditions have made possible, of that particular text,
- the expectations dictated by the genre of the text and the tradition of genre of the reading,
- the relations of meaning which are 'in' the text by virtue of its having been written at all, modified by the fact that these relations have a certain historical existence, a local, situated, and corporeal existence whose reality may or may not be imaginatively recoverable;
- the understanding that these 'historical' relations of meaning will to some extent be mystifying and ideologizing relations,
- the understanding that insofar as texts have a surplus of meaning they tend to reveal the flaws which the reigning discourse is attempting to mystify,
- the conceptual distances between the historical discourse / ideology / cultural codes / genre-traditions of the past and the historical discourse / ideology / cultural codes / genre-traditions of the present, which distance opens up 'new' meanings which the work could not have, in a sense, had before. Post-structuralism is deeply aware of such hermeneutic reading and also suspicious of it, certain that meaning is historical, uncertain that it is recoverable as what it may have meant.

- At the expense of repetition, let's go again over the sorts of conflict Culler notes deconstructionist criticism (which is a mode of or modes of post-structuralist criticism) may look for [*On Deconstruction* pp. 213-215]:
- the asymmetrical opposition or value-laden hierarchy
- points of condensation, where a single term brings together different lines of argument or sets of values
- the text's *ecarte de soi* or difference from itself -- anything in the text that counters an authoritative interpretation, including interpretations that the work appears to encourage (this was touched on earlier re: the cracks, silences, discontinuities, etc.)
- self-reference, when the text applies to something else a description, image or figure that can be read as self-description, as a representation of its own operations; one can by applying these to the operations of the text read 'against the grain'
- an interest in the way conflicts or dramas within the text are reproduced as conflicts in and between readings of the text -- Texts thematize, with varying degrees of explicitness, interpretive operations and their consequences and thus represent in advance the dramas that will give life to the tradition of their interpretation
- attention to the marginal -- hierarchies depend on exclusions; the marginalized is what the text resists, and therefore can be identified by.

- Post-structuralism is consequent on and a reaction to structuralism; it would not exist without structuralism. Macherey's points in his critique of structuralism (1965) lay out some of the groundwork for post-structural thought:
- structuralism is a-historical; life and thought are historical -- they change, different relations with different elements at different times, and so forth
- the transfer of knowledge from one area of knowledge (e.g. linguistics) to other areas of knowledge is questionable enterprise
- structuralism assumes that a work has intrinsic meaning -- that is, it is 'already there' and always there, that the 'meaning' pre-exists its realization (it is already there -- we just identify it).
- structural analysis is therefore the discovery of the rationality or 'secret coherence' of a text. But this coherence is a coherence that precedes the text, or it could not form the text. For there to be 'intrinsic meaning' there has to be a pattern or order or structure which governs and orders and regulates the production of meaning. The text is therefore in a sense a 'copy' of that order or structure which grounds the coherence of the text; analysis of a text is a copy of a copy, the text is just an intermediary between the reader and the structure of rationality, and so it 'disappears'.
- structuralism presupposes the traditional and metaphysical notion of harmony and unity; a work is only a work, i.e. only has meaning as an entity, only insofar as it is a whole. This notion negates the reality of the material conditions of production or reception, it makes the meaning itself unitary, it makes criticism commentary, a pointing out of the essential truth which is embodied not in but through the work.

# Limits of Knowledge in Modernity

- "Grand narratives" or "master narratives," are stories a culture tells itself about its practices and beliefs.
- 'Modern' societies have to have things that represent "disorder" to continually create/construct order. In the process they construct "disorders" too. In western culture, this disorder becomes "the other"--defined in relation to other binary oppositions. Thus anything non-white, non-male, non-heterosexual, non-hygienic, non-rational, (etc.) becomes part of "disorder," and has to be eliminated from the ordered, rational modern society.
- Every attempt to create "order" always demands the creation of an equal amount of "disorder" but a "grand narrative" masks the constructedness of these categories by explaining that 'disorder' really is chaotic and bad, and that "order" alone is rational, real and truth.







