

## Postmodern Theory: Some Preliminaries

First, we need to distinguish postmodern *theory* from what many people call the postmodern *condition*. There is considerable consensus between writers on the *condition*. Post modern *theory* is a family of theories *about* “the world.” The postmodern condition (if this is a useful idea) refers to the world—and it can be variously theorized, including, e.g. David Harvey’s brilliant Marxist theorization of it (in *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1990)).

Briefly, Harvey argued that the PM condition –*including its culture*--is explained by understanding how capitalism changed, in particular from Fordism/Keynesianism to Flexible Accumulation. There are elements of this also in Baudrillard who wants to extend Marx’s analysis of the commodity. There is, however, a huge difference in the epistemologies of Marx (and Harvey) and Baudrillard. See below.

Bauman, an important sociologist working in Britain, connects postmodern theory with the postmodern condition by hold that the postmodern condition produces a crisis for “the intellectual” who are now mainly in universities. What they can provide is not “so easy to provide” (e.g., legitimation, social managerial tasks (p. 197)). Moreover, the need for such services is, in any case, receding. Thus (following up strands in “critical theory” and Foucault), the ‘weapon of legitimation’ has been replaced with ....seduction and repression (p. 191). Indeed, On the hand, he holds that efforts at legitimation were always, in fact, shams, either Eurocentric rationalizations of domination of mystifications of state power (pp. 190f.) and in more distinctly postmodernist fashion (esp. Foucault) that “repression stands for ‘panoptical power’) and that seduction (esp. Baudrillard), is made possible by the consumerism which makes consumers dependent on “the market.” But in marked contrast to Harvey, it is not clear who dominates or who is “in control”--if anybody.

### **Much depends upon how one understands postmodern epistemological theory.**

Lyotard gives us a good start. (Harvey agrees with him as regards locating the “seeds of ‘delegitimation’ and nihilism in the grand narratives of the nineteenth century” (p. 28), especially in *fin de siecle* Vienna (p. 31). The question is (as with Bauman): How does one respond?

Characteristically, the epistemological argument turns on the inability to provide justification (“legitimation”) for claims made. For Lyotard, there is an heterogeneity of language games with no “consensus” possible as regards “rules” or “meta-prescriptions.” Each is subject to its own “pragmatic rules,” and they are not “isomorphic.” That is, lacking a universal set of “rules,” these many “discourses” are not inter-translatable. Hence any “consensus” must be “local” (p. 37). “The game of science is thus put on a par with the others” (p. 30). Beginning with a linguistic relativism, we end up with an epistemological relativism.

Lyotard arrived at this position in criticism of “structuralist” linguistics, but it is by now a very familiar move, offered initially by (of all people) the American analytic (and neo-positivist) philosopher Willard V. Quine. This is Quine’s famous “indeterminacy of translation,” a consequence of the “inscrutability of reference.” I quote from a paper of mine:

What is the gist of the argument and what are the consequences? The argument begins with famous artificial example of ‘Gavagai,’ introduced in his 1960 *Word and Object*.<sup>i</sup> We are to imagine a field linguist seeking a translation for the native word, ‘Gavagai.’ There is no vocabulary or manual since it is just his job to create one. All he has is the behavior of natives. Now, it is a fact that “a whole rabbit is present, when and only when an undetached part of a rabbit is present; also when and only when a temporal stage of a rabbit is present” (meaning by this last, there are definite space and time coordinates for his location). Ostension (pointing) will not suffice since, there will be no behavioral difference to be discerned in the speaker’s assent to ‘gavagai’: It might, accordingly, mean ‘rabbit,’ *or* ‘undetached rabbit part,’ *or* ‘rabbit stage.’ This is Quine’s famous “inscrutability of reference.”

It may be supposed that there is a non-ostensive means available once our linguist has developed a grammar for the language, a grammar which includes decisions on plural endings, the ‘is’ of identity, etc. Eventually, by abstraction, he gets a system for translating. Then, “insofar as the native sentences and the thus associated English ones seem to match up in respect to appropriate occasions of use, the linguistic feels confirmed in these hypotheses of translation—what I call analytical hypotheses” (“Ontological Relativity,” p. 190). Quine notes that this route is both “laudable in practice and the best we can hope for,” but it does not allow us to settle the indeterminacy. And it does not because of the holistic character of meaning: There is no reason to believe that there isn’t another, perhaps several other translation manuals, which are wholly consistent with all the behavioral data (p. 190)!

Similarly, this became part of the Kuhnian “incommensurability” of paradigms which similarly could not be compared since they each involved different conceptual universes. (Hence, the idea of scientific progress became questionable.)

To be sure, both Quine and Kuhn resisted this consequence and it remains contested whether they succeeded.

Foucault is easily joined here. Again, he agrees with Kuhn that the fixing of belief in science (and elsewhere) is not a politically neutral enterprise—his famous “Power/knowledge” term. For him “global” theories are “totalitarian” because they “privilege” one “power/knowledge” set: Eurocentric, Enlightenment, imperialism. So he is “anti-science.” He wants to liberate “subjugated knowledges,” historical “contents” that have been “buried” and “a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as adequate to their task...” (p. 41). He advocates, accordingly, “genealogy,” the “painstaking rediscovery of struggles...” (p. 42). His politics, in contrast to Marx’s

would seem to be “anarchic.” Or as Derrida has it, the assumptions which govern practice need to be “deconstructed.”

It is easy to see why these views have powerfully influenced work on the “third world” and in women’s studies. As many would say, their work involves rejection of the assumptions of “Enlightenment” epistemologies. Instead, they welcome localized “discourses” which play by different rules.

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<sup>i</sup> Willard Van Orman Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960).