

A selection of more recent assessments can be found in:

Appignanesi, L. (ed.) (1989) *Ideas from France: The legacy of French theory*, Free Association Books, London.

Also referred to in the text:

Marx, K. (1964) *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, International Publishers, New York.

Marx, K. (1967) *Capital*, Lawrence & Wishart, London.

Trotsky, L. (1967) *History of the Russian Revolution*, 3 vols, Sphere Books, London.

Jan Craig, Modern Social Theory (1992, Harvester Wheatsheaf)

POST-STRUCTURALISM AND POST-MODERNISM: THE WORLD GONE MAD

INTRODUCTION

In the last chapter I argued that despite certain advantages in the way that structuralist Marxism conceptualised societies, problems begin to arise when the structuralist form of analysis attempts to deal with agency, with human action. I tried to demonstrate this in relation to the political and ideological levels where, I suggested, the alternatives were to grant some form of autonomy to agency, or to resort to a deterministic model based on the economic level. I suggested that both Althusser and Poulantzas take the second option, producing a sort of economic functionalism rather than a system functionalism – whereas Parsons attempts to explain institutions in terms of their function for the whole system, Althusser does so in terms of their function for the economic level. I likened Althusser's system to a puppet theatre with various levels of machinery, working a set of invisible strings which give the appearance that the actors work of their own volition. Finally, I suggested that there was a crucial flaw in his explanation of the working of these invisible strings.

In this chapter, I will begin by tracing the fragmentation of structuralist Marxism, but it is a particularly interesting form of fragmentation, because we end up with something that is almost the complete opposite to what we started with. The puppet theatre collapses, and we are left with no hidden machinery, nothing pulling the strings, and in one sense no puppets – and, beyond that, no people. In fact it is difficult to say exactly what we are left with – but it is definitely something, and something else at the same time.

The critique of structuralist Marxism is closely connected to what has become known as 'postmodernism'. A regular complaint in the literature is that it is difficult to define the term itself, or the terms in which we discuss it, but it will become apparent that this difficulty is inherent in its nature. Postmodernism is an artistic movement, perhaps most evident in architecture but spreading throughout the arts, and this will be the area I concentrate on least. It embraces a range of developments in modern philosophy which follows on directly from what has become known as the 'linguistic turn'. In sociology, the idea of postmodernism carries the implication that the social world has undergone a major and dramatic change. In this sense, it is not all that new an idea – Töynbee's writings in the early 1950s are often referred to as an origin, and it has certain affinities with Daniel Bell's notion of a post-industrial society. Postmodernism is often juxtaposed to something called 'modernism', although the exact relationship between the two is open to debate.

However, perhaps this is a good way to start. Modernism is associated with the Enlightenment, 'the project of the Enlightenment', involving the idea of universal rationality – a search for a knowledge that is more or less certain, and for a control over the natural and social world. In contrast to this, postmodernism denies the existence of a universal rationality or the possibility of knowledge in the way we might conventionally think of it. One thing that follows from this is the argument that Enlightenment thought is concerned with establishing hierarchies – for example, between rational and irrational, knowledge and non-knowledge, but also good and bad literature, good and bad art. This argument is often taken further: there is a link between establishing hierarchies of knowledge and social hierarchies. Enlightenment rationality is really white, male rationality, and is another aspect of the oppression of women and ethnic groups. Postmodernism thus has its radical political associations. It will become apparent that the linguistic model is paramount, but in a way that denies the existence of any underlying linguistic or social structure. There is only what goes on on the surface, and what goes on on the surface, for many, is talk.

To begin with, I will approach postmodernist sociology through looking at critiques of structuralist Marxism and post-structuralism; then I will return to a sociology of postmodernism in an attempt to make sense of why these ideas should be appearing.

THE FAULT LINES OF STRUCTURALIST MARXISM

One feature of postmodernism is, perhaps, the speed with which ideas appear and disappear, in a series of arguments that now seem rather dated, two British sociologists, Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst, played a major role in introducing Althusser's work to a British audience and – all within a period of ten years – dismantling it.

The most prominent fault lines, and the ones they seized upon, have to do with the attempt to force a theory of societies on to other inappropriate areas of social reality. The most important of these is that of agency, the problem being that the subject never quite manages to give up the ghost; beyond this, however, the area I referred to as that of 'general meanings' proves troublesome as the metaphysical assumptions of structuralism reassert themselves. The specific political factors at work in this British development had to do with the attempt to explain conflicts that have arisen around race, sex and nationality, since it proves very difficult, if not impossible, to make sense of these issues using traditional Marxist, or Althusserian Marxist, economic categories. This prepares the ground for collapsing the idea of a social formation with the economic level 'determinant in the last instance'. We are left with only a multiplicity of free-floating political and ideological phenomena which are seen not as results of causal processes in the social formation, but as constituted in and by discourse. Perhaps the best way of describing this fragmentation is as a slide from a theory of societies to a descriptive theory of the interplay of general meanings.

First, the 'fatal flaw' in Althusser's argument about the subject and subjectivity. To summarise his argument again: the 'ideological state apparatuses' arise to fulfil certain needs at the economic level; they involve 'material practices', courses of action carried out by individuals placed in them – born into them, in the case of the family. Through engaging in these institutional practices, already mapped out before the person takes up position, the agent comes to see herself reflected as the author of her actions, and experiences herself as such. This experience is real but imaginary, and hides the deeper reality that she is the bearer of underlying structures. Now the flaw in this argument is that neither Althusser nor Lacan is proposing a view of the unsocialised individual as a *tabula rasa* – a blank slate upon which society writes whatever it desires. We are not the *simple*

product or 'effect' of underlying social structures. Both argue that the experience of subjectivity, of being the author of one's actions, comes from recognising an image of oneself – in a mirror, to use Lacan's metaphor, or in a 'material practice' – and then identifying with that image. Now this presupposes that the individual already possesses certain characteristics of subjectivity; she must be able to recognise an image and identify with it, and if she is the author of these actions, there is no *a priori* reason why she should not be the author of others. If Althusser's theory is intended to explain why – as he puts it – people 'work by themselves', it seems to presuppose what it is trying to demonstrate. The explanation holds only if individuals already possess that quality. The subject refuses to lie down.

This point is argued with considerable subtlety by Paul Hirst (1976). The conclusion I would draw from it is that we need to maintain some notion of the subject as the author of actions, even if it is modified – or 'de-centred', to use another favourite structuralist term. However, this is not Hirst's conclusion; he is firmly committed to abandoning such a notion. His way out will emerge shortly but I want to leave this argument for a while. For the moment it is sufficient to note that the gap between society and agency proves unbridgeable.

I now want to turn to other tensions in Althusser's theory that encourage the process of fragmentation. These lead in one way or another to examples of what I called, in the Introduction, the 'logic trap': the idea that one can know what the world is like through logical theoretical argument alone. In the criticism of Althusser's theory, this takes the form of posing either/or questions and coming down on one side or the other. The important point is that the logical criticisms we will be looking at arise around the different areas of social reality that the theory attempts to embrace, in particular social structures and general meanings.

The first such criticism focuses on what I have already identified as a tension in Althusser's view of theory. This involves a combination of the structuralist metaphysical assumption that a theory (or language) creates its own objects, its own world, and that theory none the less 'appropriates' a real external object, in this case underlying social structures. The criticism, as simply as I can put it, is this: if the theory creates its own objects, and if we can judge a theory only by its rational or logical coherence, we have to make the implicit assumption that the world is logically coherent if we are to maintain a realist

position. This assumption involves the view that our theory and the external world should be of the same structure – we can match one against the other – and are therefore (God forbid) empiricist. This sort of argument can lead to an attack of vertigo unless you take it slowly. In effect, the critics are saying: *either* a theory creates its own objects, *or* it somehow describes objects in the external world. The latter has already been ruled out of court, therefore the former must be true. We are left with the fairly simple view that the world is a product of our ideas; in other words, we are left only with general meanings.

Now it seems to me quite reasonable to suggest that a theory does not refer necessarily to observable objects in the world, but it does not follow that it does not refer to any external and independent object. We cannot *see* a mode of production, but it is reasonable to suggest that it exists as an underlying structure. Althusser is trying to grasp and master a subtle problem, and he does so by introducing a tension in his explanation. Logically, this tension may be called a contradiction and resolved on one side or the other, but such a resolution does not help us to understand the world any better. The Hirst/Hirst resolution ignores the fact that the world often refuses to be as our theory says it should. It also removes any possibility of judging between theories, except perhaps on arbitrary political grounds. From saying that a theory creates its own world, it is only a step to saying that it creates its own rationality or logic. Each theory, then, is logical in its own terms. This introduces a particular absurdity into the position. The argument that there is no way of judging between theories is disagreeing with an argument that says that we can judge between theories – it is therefore implying that it is a better theory. The very act of arguing that we cannot judge between theories contradicts itself by its very existence. This is the sort of spiral into which the logic trap leads us.

Two further logical hatchet blows have been dealt to Althusserian theory. The conception of 'relative autonomy' is one target. It is argued that *either* the political and ideological levels are autonomous, *or* they are dependent upon and in some way 'caused' by the economic level. The latter would be crude economic determinism, which doesn't work, so the former must be true. I discussed the alternative to this in the last chapter: a closer analysis of the underlying structures and causal mechanisms at work at each level. However, the either/or argument removes any possibility of a causal

relationship between the levels and, in effect, collapses the idea of the social formation, making any distinction pointless. We are left with a mixture of politics and ideology, and led back to the level of general meanings.

The next step is to remove any idea of causality altogether. In the Introduction I suggested that some notion of teleological causality was necessary to understand human action: it involves notions such as intention and project. The logical criticism here argues, first, that any relationship between cause and effect is teleological, since the effect must somehow be present in the cause, just as my intention is present at the beginning of the action to which it leads. If we accept Althusser's argument against teleological causality, which is part of his general attack on traditional ideas of the subject, then any idea of causality is outlawed, and it is argued that the most we can do is talk about 'conditions of existence'. We can say, for example, that parliamentary democracy has certain conditions of existence, and other things must exist if parliamentary democracy is to come into being, but we cannot say that it is caused by these conditions. Again, sensitive – albeit, sometimes, ambiguous – distinctions are dismissed in favour of logical clarity. Logical clarity leaves us with no way of distinguishing levels or 'regions' of the social world, no means of identifying causal relationships, and no way of choosing between different theories; in other words, it leaves us in a mess – *all* we can say is that there is a lot going on.

It is not quite as bad as this, however: we are left with just one level of social reality, that of 'general meanings', and when I talked about Paul Hirst's discussion of the theory of the subject, I indicated that he took a different course to the one I took. In fact he suggests that we must look at the 'constitution' of the subject, the creation of the subject at the level of general meanings, in what he calls 'signifying practices' or 'discourses'. This is not the same as talking about the 'constitution of the subject' by underlying structures of language; rather, it is the use of language that constitutes subjectivity.

I will elaborate on this shortly; for the moment, I want to take a detour through the political background to post-structuralism. From 1968 onwards there had been a steady disillusion with the French Communist Party and a growth of organisations further to the Left. On a theoretical level, this led eventually to a wide-ranging criticism of Marxism itself. It was argued that the conservative and authoritarian nature of Western European Communist Parties was itself a

reflection of the conservative and authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe, and both were the product of Marxism, an authoritarian and conservative theory. Now part of Althusser's appeal had been the return to the original works of Marx, and the implication of this was that Stalinism and all that it entailed could be explained as some form of deviation. Given the 'relative autonomy' of the ideological and political levels, for example, it might be argued that the transformation of the economic level in Stalin's Russia had not yet led to the revolutions in the political and ideological levels that would be necessary for the establishment of socialism. The return to Marx was a way of bypassing Stalin and associated evils. However, the Communist Party's inability to maintain its radicalism, and in some places, such as Italy, its tendency to enter into alliance with conservative opposition parties, together with its failure to change its own internal organisation, led some people to conclude that the return to Marx made no difference. In the graphic words of Foucault reviewing a book by André Glucksmann: 'Those who hoped to save themselves by opposing Marx's real beard to Stalin's false nose are wasting their time' (quoted in Callinicos, 1982, p. 108).

André Glucksmann's own development is interesting. He produced the first systematic critique of Althusser's work (see Further Reading), a very difficult piece aimed mainly at *Reading Capital* (1970). The points he made were telling – so telling, in fact, that there was no direct reply, and when the second edition was published (this was the one to be translated into English) sections that Glucksmann had particularly savaged were simply omitted. Glucksmann himself later became associated with a group known as the *nouveaux philosophes* who adopted what is basically a traditional right-wing criticism of Marxism – that any attempt to create socialism automatically leads to dictatorship and concentration camps, this being built into Marxist theory itself.

However, this right-wing critique is not the one I shall trace. There is a leftist, radical version, best represented by Foucault himself, which leads to a pessimistic anarchism. Partly a criticism of Marxism, and partly an alternative, it abandons the classical Marxist view that revolution involves the seizure of the state, and thus of power, on the grounds that power itself is not centralised in the state. Instead, the social world is seen as a kaleidoscope of power struggles which can never be transcended. All that can be done is to encourage the resistance that arises wherever power arises. In place of a

revolution we are confronted with an endless series of power struggles which cannot be resolved because power is a necessary and inherent part of any relationship. This, in fact, is the way the 1968 rebellions appeared in France – as a series of localised power struggles in colleges, factories and offices – and many recent political conflicts in Western Europe generally may be seen in the same way. In the approach that has become known as 'post-structuralism', fragmentation becomes explicit, both politically and theoretically.

THE THEMES OF POSTMODERNIST SOCIOLOGY

Hirst's criticisms of Althusser lead on to Foucault, post-structuralism, and postmodernism in general. There is an absence of causal explanations which involves a rejection of the notion of ontological depth, and a concentration on appearances, representations, and a rejection of historical explanation – at least in so far as it is an *explanation* (a result of the criticism of teleological explanation). The philosophical roots of postmodernism are rather firmer than Hirst's criticisms might suggest. It certainly owes much to the German philosopher Nietzsche, who was writing at the end of the last century and whose philosophy has variously been described as nihilistic, anarchistic and existentialist. In his work we find themes that have reappeared in post-structuralism: the relationship between knowledge and power, the relativism of knowledge and the death of God. But these have been developed through the filter of structuralism and postmodernism in the arts.

We have already met the idea that a language creates its own objects, and this idea has developed – particularly in the work of Derrida – into a theory of meaning. The starting point is that meaning does not come in any way through a relationship to something outside language; there is absolutely nothing to which we can look to guarantee meaning, to assure us that we are right. Another way of putting it is that there is nothing playing the role of God, there is no 'transcendental signified'. Yet another formulation of the same idea is that meaning is never *present*, it is always somewhere else. On the simplest level, we have learnt from structuralism that the meaning of a word depends upon its relationship to other words – meaning lies between words rather than in the relationship between word and object. We know the meaning of

'dog' only because of its relationship to other words in the relevant paradigm and syntagm, not because of any inherent quality of the word itself. Meaning, then, always lies elsewhere and it is not guaranteed by anything outside itself; and of course, the world we see is created in and by meanings. There are only meanings.

The concept of sign implies that there is something signified, and the concept of 'structure' that there is something firm and ordered. Post-structuralism abandons these ideas: there is only one level, a surface level. There are no hidden depths in the world, and in its primitive form the surface level is chaotic and meaningless – a kaleidoscope. A variety of puzzling metaphors are employed to describe this ('the body without organs' is my personal favourite, since it leaves me completely mystified), but the idea of life itself as a meaningless chaos upon which we must impose some order has a long history in European philosophy.

Any order that exists is seen as coming from a process of differentiation within the chaos – remember that meaning lies in the relationships between words, the differences between words. The 'process of signification' is the drawing of these differences. When we make a statement, we bring a momentary order to the world – we define something according to its relationship with something else. A statement is often described as an 'event', and the term 'discourse' is usually employed to refer to a collection of related statements or events. The argument to which Paul Hirst is moving in his criticisms of Althusser's philosophy is that 'subjects' are created or 'constituted' by 'signifying practices', by the production of statements in discourses – discourses being what bring a general order to chaotic experience. No statement or discourse has a fixed meaning – its meaning always depends upon its relationship to other statements or discourses. As a result, there is a constant movement or slippage: when we ask the meaning of one discourse we are referred to another, and so on. This has a resonance with the insights of ethnomethodology, but it is much more radical in the sense that it undermines any sense of order in the world – hence the anarchistic colouring of much post-structuralist writing. A multiplicity of possible interpretations becomes a sort of aesthetic standard in the arts, and in literary criticism the interpretation itself has come to be regarded as a creative act of equal value to the work being interpreted.

For some writers, however, there are sources of order, or at least fixity – points at which meaning becomes comparatively stable. Lacan

uses the analogy of the points at which a loose chair-covering is fixed to the upholstery, and for him the fixed points in the sea of discourse come through the production of male sexual identity. Some of his ideas have been taken up critically by feminist theorists. Of more immediate relevance to the concerns of this book, however, is the work of Foucault: his points of fixation have to do with power.

Foucault does talk about an external world, an 'extra-discursive' order, the institutional structure out of which discourses develop and which embodies discourse; this distances him somewhat from other post-structuralists. Discourses and institutions are both 'fixed' by the power relations inherent in them. Following Nietzsche, he inverts the common-sense view of the relation between power and knowledge: whereas we might normally regard knowledge as providing us with the power to do things that, without it, we could not do, Foucault argues that knowledge is a power over others, the power to define others. Knowledge ceases to be a liberation and becomes enslavement. Thus, in his *History of Sexuality* (1979–86) he argues not only that the Victorian period was the opposite of what we suppose it to have been – a period when talk about sexuality was repressed – but also that the popular modern view that talking about sex is a form of liberation is wrong. The Victorian period was one in which a number of disciplines, such as medicine and psychiatry, developed their investigations into sexuality, and this process of bringing sexuality under control, of developing classifications and treatments and techniques, has continued to grow ever since. A discourse embodies knowledge (or, rather, what it defines as knowledge) and therefore embodies power. There are rules within a discourse concerning who can make statements and in what context, and these rules exclude some and include others. Those who have knowledge have the power to fix the flow of meaning and define others. The world is thus made up of a myriad of power relations, and each power generates a resistance; therefore, the world is a myriad of power struggles – something that is illustrated precisely by the 1968 uprisings in France.

This rather rarefied philosophical atmosphere in which the world is seen as created by language might seem strange; in fact, we have already met the idea in a different way in ethnomethodology. As far as Foucault's work is concerned there is, I think, a striking resemblance to conflict theory in the nature of his approach. As with conflict theory, we have only a few real theoretical statements – about

discourse and meaning and power – but at a much higher level of abstraction, that of philosophical metaphysics. Also as with conflict theory, these statements point to the variegated, kaleidoscopic nature of the social world. The next step is to describe that social world, and the most interesting of Foucault's work comprises studies of the knowledge/power relations in the growth of different sciences – in psychiatric medicine, in criminal law, and in theories of sexuality. His methodological works can be seen as developing rules for studying the world in the light of the metaphysical-theoretical statements, just as conflict theorists produce a series of hypotheses and rules for studying role conflict. There is, I think, rather more to be gleaned from post-structuralism than there is from conflict theory, and I will return to this shortly.

The development of postmodernist thought has been in the direction of disorder – or, more accurately, towards emphasising the multiplicity of orders, the kaleidoscope. In Foucault, this seems to be a desired end, a result of radical politics, but in other writers it seems to be a description of what is actually happening. Jean-François Lyotard, for example (in *The Postmodern Condition*, 1984), draws on the Wittgensteinian notion of a language game, which we have already come across in the discussion of ethnomethodology. His concern is to establish that there is no such thing as a meta-language game, a game which enables us to bring all the others together and judge between them. The basic argument seems to me very much like that presented by Peter Winch in *The Idea of Social Science* over thirty years ago, but in terms of style, it is as different as *Twin Peaks* is from *The Lone Ranger*. Lyotard argues that all knowledge is presented in the form of a narrative, a story – even scientific knowledge, which apparently points directly to things in the outside world, must call on a story if we are to understand it. Postmodernism doubts the existence of any 'meta-narrative', whether of Science, Reason, Marxism, or whatever, which claims to guarantee Truth, any aesthetic narrative which offers standards of Beauty, any moral narrative which offers standards of The Good. Instead of such a meta-narrative holding everything together, we are left with a complex network of different language games, between which we move, and our grasp of the rules of these games and our ability to move from one to the other keep everything together. At this point, we are closer to Giddens.

processes. As a result, he rejects much of what postmodernism has to say, particularly its emphasis on relativism in all fields.

Scott Lash's *The Sociology of Post-Modernism* (1990) is much more sympathetic to the approach, and much of it is inspired by the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Lash sees postmodernism as involving a reverse of the modernist development of differentiation and the increasing autonomy of the different areas of social life, a process generated by two 'motors'. The first is the development of new social classes:

the development of the post-industrial middle classes, the cultural-capital based fraction of the bourgeoisie. In contemporary times, the cultural field of these symbol-producing middle classes undergoes such expansion, such 'mass-ification', that it begins to engulf or implode into the more general social field itself. The cultural field expands thus to such a point that it bursts through the barriers that had previously contained it as only a delimited field (Lash, 1990: 263)

The second is the development of a new type of avant-garde that actually promotes orthodoxy – he cites architects such as Ventura here. We can find the same tendencies in post-structuralist theories. Lash points to Foucault's de-differentiation of different discourses, and perhaps we could argue that Lyotard's conception of language games illustrates the emphasis on the conventional, if not the orthodox.

Lash, unlike Giddens, seems to regard these processes as representing a real social change rather than the continuation of modernism's drive to a new level. The third approach I want to look at, David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989), is a Marxist approach which combines elements of both and seems to me to take the analysis much further, in that it maintains a notion of an underlying system or structure. Thus Harvey sees postmodernity as a real change at one level of the social formation, generated by developments, at a deeper level, of the same system. The following is a crude reconstruction of a comparatively subtle argument.

Harvey locates both economic and cultural changes as a response to the classic capitalist crisis – an overproduction – or, as he calls it, overaccumulation crisis – which, in Marxist theory, is seen as a result of the contradiction between the forces and relations of production. This response is seen in terms of a change in the structure of capital – finance capital, more flexible than industrial capital, taking over a

controlling function, and a move from what has become known as 'Fordism' to 'post-Fordism'. This involves a number of aspects, but the crux is a changing organisation of the labour force, away from the routinised, highly organised and controlled model based on the innovations of Henry Ford. The new form of organisation involves more small-scale production, a flexibility of skills and location in the workforce, where workers carry out multiple tasks; and, at the level of the state, de-regulation and some degree of privatisation. There is much more to it, of course, and Harvey – rightly, I think – sees 'post-Fordism' not as a total change but as a process which might vary in extent and dominance. He calls the whole process a change to 'flexible accumulation', and it is bound up with the rapid development of new technology.

Harvey then goes on to talk about the effect of all this on our experience of space and time, and it becomes clear that there is more going on here than Giddens deals with. Harvey argues that the change to flexible accumulation has led to 'an intense phase of space-time compression'. Flexible accumulation involves small-batch production, rapid turnover time, the speeding up of the labour process, the rapid change of styles in mass fashion markets, the movement from consumer goods to consumer services which are 'spent' immediately, and so on. All this leaves us in a world where things change quickly and appear ephemeral; at the same time, modern communication systems have broken down spatial barriers and, according to Harvey, it has therefore become important for *places*, actual geographical locations, to differentiate themselves in order to make themselves more attractive to investment:

The result has been the production of fragmentation, insecurity and ephemeral uneven development within a highly unified global space economy of capital flows. (Harvey, 1989: 296)

In addition, Harvey comments on the increasingly ghostly nature of money itself. This began to develop when money was no longer coined in precious metals, but it has accelerated rapidly over the last twenty years. I see only a very small proportion of my salary as actual cash; most of it passes through my hands not as money but as cheques and, increasingly, plastic; or as bits of paper I signed many years ago – when, for example, I took out my mortgage. I could, if I wanted to, move chunks of it around by telephone or computer. The

process goes beyond this – money's devaluation through inflation means that it can no longer be trusted to store value: putting money in a bank can be a sure way to see its value deteriorate.

Harvey talks about this as a crisis in representation, money's ability to represent value. This has clear links to the explicit themes of postmodernist theory, as do fragmentation, etc. But it seems to me also to represent the *form* of postmodernist theory – which, especially in a writer like Baudrillard, is chaotic, fragmented – and the speed with which concepts and fashionable theorists can appear and disappear. Harvey's book, on the other hand, presents an interesting and useful contrast: it takes the change it discusses as real and significant, and it is clear that Harvey understands what we might call the postmodernist consciousness, at the same time the change is understood as a change at a deeper level, the understanding of which draws on theories rejected or surpassed by postmodernism, and his analysis lays claim to be knowledge, rather than accepting our experience of knowledge as impossible. This leads me on to the conclusion of this chapter.

WHAT'S THE POINT OF IT ALL?

It is – to coin a phrase – a sign of the times that ten years ago I was able to conclude this chapter by juxtaposing structuralist Marxism and post-structuralism to E. P. Thompson's argument in *The Poverty of Theory* (1978), a straightforward attack on theoretical work and an appeal for a return to the real world. There is a current in modern culture, and modern sociology, which is now so generally accepted that to talk of a 'real world' is difficult, and to talk about it in the simple terms of Thompson's argument almost impossible. Many sociologists get on with their work as if that world were still there, but any excursus into theory has to take account of the phenomena I have been discussing – whether we regard them as the result of a fundamentally new type of society, of our old society – as it were, living out its fate – or of yet another crisis of capitalism.

The advantage of Harvey's analysis is that we can take postmodernism seriously and at the same time maintain a theoretical analysis in a more traditional sense – of looking for underlying structures and causal mechanisms. Postmodernism, both as theory and in its artistic manifestations, tells us what it is like for a large number of people –

going, I suspect, beyond Lash's new classes – to live in modern Western society, where arguably, at least occasionally, and perhaps frequently, we perceive the world as going mad: change is too fast, nothing is reliable. This has perhaps been the experience of every generation since industrialisation and perhaps even before, but the speed of change certainly seems to be accelerating.

However, postmodernism tells us more than what it is like to live. There is a very real sense in which it tells us about what the world is like – despite itself, we can see it as a theory in the traditional sense. To begin with, it is now impossible not to consider seriously the 'means of representation', language, the various languages in which we express ourselves and which determine what we express. We do not have to elevate this level of analysis to the status of the only reality to understand that we are, in part, the product of our language; that meanings are not fixed once and for all, but are engaged in perpetually changing relationships with each other. In a similar way, in epistemological terms, we can no longer hold on to an idea of 'firm knowledge' established through rigorous scientific means, but it does not follow that we have to give up the search for knowledge, or that we cannot judge between better and worse knowledge.

Postmodernism also tells more about agency. I argued that structuralism fragments over the issue of agency, and that we cannot actually avoid some conception of agency. At the same time, however, postmodernism suggests a deeper understanding of subjectivity than does action theory. All the approaches we looked at in Part II assumed a comparatively simple notion of the subject as the author of choice and action. From the development of structuralism into post-structuralism we can learn of the individual as driven and torn by unconscious desires and conflicting ways of making sense of the world, as placed amongst 'discourses' which are independent of her. We can use this 'de-centred' view of the subject, but within this de-centring there is still choice and action. The subject, and the experience of subjectivity, can be seen as a sort of flux. We are constantly buffeted and torn apart by forces beyond our control; they limit us and sometimes push us in directions we do not want to go. But at the same time we are constantly striving to control them; perhaps the best we can hope for is to ride them without falling off and being trampled underfoot.

FURTHER READING

General background

Sarup offers a basic, good introduction; Callinicos a committed political account; Jameson is rather difficult, but interesting; Dews offers a good discussion of Foucault.

- Callinicos, A. (1982) *Is There a Future for Marxism?*, Macmillan, Basingstoke.
 Descombes, V. (1980) *Modern French Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
 Dews, P. (1987) *Logics of Disintegration: Post-structuralist thought and the claims of critical theory*, Verso, London.
 Jameson, F. (1991) *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Verso, London.
 Poster, M. (1989) *Critical Theory and Post-Structuralism: In search of a context*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY.
 Sarup, M. (1988) *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Post-Modernism*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hemel Hempstead.

Critics of Althusser

None of the criticisms moving towards post-structuralism is simple, though the work of Hindess and Hirst is reducible to the logical either/or trap.

- Burchell, G. (1977) 'Review of Hindess and Hirst', *Radical Philosophy*, no. 18, pp. 22-30.
 Centre for Contemporary Culture Studies (1978) *On Ideology*, Hutchinson, London.
 Glücksmann, A. (1972) 'A ventriloquist structuralism', *New Left Review*, no. 72, pp. 68-92.
 Hindess, B. and Hirst, P. (1975) *Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London.
 Hindess, B. and Hirst, P. (1977) *Mode of Production and Social Formation: An auto-critique of pre-capitalist modes of production*, Macmillan, Basingstoke.
 Hirst, P. (1976) 'Althusser and the theory of ideology', *Economy and Society*, vol. 5, no. 4, pp. 385-412.

For an excellent discussion of these arguments, see:

- Benton, T. (1984) *The Rise and Fall of Structural Marxism*, Macmillan, Basingstoke.

Woodiwiss, A. (1990) *Social Theory after Post-Modernism*, Pluto Press, London.

E. P. Thompson's attack:

Thompson, E. P. (1978) *The Poverty of Theory*, The Merlin Press, London.

Post-structuralism

Foucault's most important works:

- Foucault, M. (1967) *Madness and Civilisation*, Tavistock, London.
 Foucault, M. (1970) *The Order of Things*, Tavistock, London.
 Foucault, M. (1972) *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Tavistock, London.
 Foucault, M. (1973) *The Birth of the Clinic*, Tavistock, London.
 Foucault, M. (1977) *Discipline and Punish*, Allen Lane, London.
 Foucault, M. (1979-86) *The History of Sexuality* (3 vols), Allen Lane, London.
 Gordon, C. (ed.) (1980) *Power/Knowledge*, Pantheon, New York.
 Rabinow, P. (ed.) (1985) *The Foucault Reader*, Pantheon, New York.

Useful introductions to Foucault; Smart is the best start:

- Cousins, M. and Hussain, A. (1984) *Michel Foucault*, Macmillan, Basingstoke.
 Dreyfus, H. and Rabinow, P. (1983) *Michel Foucault: Beyond structuralism & hermeneutics*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London.
 Gane, M. (1986) *Towards a Critique of Foucault*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London.
 Hoy, D. (1986) *Foucault: A critical reader*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford.
 Poster, M. (1984) *Foucault, Marxism & History*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
 Smart, B. (1983) *Foucault, Marxism & Critique*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London.
 Smart, B. (1985) *Michel Foucault*, Ellis Horwood & Tavistock, London.

Works by and on Baudrillard and Lyotard:

- Baudrillard, J. (1975) *The Mirror of Production*, Telos Press, St Louis, MO.
 Baudrillard, J. (1981) *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Telos Press, St Louis, MO.
 Baudrillard, J. (1983) *Simulations*, Semiotext(e) Foreign Agent Press, New York.
 Baudrillard, J. (1988a) *Selected Writings*, Polity Press, Cambridge.

- Baudrillard, J. (1988b) *The Ecstasy of Communication*, Semiotext(e) Foreign Agent Press, New York.
- Baudrillard, J. (1988c) *America*, Semiotext(e) Foreign Agent Press, New York.
- Gane, M. (1990) 'Ironies of postmodernism: The fate of Baudrillard's fatalism', *Economy and Society*, vol. 19, no. 3, pp. 314-33.
- Kellner, D. (1989) *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to postmodernism and beyond*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Lyotard, J.-F. (1984) *The Postmodern Condition: A report on knowledge*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- Lyotard, J.-F. (1888) *The Differend: Phrases in dispute*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

On the sociology of postmodernism:

- Peatherstone, M. (1991) *Consumer Culture & Postmodernism*, Sage, London.
- Giddens, A. (1990) *The Consequences of Modernity*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Harvey, D. (1989) *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford.
- Lash, S. (1990) *The Sociology of Post-Modernity*, Routledge, London.

PART IV

FROM STRUCTURE OR
ACTION TO STRUCTURE
AND ACTION