

## CHAPTER 7

# *Poststructuralism, postmodernism and social research*

This chapter has two aims. First, to examine the views of writers of both the poststructuralist and postmodernist schools of thought in relation to the philosophy of social research. Secondly, to illustrate how these ideas relate to the methodology of social research and the social sciences in general, leaving us in a better position to evaluate their implications for the practice of social research.

### *The post-critiques: taking aim at foundationalism*

Given the sheer breadth of these topics, the aim here is one of clarification, not resolution. This is fortunate, for when it comes to postmodernism it is not possible to say the “jury is out and will soon reach a verdict”; there is not, nor can there be, any jury who might allude to universal concepts of justice upon which to base their judgements. Monolithic concepts of truth based upon universal reason are now committed to the dustbin of history. Allusions to transcendental and universal concepts of truth in the name of science have vanished into the air of relativism. No doubt as we write, the complacency of modernity, based upon Enlightenment principles, is once again being demolished by new converts to postmodernism, or questioned and subverted by a new generation of poststructuralists.

Even if our aim in this chapter is one of clarification, there is now an overwhelming body of literature relevant to this topic (for example, Lash 1990, Docherty 1993, Sarup 1993, Smart 1993 and Bertens 1995). To some

## POSTSTRUCTURALISM, POSTMODERNISM & SOCIAL RESEARCH

this may be a good thing. At the same time, it is quite clear that the idea of a “postmodern condition” is not without considerable criticism, some of which we will outline in the summary section of the chapter. Given this state of affairs, our path will be one of attention to its arguments, as well as its implications for social research. Although the French intellectual scene, from which so much of this writing derives, has been the subject of literary derision (Bradbury 1989), we agree that in approaching the postmodern and poststructuralist literature it is not helpful to do so in the manner of either wholesale adoption or rejection. As one writer who approaches this work in such a manner suggests:

if radical manifestos proclaiming the end of sociology and social philosophy “as we know them” seem unfounded, equally convincing is the pretence that nothing of importance has happened and there is nothing to stop “business as usual” (Bauman 1992:105).

Perhaps the first point we should note is that critics of the Enlightenment project are not new. We have already considered the ways in which the critical theorists approached this subject. For them, the modern age is characterized as a disjuncture between reason and rationalization. As Adorno & Horkheimer wrote in 1944:

For the Enlightenment, whatever does not conform to the rule of computation and utility is suspect. So long as it can develop undisturbed by any outward repression, there is no holding it. In the process, it treats its own ideas of human rights exactly as it does the older universals. Every spiritual resistance it encounters serves merely to increase its strength...*Enlightenment is totalitarian* (1979:6. Emphasis added).

Compare this quote to one of the leading figures of the postmodernist movement—Jean-François Lyotard. Here we find that claims to speak for “reality” and society as a “whole” are firmly laid to rest. For this reason, the scientific aim of generalization is not viewed as part of the path towards greater knowledge. On the contrary:

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia

## THE POST-CRITIQUES: TAKING AIM AT FOUNDATIONALISM

of the whole and the one...Under the general demand for slackening and for appeasement, we can hear the mutterings of the desire for a return of terror, for the realization of the fantasy to seize reality. The answer is: Let us wage war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences (Lyotard 1993:46).

Jürgen Habermas (1992) argues that the openings of postmodernism in Western thought may be found in the writings of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). In Nietzsche's writings we can find him espousing the doctrine of perspectivism: that is, there is no transcendental vantage point from which one may view truth, and the external world is interpreted according to different beliefs and ideas whose validities are equal to one another. References to postmodernism may also be found in 1930s literary criticism, while in North America during the 1960s there was a postmodernist movement in art, "constituted as a potentially avantgardist cultural configuration" (Smart 1993:19). Its roots may also be traced in dance, art, film, photography, as well as architecture (Bertens 1995). In this sense, we may characterize postmodernism as a general cultural movement associated with the epoch known as postmodernity. The characteristics of this age include the rise of the information society (Lyotard), the triumph of production over consumption (Baudrillard), coupled with general denunciations of meta-narratives of explanation, totalizing politics and homogeneous and invariant concepts of social identity.

In a classic work, *The sociological imagination*, originally published in 1959, Mills writes of the changing notions of "reason" and "freedom". He notes how social science has inherited terms that, even though they are outdated, are still rooted in their practice. These "categories of thought", if generalized to contemporary situations, "become unwieldy, irrelevant, not convincing" (1970:184). Given this state of affairs:

We are at the ending of what is called the Modern Age. Just as Antiquity was followed by several centuries of Oriental ascendancy, which Westerners provincially call the Dark Ages, so now The Modern Age is being succeeded by a *post-modern period*. Perhaps we may call it: The Fourth Epoch (1970:184. Emphasis added).

If this "Fourth Epoch" is a search for new values, identities and ways of

life, it is not surprising that we can range, in reaction to postmodernism, from those immersed in the cosy slumbers of the “nothing has changed” group, to those convinced by its arguments. These tensions have opened up new fields of inquiry. It has led to a desire, for example, to understand social identity, feelings, emotions, sexuality and the “body”—not simply an epiphenomena of the mind as represented in Cartesian rationalism (see Featherstone & Turner 1995). This has been undertaken through the use of forms of research that are often regarded as “unscientific”, in terms of their being rooted in art and subjectivity, as opposed to “science”: for example, biography, autobiography and photography. Accompanying this process has been the breaking down of disciplinary barriers between, for instance, literature, art and science. In these terms, we might view social research as part of the search for new values and ways of life. It could be characterized, perhaps, as simply another form of representing the desire, motivated by Michel Foucault’s injunction to write, in order, “to become someone other than who one is” (quoted in Miller 1993:33).

Although not a new concept, the sheer scale of the postmodern assault on the social sciences is a more recent phenomenon. At an epistemological level, converts to postmodernism regard it as doing nothing less than pulling the rug from under the feet of traditional scientific foundations. Although there remains definitional ambiguity over the term, for our purposes postmodernism may be viewed as a critique of the values, goals and bases of analyses that, from the Enlightenment onwards, have been assumed to be universally valid. Its theoretical base is therefore pluralist and anti-reductionist. This results in a celebration of difference and diversity, rather than similarity and uniformity. Methodologically, the alternative to the complacent foundationalism of modernism becomes the maxim, apparently favoured by Feyerabend (1978), that “anything goes”. Given this, it provokes established scientific beliefs. As the postmodern philosopher Jean Baudrillard puts it, “there is always an element of provocation in what I write. It is a sort of challenge to the intellectual and the reader that starts a kind of game” (Baudrillard in Gane 1993:153–4).

### Foundations and representation in question

In reaction to these critiques we could take the “middle ground” by rejecting the complacency of modernism and methodological anarchism. We might simply say that postmodernism has reinforced the idea that

## THE POST-CRITIQUES: TAKING AIM AT FOUNDATIONALISM

truth is contingent and nothing should be placed beyond the possibility of revision. However, elements of these critiques go further than this. At an individual level, they constitute a direct challenge to the expert status of the researcher. Consider, for instance, the consequences of Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist project. Science may be seen from this point of view as a form of rhetoric that serves to obfuscate more than it illuminates. Behind every technical argument there lurk values and it is these that should be exposed by the process of deconstruction.

Derrida's overall strategy is to expose what he calls the "disingenuous dream" of Western philosophy. So far, we have discussed this in terms of the attempt to find a transparent language that might represent the world as it "really" is. The history of science can thus be read as the attempt to legislate for what is to constitute valid knowledge. As we have seen, this goal attained its credibility with the Cartesian notion that a transcendental standard against which truth could be objectively measured, independent of the objects of scientific inquiry, was possible. In Kant's work, we found the fusion of reason and empiricism. According to this view, the material world causes sensations, but it is our mental apparatus that orders them. Reason becomes a universal capacity from which arose a whole new mode of thought:

Rational mastery of nature and society presupposed knowledge of the truth, and the truth was universal, as contrasted to the multi-fold appearance of things or to their immediate form in the perception of individuals. This principle was already alive in the earliest attempts of Greek epistemology: the truth is universal and necessary and thus contradicts the ordinary experiences of change and accident (Marcuse 1969:17).

Methodologically we have seen that this required representation and reality to correspond to each other in the process of rational scientific inquiry. If accepted, then once *the method* is found, we then discover *the reality*. This leads to a claim of objectivism defined as:

the basic conviction that there is or must be some permanent, ahistorical matrix or framework to which we can ultimately appeal in determining the nature of rationality, knowledge, truth, reality, goodness, or rightness (Bernstein 1983:8).

However, is the world not characterized by chance, accident and difference

that science attempts not to represent, but to control in the name of limited concepts of ontology and epistemology?

In the unfolding history of epistemology, the Kantian notion was challenged through the argument that rationality, the guarantor of this process, is historically and sociologically constituted and not some ahistorical objective reality. The argument that this is relativistic, from a Cartesian perspective, is met by the counter-claim that we “progress”, in terms of our knowledge base, as we move from one age to the next. However, for the post-critiques, even this historicist move does not go far enough. Why? Because George Hegel (1770–1831), the first European thinker to consider knowledge in these terms, was still committed to two cornerstones of scientific endeavour: objectivity and truth (Sayers 1989). Reason, in other words, may still be mobilized in defence of “science”, which claims for itself the role of an arbitrator of progress.

The implications of the undermining of this argument are far reaching. Quite simply, once we move beyond Cartesian and historicist claims, the concepts that underpin scientific practice become confined to the epistemological toilet and with this, the security of the scientific practitioner’s expert status, as well as that of their discipline in general. This is where Nietzsche steps in; a thinker who has been so influential on such diverse thinkers as Derrida, Baudrillard, Deleuze and Kristeva.

This strand of thought, as it applies to the history of social science, is also argued to be present in the work of Michel Foucault. It comes as no surprise that Richard Rorty, a contemporary “anti-foundationalist” thinker, should pursue this line of thinking in his interpretation of Foucault:

To see Foucault as a Nietzschean enemy of historicism rather than one more historicist enemy of Cartesianism, we need to see him as trying to write history in a way which will destroy the notion of historical progress (1987:47).

Chance and chaos, not the discovery of “truth” and “progress”, now enter research endeavours. In an historical manner, rather than Derrida’s philosophical approach, the very “background thinking” (Gouldner 1971) of the researcher and philosopher is exposed under this critical gaze. Even the attempt to break free of this historical legacy, according to Foucault, leads us into the building of other forms of constraint as we search, in vain, for universals that might demarcate between the “true” and the “false”.

## THE POST-CRITIQUES: TAKING AIM AT FOUNDATIONALISM

In these circumstances, the best that a social researcher might hope for is to act as an interpreter, but certainly not the legislator of truth (Bauman 1987).

How did this all happen in the history of epistemology? It starts from the recognition that we are structured by history and even the forces of nature. Despite this, an apparent anthropological constraint was turned into a strength. In this process, scientists became the legislators of what was to count as “valid” knowledge. From the Enlightenment onwards, this has involved a move away from an analysis of representations, towards what Foucault calls an *analytic*:

From Kant on, an analytic is an attempt to show on what grounds representation and analysis of representations are possible and to what extent they are legitimate (Dreyfus & Rabinow 1982:28).

Foucault (1992) terms this the “analytic of finitude”. It represents the desire to achieve a correspondence between reality and a language (scientific) that can describe that reality. However, Foucault added to this in two ways. First, through a critique of transcendental reason and the corresponding desire to find a universal, ahistorical and normative basis for a “way of life”. In practice, this came to mean that differences between ways of life could be judged according to reason, whereas the “authenticity” of such a dialogue is based upon the participants’ abilities to reach a particular standard; a standard set by limited notions of Western rationality. One of the implications of this critique is that research cannot then adjudicate, on a normative basis, between ways of life, but may only describe them relative to time and place.

Secondly, there are Foucault’s (1980) arguments on the inseparability of knowledge and power. This undermines the ideal of knowledge as liberation, as well as the practice of human sciences as being separate from the operation of power. Thus, where power is exercised, knowledge is also produced. In this respect, the human sciences, by producing knowledge, affect social and institutional practices. The knowledge they generate about relations and practices between individuals in societies has an effect on the regulation, or discipline, of those societies:

there is no power relations without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations (Foucault 1977:27).

We have become both the subjects and objects of knowledge. The human

sciences appeared not as the result of some scientific problem that demanded analysis, nor as the result of some “pressing rationalism”; the decision to include people among the objects of science “appeared when man constituted himself in Western culture as both that which must be conceived of and that which is to be known” (Foucault 1992:345). If we now view the human sciences as implicated in the operation of power for the purposes of the classification and regulation of the population, we can understand the problems of arriving at concrete and scientific classification systems that, by default, assume that knowledge may be separated from the exercise of power. Instead, according to Foucault, to base social science upon Enlightenment reason leaves us with a legacy of inherent instability and conflict. On the one hand, research is justified through the positivistic findings it produces. On the other hand, it is critical insofar as it constantly reflects upon the possibilities for producing such knowledge in the first instance. In the process, reason becomes its “iron cage” and its practice and findings act not as a source of liberation, but as part of a continual process of the inextricable link between power and knowledge.

Prediction, explanation, generalization and classification have become the guiding principles of scientific enquiry. They are, in turn, linked to the idea of controlling the social world. Unitary bodies of theory create hierarchies through which truth is filtered. Therefore, the scientific authority to arbitrate between truth and falsehood is predicated upon an appeal to objective knowledge and an access to truth enabled through the formulation of procedural rules (Bauman 1987). It is this desire to universalize, and the foundations upon which it is based, that postmodernist thinkers take as the focus of their critiques. It results in a denial of difference and diversity among peoples who are then judged according to dominant standards of Western reason. Attempts to generalize across social contexts are thus seen as not simply inaccurate but, as noted in the earlier quote from Lyotard, totalizing and even despotic.

For Lyotard (1984) there are no universal explanations based on metanarratives, nor the allusion to some universal that lies outside the sphere of scientific competence. He is also opposed to the idea of validating different types of knowledge according to the dominant standards of Western reason. As such, there is no constant standard of *reason*, but there are *reasons*. This would seem to be problematic in terms of the general tenor of this book. We have suggested, along with others before us (Gjertsen 1989), that science has needed to ground itself in a discourse that is itself not “scientific”. That discourse is philosophy. This, according to Lyotard, has

occurred in two ways. First, through the idea of progress in terms of the pursuit of truth and secondly, in terms of education as being a healthy condition for the purposes of liberation. However, these narratives have lost their credibility. How has this occurred?

Influenced by Wittgenstein's idea of language games, Lyotard calls for the abandonment of the search for "hidden" meanings and "depth" explanations, in favour of the "play" of language games. Broadly speaking, science has always distinguished itself from narrative. Narrative flows through society and individuals may participate in a manner that does not require justification in terms of reference to some grand, legitimating narrative. Any person may therefore occupy the place of the "speaker". Science, on the other hand, is a single language game with a very different logic. It allows only denotative statements whereby competence is required on the part of the speaker, not the listener. As such, an understanding of an existing body of scientific knowledge is required for its legitimation where the rules of the language game are understood by its participants. It appears not to require narrative for this purpose. Instead, science "progresses" through the approval of others within the same field of expertise. Add to this idea the "age of information" and we can see how, as the complexity of scientific work increases and with that the types of proof required to test theories, technological innovation becomes bound up with scientific enterprise. More complicated computer programmes, for example, are needed in order to routinely conduct scientific work.

The result of this process is what Lyotard (1984) calls "performativity". Technology allows a scientist to achieve maximum output for a minimum input, but one that costs more and more money in terms of the technology required for its performance. While, as Popper had already noted, ideas and discoveries may take place in the absence of such funding, most science is now conducted on this basis. The result is a scientific language game where wealth, truth and efficiency combine, not the idealized concept of the disinterested pursuit of knowledge. Our earlier question "what is science?" is now answered in terms of science being a self-referential language game where money and truth are bound as one, without the possibility of allusion to a meta-narrative (philosophy) in order to justify its methods, insights, procedures and conclusions. This non-foundationalist thinking lays scientific quests for foundational "truth" firmly to rest.

## Taking aim at the subject

What we have generally termed the “post-critiques” do not simply reside in epistemology. Ontological assumptions that draw upon humanism also find themselves questioned by these traditions. We have seen that Anthony Giddens shuns the possibility of drawing up a set of predetermined epistemological principles for his inquiries. Instead, he argues that social theory should seek to overcome a set of dualism’s through an ontological concern with, “conceptions of human being and human doing, social reproduction and social transformation” (Giddens 1984: xx). When it comes to the subjects of modernity and social identity, his concerns are thus focused upon ontological security and existential identity (Giddens 1991).

Giddens recognizes the absence of a unified subject upon which to base social theory and social science in general, but he still conceives of history in terms of the actions of individuals. However, the concept of a unified and autonomous subject falls under the critical gaze of both postmodernism and poststructuralism and with that, the ideas of this influential sociologist. The key concept here is “humanism”. In this context, we can take it to refer to the centrality of human subjects as the source of knowledge, accompanied by a stress on human agency as deployed in social explanations and understandings:

From Descartes’s *cogito*, to Kant’s and Husserl’s transcendental ego, to the Enlightenment concept of reason, identity is conceived as something essential, substantial, unitary, fixed, and fundamentally unchanging (Kellner 1993:142. Original italics).

It has become yet another “foundation” upon which social science has been able to proceed.

Poststructuralism was not the first school of thought to subject this idea to critical scrutiny. Marxists have emphasized a dialectic between agency and material circumstances, and structuralists, such as Lévi-Strauss, sought an underlying unity in what were divergent surface meanings. Structure and culture, meaning and causally motivated behaviour, and explanation and understanding, all became dualisms in the process of debates around these issues and form the intellectual and cultural legacies that, as Mills noted, we have now inherited. In the poststructuralist camp, Foucault did not abandon the significance of

## THE POST-CRITIQUES: TAKING AIM AT FOUNDATIONALISM

meaning in human relations, and returned to the concept of the “subject” in his later work (Dews 1989). However, he did react to the influence of Sartre and existentialism in French intellectual life and subjected this humanist tradition to a radical critique (see Miller 1993). The same may be said for the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901–83). Lacan, in his interpretations of Freud, held that we were “de-centred” subjects who only came to recognize ourselves through language that, as we shall see, is a system of differences in terms of the arbitrary relations that exist between the signifier and signified. Once again, this offended the humanist tradition with its concept of a homogeneous ego. Along with Derrida, Lacan has influenced the works of H  l  e Cixious, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva whose writings have been labelled “postmodern feminism” (Tong 1989).

It is these strands in poststructuralist thought that often provoke a deep hostility in those who emphasize agency in understanding human conduct. These arguments and their implications can be followed via a brief examination of the ideas of Jacques Derrida whose deconstructionist project, as noted, entails the exposing of what is referred to as the “disingenuous dream” of Western philosophy. Accompanying this is the break-down of the distinction between what are often and somewhat oddly called, the “hard” and “soft” sciences. This distinction has enabled a simple dualism to be drawn between reality and fiction. How has this occurred?

We have seen that science might be characterized as the desire to achieve a correspondence between the language used to describe reality and reality itself. Now, the structuralists, such as Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), maintained that signs are divided into two parts: the signifier (the sound) and the signified (the idea or concepts to which the sound refers). The meanings of terms are thus fixed by language as a self-referential system, leaving Saussure to consider the relationship between thought and language via a comparison with a sheet of paper:

thought is the front and the sound the back; one cannot cut the front without cutting the back at the same time; likewise in language, one can neither divide sound from thought nor thought from sound...Linguistics then works in the borderland where elements of sound and thought combine; *their combination produces a form, not a substance* (Saussure in Easthope & McGowan 1992:7. Original italics).

The signifier and signified thereby relate. However, Derrida does not accept this connection. For Derrida, the relationship between words and thoughts or “things”, never actually connects. Instead, what we arrive at are structures of differences where the production of meaning is not achieved through a correspondence arriving at the final signified, but only through the different significance that is attached, by speakers, to words themselves. As such:

when we read a sign, meaning is not immediately clear to us. Signs refer to what is absent, so in a sense meanings are absent, too. Meaning is continually moving along on a chain of signifiers, and we cannot be precise about its exact “location”, because it is never tied to one particular sign (Sarup 1993:33).

The implication is that meaning can never be fixed, nor readily apparent. We are left with an inability to decide based upon the idea of *différance*: that is, fixed meanings always elude us because of the necessity of clarification and definition. This process requires more language for its production, but language can never be its final arbiter. In other words, signs can only be studied in terms of other signs whose meanings continually evade us.

This philosophical conundrum was recognized by philosophers who, to put it in the language of the post-critiques, sought an area of certainty for their formulations. For some this came in ontology. One of the more famous examples of this move took place in the work of Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) who moved Husserl’s phenomenological focus from epistemology to ontology. It was Heidegger who, along with Nietzsche, recognized the limitations of Western reason in his critique of, among others, Kant. He argued that we are not just external observers of the social and natural worlds, but are also “beings” who exist in time. Therefore, we are part of, not separate from, the world. However, for Derrida, he also sought a *logos*: that is, a foundational basis for beliefs exemplified in either an essence of being (ontology) and/or grounds for knowing (epistemology). This may be seen in Heidegger’s attempts to overcome the falsehood of the Enlightenment by returning to an original state of “Being”. Here, language and experience would become one. Nevertheless, for Derrida this is not a satisfactory answer because, once again, it rests upon the desire to find an unmediated truth about the world by smuggling into its formulation what he calls a “transcendental signified”. As a result,

“Heideggerian thought would reinstate rather than destroy the instance of the logos” (Derrida in Kamuf 1991:35). Unmediated scientific truth, therefore, is simply not attainable.

The idea of the “real”, and the methods for reaching this, provide scientists with an existential security. In this way, social selves and scientific endeavours act in a symbiotic manner that, according to the post-critiques, is a false relationship. We desire to “discover” the social world through observations, experiments, textual analysis, questionnaires, videos or other methods that are employed towards this end. In so doing, the right to know or understand is proclaimed. Contrary to this, the post-critiques see us as implicated in the production of knowledge. In poststructuralist terms, there is complicity in perpetuating a “metaphysics of presence” (Derrida) or, in a more historical than philosophical vein, the relationship between power and knowledge in discourses that produce “truth” (Foucault). In postmodernist terms, science is a self-referential language game that can no longer appeal to meta-narratives (Lyotard), nor make judgements regarding the differences between the real and the imaginary, for ours is an age of what has been termed “hyperreality” (Baudrillard). Whether or not one argues that poststructuralists work within modernity to expose its limits and postmodernists seek to overcome it, it remains the case that science in general and social science in particular, may no longer speak with the authority that its predecessors once enjoyed.

### *The post-critiques and the practice of social research*

In this section we will consider the relationship between the above ideas and social research. Our intention is only illustrative given the aims of this book and the space available to us. We also note that, for some, we can apparently expect little else of the following narrative. Connections and possibilities are thus suggested in terms of the writings and researches of those who have attempted to apply the above ideas in their studies of societies and social relations.

## Derrida and deconstruction

Let us start with Derrida's poststructuralism and its methodological consequences. It was noted earlier that science may be read as a form of rhetoric:

Deconstruction refuses to view methodology simply as a set of technical procedures with which to manipulate data. Rather, methodology can be opened up to readers intrigued by its deep assumptions and its empirical findings but otherwise daunted by its densely technical and figural findings (Agger 1991:29–30).

Once again, we are left with the idea of science as obfuscation, not liberation through illumination. The idea, as Agger notes, albeit with a modified critical theory in mind, involves questioning the underlying assumptions of science that may then be open to question through the revealing of the values and interests that inform its practices. However, the result is not enlightenment for even a "deconstructed science" may not attain the truth, merely expose it as another form of rhetoric that, more than others, can bury its presuppositions away from the gaze of those who have not served its apprenticeships. We cannot, of course, allude to language to solve this problem for Derrida's principle of "undecidability" will always obtain.

Despite this latter insight, Derrida argues that there is still a "metaphysics of presence" in Saussure's work because he prioritizes speech over writing. Whereas Saussure challenges the idea of the subject before language and sees the subject produced by language, he still sees a link between sound and sense in the prioritization of what is known as "self-present speech" (Norris 1987). The result is that he, as with Western thought in general, becomes committed to a metaphysics of presence: that is, the existence of a unified speaking subject. Derrida seeks to correct this bias. After all:

If writing is the very *condition* of knowledge—if, that is to say, it can be shown to precede and articulate all our working notions of science, history, tradition etc.—then how can writing be just one object of knowledge among others? (Norris 1987:94. Original italics).

## THE POST-CRITIQUES AND THE PRACTICE OF SOCIAL RESEARCH

From this we can say that it is writing, not the speech-act of the subject, that should be the subject of social inquiries within a deconstructive mode.

Armed with this insight, deconstructionist researchers may descend upon the social world to examine the presuppositions that are buried in the texts produced in the course of its everyday activities. The idea of questioning the metaphysics of presence affects social research practice in terms of, for example, its use of "consciousness" and "intentionality" as explanatory frameworks in the study of human relations. As a result, the task of social research becomes the deconstruction of texts in order to expose how values and interests are imbedded within them and how the social world is fabricated through what is known as "intertextuality". In the process, how the social world is represented becomes more important than the search for an independent "reality" described by such texts. There are certainly ethnographers who have examined the implications of this idea in terms of the process of representations through description (Atkinson 1990, Fontana 1994).

This links into the debate on the subject and humanism in its implications that we both read and are *written by* texts. This is not necessarily assumed to be a conscious process, but an unconscious one. Ann Game, whose book is devoted to arguing for a "deconstructive sociology", notes how this idea goes right to the core of so much social science reasoning. She starts her study by noting that, "The idea that reality is fictitious and fiction is real does not find favour with sociologists" (Game 1991:3). The focus of social inquiry now moves towards "how" meanings are produced, not that to which it finally refers. If this epistemological move is not sufficient to debunk common claims and arguments, then those who base their claims on ontology are also taken to task. Game argues that Giddens prefers the idea of the subject as being characterized by "consciousness" over that of the "unconscious". A metaphysics of presence thus pervades his work and sociology in general:

The idea that we write and read culture is incompatible with the sociological conception of human agency; they are based on fundamentally different assumptions about the subject and meaning. One of the concerns of this book is to argue for the significance of the unconscious to an understanding of cultural processes (Game 1991:6. Original italics).

From this starting point the fact-theory relation is taken to be a "writing practice", not one upon which the process of validation is achieved through the correspondence theory of truth. Difference is celebrated and the Cartesian mind-body duality is debunked in favour of seeing the human body as a site of representation, identity and action. Drawing upon the work of, among others, Irigaray, Derrida, Freud, Barthes and Saussure, questions of the "essential" nature of women (a fixed ontological claim) are then abandoned in favour of the mode through which they are defined and represented by texts. Texts are seen as social practices and observations become acts of writing, not the reporting of an independent reality.

Social research is now implicated in and part of, the production of reality itself. Social research is an activity that forms conceptions of social reality and so opens up the question of, "how research texts might be written in an open and reflexive way" (Game 1991:32). We are then left with the notion that no single text is to be authorized and then theorized in terms of being open to test against some empirical reality. It may only be viewed in terms of other stories or accounts of social life. Armed with these insights she then analyzes films, photographs, texts on English Heritage and the idea of "urban strolling". We will briefly illustrate how this deconstructive research programme is conducted by using one of her studies.

Using transcripts of interviews, Ann Game conducts an interview with a "boss" on "boss-secretary relations"; the discourses of the boss are compared to those of the secretary in order to ask, "Do they tell the same story? And if not, what does this suggest about multiplicity?" (Game 1991:116). The result is a series of differences that are posited in their accounts in terms of how the relations between boss and secretary are considered, managed and enabled. Office spatial arrangements, roles, tasks, the notion of both having particular attributes that are then seen to enable effective functioning in terms of the division of labour between them, the separation of public and private lives, all add up to "social positionings". Game does not, as is consistent with her methodological prescriptions, separate herself from this process noting how, as an "outside" academic, she tended to identify with the boss more than the secretary. This is seen as, "symptomatic of a general unease about the power relations of research and the constitution of the other to the subject of research" (1991:127).

Foucault: discourses, objects and subjects

When it comes to the implications of poststructuralism in the work of Foucault we find, despite differences between his work and that of Derrida (see Boyne 1990), similarities in terms of the critique of the subject-object distinction. A number of researchers, albeit not uncritically, have found analytic mileage in his work for the study of different social phenomena (for example, see Jones & Porter 1994, Law 1994, May 1994, Weeks 1991). As Barbara Townley writes in her study of Human Resource Management (HRM) in the organization of work relations:

To illustrate the relevance of his work for personnel, we must follow his recommendation to question the self-evident and return to the basic building block on which personnel practices are premised: the employment relationship. Central to this relationship is the indeterminacy of contract, the naturally occurring space between expectation and deliverance of work. The "gap", or space, between what is promised and what is realized, inevitably exists in a transaction between the parties. In the employment relationship, this gap is between the capacity to work and its exercise (1994:13).

This provides a way in which she is able to analyze the methods through which everyday practices, as part of the discourse of HRM, inform so many people's working lives: for example, evaluations, rankings, performance indicators, self- and peer-assessments, etc., all of which create employees as both subject and object within their working environments. "Quality circles", "attitude surveys", "testing" of candidates for jobs and the work of "Assessment Centres" are just some of the techniques she analyzes in order to develop her insights.

To analyze discourses in this manner means insisting upon the idea that the social world cannot be divided into two realms: the material and the mental. What we see, once again, are the concepts of consciousness and intentionality, among others, being questioned in the process of a form of social inquiry that seeks to overcome the dualisms so often associated with the history of social thought and the practices of the social sciences. Discourses are seen to provide the limits to what may be experienced, the meanings attributed to those experiences, as well as what might be said and done as a result (Purvis & Hunt 1993). As Mitchell Dean (1994) puts it in his study of Foucault's methods, social researchers

are presented with the possibility of examining the conditions under which representation itself actually takes place, as well as the generation of ideas and knowledge. In these terms, a social researcher would examine what Foucault (1991) has termed the “form of appropriation” of the discourse, as well as its “limits of appropriation”.

As part of this overall strategy, the notion of “eventalization” sees the singularity of an event not in terms of some historical constant or anthropological invariant. Instead, the use of Foucault’s methods provides for a subversive strategy that breaches the apparently self-evident nature of an event to show that “things” might have been otherwise. This is said to allow for a series of possibilities without the allusion to some guarantee in terms of either ontology or the inevitable unfolding logic of history as found, for example, in the works of Marx and Hegel. To attempt to impose some unilinear development on history, as is the case in evolutionary schemas, or to reduce social change to mono-causal explanations is anathema to Foucault’s methodology. For him, there is no external certainty or universal understanding beyond history and society. Instead, the social researcher is required to “rediscover”

the connections, encounters, supports, blockages, plays of forces, strategies and so on which at a given moment establish what subsequently counts as being self-evident, universal and necessary. In this sense one is indeed effecting a sort of multiplication or pluralization of causes (Foucault 1991:76).

As in Townley’s study, discourses may be analyzed in terms of how they appropriate subjects and turn them into objects, as well as the limits that exist to their forms of appropriation. In so doing, this strategy demonstrates the ultimate “arbitrariness” of the discourses themselves and provides for the possibility of alternative modes of organizing social life, “So my position leads not to apathy but to hyper- and pessimistic activism” (Foucault 1984:343). With the relationship between power and knowledge and these points in mind, Foucault wrote of his study *Madness and civilisation* (1971):

if, concerning a science like theoretical physics or organic chemistry, one poses the problem of its relations with the political and economic structures of society, isn’t one posing an excessively complicated question?...But, on the other hand, if one takes a form

of knowledge (*savoir*) like psychiatry, won't the question be much easier to resolve, since the epistemological profile of psychiatry is low and psychiatric practice is related to a whole range of institutions, economic requirements and political issues of social regulation? (Foucault 1980:109).

### Baudrillard: simulation and the end of the social

There are those who have drawn upon the above ideas and labelled their works "postmodernist". It is at this point that one sees an affinity and overlap between these different authors in terms of the rejection of meta-narratives. This then entails the study of the social world from the point of view of multiple perspectives rather than, say, the monoliths of race, gender, class and ethnicity. Presuppositions are, as noted, to be distrusted, while foundations are, within postmodernism at least, to be dismissed as epistemologically untenable, ontologically groundless and ultimately, politically unacceptable. Relativism, it appears, is unproblematic. On the contrary, it is to be celebrated.

In considering the work of Baudrillard within this genre and its implications for the practice of social science, we might first observe that we live in an information age where the media have proliferated to such an extent they are now part of our everyday lives:

The combination of verbal and visual elements to constitute texts is becoming increasingly important in our society, and advertising is at the forefront of it. Television as a medium produces only such composite texts, but advertisements in printed materials also give greater emphasis to them. And the visual element is progressively becoming the more important in advertising. The salience of the image has been taken to be one of the *main characteristics* of contemporary "postmodern" culture (Fairclough 1989:208. Emphasis added).

In this work, Norman Fairclough accepts the idea of media saturation but seeks to develop a "critical linguistics" based upon its potential for emancipation. As such, it is anathema to the work of Baudrillard (1983a) who, while arguing that media images are now the most fundamental part of the contemporary world, would reject such emancipatory goals.

Media and cultural sources in general are now so involved in the simulation of reality that, under the condition of what he terms “hyperreality”, we are no longer able to distinguish between reality and its representation. This is particularly so in the case of America (Baudrillard 1993). Following the implications of his argument through, the postmodern condition means that signs no longer have any depth to them, nor any meaningful referent. Although this leaves something of an opening for cultural studies (see Inglis 1993), our contemporary age may be characterized by a “nostalgia” for a return to the link between representation and reality that was once found in politics and history (Gane 1991). However, this is a by-gone age and so becomes a fruitless gesture.

For Baudrillard, the result is that the political realm may no longer be viewed as autonomous, while the social realm is now so saturated with media images that it has become “anonymous”. It follows that the supposed meaningful referents that are continually invoked in social research—class, gender, etc.—now disappear with the collapse of the “social”. With that also collapses the possibility of social science. Instead, we are left with an undifferentiated “mass”. Quite simply, where the sign no longer refers to the “real”, social science concepts are no longer tenable for the real has been overrun by the “hyperreal”. However, what then occurs, in the absence of any expression by the masses that may link itself with social or political reality, is a process of statistical representation, using social surveys and opinion polls, directed at what is often referred to as the “silent majority” (Baudrillard 1983b):

Here, there is no system of polarities, no differentiation of terms, no flow of energy, no field or flow of currents. The mass is born short-circuited in “total circularity”. What seems to occur he argues is a circulation around simulation models, and a collapse of the complex system into itself...For no-one, no organisation, as has been the case previously can any longer speak with confidence “for” the mass (Gane 1991:136).

The resulting “simulacra” or models of social science thus have no grounding in anything but their own “reality” which becomes self-serving. There may be jobs for opinion pollsters, but their work has no validity in terms of appealing to some correspondence with reality.

In an era where the real no longer exists, “codes” of the original appear.

## THE POST-CRITIQUES AND THE PRACTICE OF SOCIAL RESEARCH

They enable a state of simulation to ensue that by-passes the process of production. This reflects Baudrillard's rejection of Marxism, in order to characterize the current age in terms of reproduction. In the condition of postmodernity, the state is achieved whereby the real and its representation become erased and everything is either, or has the potential to become, simulacra. As such, the ability to decide, for example, between ideas, aesthetics and political persuasions, now collapses. In these terms, precedence is now given to the object over the subject. Social "needs", for example, are not given nor can they be "researched" in the traditional sense, but are overtaken by the politics of seduction. The once revolutionary class are no longer subjects who, to paraphrase Marx, may become from a class in itself, a class for itself, but give themselves over to fascination and ecstasy. They live the postmodern condition; unlike the intellectuals who despair and simply desire an era through which history has passed. For this reason, the masses maybe venerated for such a recognition, but from a rather different point of view to that of traditional Marxist or critical social research programmes more generally. These, of course, would seek to uncover the ideological mechanisms that distort understanding in the first instance.

According to the above view, we are exhorted to examine the ways in which reality is increasingly the object of the process of simulation. Take, for example, research on organizations. Here, we might wish to examine how organizations participate in the manufacture of images. To remain faithful to Baudrillard's position, we would posit neither a reality, nor unreality, but instead consider the ways in which organizations play upon their definitions of reality; hence the topic of our research would be their participation in the politics of seduction. More specifically, in considering organizational culture, we would seek to understand the practices and symbols within the cultural domains that make up organizations. This would require the entry of the researcher into what has been described as a, "vortex of symbols and symbol transformation" (Turner 1992:58). In addition:

Looking backwards, attempting to codify and to classify, we can identify those elements of the culture of an organization which have been embodied in training or set out in official handbooks. But once a culture is imposed in this way, it is already a collection of worn metaphors, a sedimented symbolism...These impositions already represent a simulation and a seduction of the reality of organizational culture (Turner 1992:58).

Of course, in Baudrillard's epoch of postmodernity, there is no transcendental position from which one may view this process, nor pronounce upon its "truth". The best we might achieve is to be a spectator in the process of seduction.

### Rorty: science and the art of persuasion

Finally in this section, we turn to the implications for the practice of social science in the writings of Richard Rorty. Despite his reservations on aspects of French postmodernism (Rorty 1993), we find similar arguments being expressed in his work (Rorty 1989,1992). Rorty, like Lyotard, is influenced by Wittgenstein, but he also inherits the tradition of American pragmatism and regards Heidegger as one of the leading philosophers of this century.

For Rorty, to abandon the correspondence theory of reality is not to replace it with a thoroughgoing idealism such that "things" are not asserted to exist until they are given a name. However, any appeal to "reality", separate from such naming, is not possible in cases where definitions of reality are subjected to dispute. For this reason, attempts at delineating some pre-linguistic form of suffering, as in Marx's materialist project, are doomed to failure. It follows that scientific standards cannot arbitrate in cases where reality itself is the subject of dispute. Instead, if scientists are to justify their findings in such instances, they must resort to interpersonal skills. They must persuade people of their definitions of reality and from there, reach some sort of consensus based upon these abilities; even if this means resorting to a dogmatic assertion of their interests (Rorty 1992). This is an idea of truth based upon the general notion of "warranted assertability" (Bhaskar 1993:216). This aims at an entire corpus of philosophical discourse which, as a narrative, has underpinned much of scientific endeavour. As Rorty puts it:

The reason we anti-representationalists bother to hold the controversial philosophical views we do is that we think that this idea that some descriptions get at the *intrinsic* nature of what is being described brings the whole dreary Cartesian problematic along with it, and that this is a problematic that nobody needs—the result of being held captive by a picture that it was in Descartes' interest to paint, but not in ours (1992:42. Original italics).

## SUMMARY

The implications of this position are that the social sciences and sciences in general, should come to accept that philosophers have been complicit in imposing a "truth" upon the population. Their practices, based upon arguments from the Greeks onwards, are open to the charge of "truth imposition". In contrast to this, liberal democracy, based on conversation, is the only possible way forward. Feminist practice, for example, should co-opt familiar words and use them in unfamiliar ways in order to create the "logical space" in which a new language, to describe women's feelings and sense of identity, might then emerge (Rorty 1991). In this formulation, we find no allusions to a universal category of "woman", nor a general theory of oppression in order to justify feminist insights. Instead, we find a gradualist approach to feminism in which new moral identities would emerge that, over time, "may gradually get woven into the language taught in our schools" (Rorty 1991:9). As such, we should now come to appreciate, as Norris puts it in his summary of Rorty's position:

that rhetoric (not reason) is the bottom line of liberal-democratic truth; that metaphors (not concepts) are the linguistic coin in which shared social interests typically achieve their best, most creative expression; and that belief (not truth) is the sole court of appeal in any genuinely working participant democracy (1993:284).

According to this line of argument, feminist social research would contribute to the production of a new language, but not from the vantage point of scientific authority. Objectivity should give way to relativism. The abandonment of the former, with its allusion to universals, is outweighed by the benefits that come from the adoption of the latter (Rorty 1991). The search for truth is now placed to one side in favour of the desire to achieve solidarity. Social research must, in other words, break free from the shackles of any privileged epistemological position.

### *Summary*

In reviewing the above we find, not surprisingly, that the direct translation of the implications for social research of postmodernist ideas are at their most problematic. When one reads the results of social research by those who have sought to employ postmodernist ideas, a modification of the insights of its central protagonists appears a usual feature of their narrative

and, some would argue, an inevitable feature of attempting such an incorporation. In this sense, it appears to have operated as a corrective to the grander claims that science, and social science, have made for themselves and requires a re-specification of their aims and values (Simons & Billig 1994). For instance, for some authors, to admit of the role of narrative in science, as Lyotard has argued, is not to abandon its practice to fiction. It is, however, to recognize the tradition in which one works and the ways in which it authorizes its practitioners. It calls, therefore, for a, "conscious and reflective creation of a specific genre" (Czarniawska-Joerges 1995:28), as opposed to the non-reflexive complacency of positivism and empiricism. For others, to adopt a postmodernist perspective represents both a refusal of the master narratives that construct particular images, as well as a demand for recognition (Young 1990).

On the other hand, we find Kantian elements in the work of both Foucault and Derrida. Perhaps it is this which, in part, has enabled us to draw links between their ideas and the implications for the practice of social research. For instance, Norris argues that the concentration on writing in Derrida's ideas represents a Kantian move. Why? Because it is a transcendental move insofar as we seek to understand and explain the presuppositions of our knowledge in the texts that we produce. Thus, writing becomes, "the precondition of all possible knowledge" (Norris 1987:95). We might say, therefore, that Derrida and Foucault work as protagonists within Enlightenment discourse. This enables them to both utilize its basis while exposing its limits and limitations. They remind us that science cannot, by itself, legislate over "truth". In the case of Foucault, at least, this does not mean a denial of the concept of validity (Visker 1992).

Baudrillard, on the other hand is, by his own admission, an *agent provocateur*. He seeks to debunk all that we take for granted and dismiss the social and hence, social science while, it should be noted, at the same time refusing the label "postmodernist" (see Gane 1993). Yet, if the link between sign and referent is past, so too is natural science particularly given that it has, as Popper himself admitted, an important social and psychological dimension to its practice. However, Baudrillard, as with postmodernism in general, has met with considerable criticism (for example, see Habermas 1992, Harvey 1992, Norris 1993, Kellner 1994, O'Neill 1994). Yet even he can act as something of a sounding board for

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

the complacency of contemporary practices without accepting, wholesale, some of his more extreme arguments (see Rojek & Turner 1993).

With these comments and qualifications in mind, the following are intended to characterize the choices that we seem to face when considering the post-critiques. It is these that we leave you with in order that you have the basis upon which to build your own views on this subject and its relation to the philosophy, methodology, theory and the practice of social research.

First, you can simply ignore the ideas altogether! Although this does not, taking the constraints of one's own time into consideration, seem to be in the spirit of committed scholarship. Secondly, it is possible to consider and then refute their insights from established theoretical paradigms that are argued to have been wrongly characterized (Callinicos 1991, Walby 1992). Thirdly, following a consideration of the post-critiques, you can modify your existing arguments and research practices accordingly. In terms of modifying an existing research programme, the following have been considered: an encounter with symbolic interactionism with its roots in American pragmatism (Denzin 1992); an encounter with a feminist research programme that still retains a commitment to social, economic and political change (Fraser & Nicholson 1990, Sawicki 1991) and finally, an encounter with critical theory in general (Agger 1991). Finally, postmodernity itself is turned into a research topic. In order to achieve this there must be an accompanying refutation of the claim that there is a collapse of the "social" and with that, the social sciences. This involves a revised project through the rejection of a postmodern social science in favour of, for example, a sociology of postmodernism (Bauman 1988, Featherstone 1991).

### *Questions for discussion*

1. Do you consider Lyotard's notion of "performativity" to be an accurate characterization of contemporary scientific research?
2. What are the potential insights that Baudrillard's work might have for social research, or does it simply represent its negation?
3. If we can no longer allude to the subject as an explanatory device, what implications does this have for the methodology and methods of social research?
4. How might one go about analyzing the effects and properties of discourses?

*Suggested reading*

- Dean, M. 1994. *Critical and effective histories: Foucault's methods and historical sociology*. London: Routledge.
- Dickens, D.R. & A.Fontana (eds) 1994. *Postmodernism and social inquiry*. London: University College of London Press.
- Poster, M. 1990. *The mode of information: poststructuralism and social context*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Simons, H.W. & M.Billig (eds) 1994. *After postmodernism: reconstructing ideology critique*. London: Sage.

Copyright of An Introduction To The Philosophy Of Social Research is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.