INTRODUCTION

During the modern period and particularly in the last two centuries in most Western countries there has developed a broad consensus in favor of the political philosophy known as "liberalism." The main tenets of liberalism are political democracy, limitations on the powers of government, the development of universal human rights, legal equality for all adult citizens, freedom of expression, respect for the value of viewpoint diversity and honest debate, respect for evidence and reason, the separation of church and state, and freedom of religion. These liberal values developed as ideals and it has taken centuries of struggle against theocracy, slavery, patriarchy, colonialism, fascism, and many other forms of discrimination to honor them as much as we do, still imperfectly, today. But the struggle for social justice has always been strongest when it has cast itself as the defender of liberal values universally, insisting that they be applied to all individuals, not just to wealthy white males. It must be noted that the general philosophical position that we call "liberalism" is compatible with a wide range of positions on political, economic, and social questions, including both what Americans call "liberal" (and Europeans call "social-democratic") and moderate forms of what people in all countries call "conservative." This philosophical liberalism is opposed to authoritarian movements of all types, be they left-wing or right-wing, secular or theocratic. Liberalism is thus best thought of as a shared common ground, providing a framework for conflict resolution and one within which people with a variety of views on political,

economic, and social questions can rationally debate the options for public policy.

However, we have reached a point in history where the liberalism and modernity at the heart of Western civilization are at great risk on the level of the ideas that sustain them. The precise nature of this threat is complicated, as it arises from at least two overwhelming pressures, one revolutionary and the other reactionary, that are waging war with each other over which illiberal direction our societies should be dragged. Far-right populist movements claiming to be making a last desperate stand for liberalism and democracy against a rising tide of progressivism and globalism are on the rise around the world. They are increasingly turning toward leadership in dictators and strongmen who can maintain and preserve "Western" sovereignty and values. Meanwhile, far-left progressive social crusaders portray themselves as the sole and righteous champions of social and moral progress without which democracy is meaningless and hollow. These, on our furthest left, not only advance their cause through revolutionary aims that openly reject liberalism as a form of oppression, but they also do so with increasingly authoritarian means seeking to establish a thoroughly dogmatic fundamentalist ideology regarding how society ought to be ordered. Each side in this fray sees the other as an existential threat, and thus each fuels the other's greatest excesses. This culture war is sufficiently intense that it has come to define political—and increasingly social—life through the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Though the problem to the right is severe and deserves much careful analysis in its own right, we have become experts in the nature of the problem on the left. This is partly because we believe that, while the two sides are driving one another to madness and further radicalization, the problem coming from the left represents a departure from its historical point of reason and strength, which is liberalism. It is that liberalism that is essential to the maintenance of our secular, liberal democracies. As we have written previously, the problem arises from the fact that,

> The progressive left has aligned itself not with Modernity but with postmodernism, which rejects objective truth as a fantasy dreamed up by naive and/or arrogantly bigoted Enlightenment thinkers who underestimated the collateral consequences of Modernity's progress.[1]

It is this problem that we have dedicated ourselves to learning about and hope to explain in this volume: the problem of postmodernism, not just as it initially arose in the 1960s but also how it has evolved over the last half century. Postmodernism has, depending upon your view, either become or given rise to one of the least tolerant and most authoritarian ideologies that the world has had to deal with since the widespread decline of communism and the collapses of white supremacy and colonialism. Postmodernism was developed in relatively obscure corners of academia as an intellectual and cultural reaction to all of these changes, and since the 1960s it has spread to other parts of the academy, into activism, throughout bureaucracies, and to the heart of primary, secondary, and post-secondary education. It has, from there, begun to seep into broader society to the point where it, and backlashes against it—both reasonable and reactionary—have come to dominate our sociopolitical landscape as we grind ever more painfully into the third decade of the new millennium.

This movement nominally pursues and derives its name from a broad goal called "social justice," which is a term dating back almost two hundred years. Under different thinkers at different times, this term has taken on various meanings, all of which are concerned on some level with addressing and redressing social inequalities, particularly where it comes to issues of class, race, gender, sex, and sexuality, particularly when these go beyond the reach of legal justice. Perhaps most famously, the liberal progressive philosopher John Rawls laid out much philosophical theory dedicated to the conditions under which a socially just society might be organized. In this, he set out a universalist thought experiment in which a socially just society would be one in which an individual given a choice would be equally happy to be born into any social milieu or identity group.[2] Another, explicitly anti-liberal, anti-universal, approach to achieving social justice has also been

employed, particularly since the middle of the twentieth century, and that is one rooted in *critical theory*. A critical theory is chiefly concerned with revealing hidden biases and underexamined assumptions, usually by pointing out what have been termed "problematics," which are ways in which society and the systems that it operates upon are going wrong.

Postmodernism, in some sense, was an offshoot of this critical approach that went its own theoretical way for a while and was then taken up again by critical social justice activists through the 1980s and 1990s (who, incidentally, very rarely reference John Rawls on the topic). The movement that takes up this charge presumptuously refers to its ideology simply as "Social Justice" as though it alone seeks a just society and the rest of us are all advocating for something entirely different. The movement has thus come to be known as the "Social Justice Movement" and its online critics often refer to it, for brevity, as "SocJus" or, increasingly, "wokeism" (due to its belief that it alone has "awakened" to the nature of societal injustice). Social Justice, as a proper noun with capital S and capital J, refers to a very specific doctrinal interpretation of the meaning of "social justice" and means of achieving it while prescribing a strict, identifiable orthodoxy around that term. Although we are reluctant to seem to concede the essential liberal aim for social justice to this illiberal ideological movement, this is the name by which it is known and so, for the sake of clarity, we will refer to it as capitalized "Social Justice" throughout this book. "Social justice" in the lowercase will be reserved to describe the broader and generic meanings of the term. Let us make clear our own social and political commitments: we find ourselves against capitalized Social Justice because we are generally for lowercase social justice.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to miss the influence of the Social Justice Movement on society—most notably in the form of "identity politics" or "political correctness." Almost every day, a story comes out about somebody who has been fired, "canceled," or subjected to a public shaming on social media, often for having said or done something interpreted as

sexist, racist, or homophobic. Sometimes the accusations are warranted, and we can comfort ourselves that a bigot—whom we see as entirely unlike ourselves—is receiving the censure she "deserves" for her hateful views. However, increasingly often, the accusation is highly interpretive and its reasoning tortuous. It sometimes feels as though any well-intended person, even one who values universal liberty and equality, could inadvertently say something that falls foul of the new speech codes, with devastating consequences for her career and reputation. This is confusing and counterintuitive to a culture accustomed to placing human dignity first and thus valuing charitable interpretations and tolerance of a wide range of views. At best, this has a chilling effect on the culture of free expression, which has served liberal democracies well for more than two centuries, as good people self-censor to avoid saying the "wrong" things. At worst, it is a malicious form of bullying and—when institutionalized—a kind of authoritarianism in our midst.

This deserves an explanation. In fact, it *needs* one because these changes, which are happening with astonishing rapidity, are very difficult to understand. This is because they stem from a very peculiar view of the world—one that even speaks its own language, in a way. Within the English-speaking world, they speak English, but they use everyday words differently from the rest of us. When they speak of "racism," for example, they are not referring to prejudice on the grounds of race, but rather to, as they define it, a racialized system that permeates all interactions in society yet is largely invisible except to those who experience it or who have been trained in the proper "critical" methods that train them to see it. (These are the people sometimes referred to as being "woke," meaning awakened, to it.) This very precise technical usage of the word inevitably bewilders people, and, in their confusion, they may go along with things they wouldn't if they had a common frame of reference to help them understand what is actually meant by the word.

Not only do these scholar-activists speak a specialized language—while using everyday words that people assume, incorrectly, that they understand—but they also represent a wholly different *culture*, embedded within our own. People who have adopted this view may be physically close by, but, intellectually, they are a world away, which makes understanding them and communicating with them incredibly difficult. They are obsessed with power, language, knowledge, and the relationships between them. They interpret the world through a lens that detects power dynamics in every interaction, utterance, and cultural artifact—even when they aren't obvious *or real*. This is a worldview that centers social and cultural grievances and aims to make everything into a zero-sum political struggle revolving around identity markers like race, sex, gender, sexuality, and many others. To an outsider, this culture feels as though it originated on another planet, whose inhabitants have no knowledge of sexually reproducing species, and who interpret all our human sociological interactions in the most cynical way possible. But, in fact, these preposterous attitudes are completely human. They bear witness to our repeatedly demonstrated capacity to take up complex spiritual worldviews, ranging from tribal animism to hippie spiritualism to sophisticated global religions, each of which adopts its own interpretive frame through which it sees the entire world. This one just happens to be about a peculiar view of power and its ability to create inequality and oppression.

Interacting with proponents of this view requires learning not just their language—which in itself is challenging enough—but also their customs and even their mythology of "systemic" and "structural" problems inherent in our society, systems, and institutions. As experienced travelers know, there's more to communicating in a completely different culture than learning the language. One must also learn the idioms, implications, cultural references, and etiquette, which define how to communicate appropriately. Often, we need someone who is not just a translator but also an *interpreter* in the widest sense, someone savvy about both sets of customs, to communicate

effectively. That is what we set out to provide in this book: a guide to the language and customs that are presently widely promoted under the pleasant-sounding moniker "Social Justice." We are fluent in both the language and culture of Social Justice scholarship and activism, and we plan to guide our readers through this alien world, charting the evolution of these ideas from their origins fifty years ago right up to the present day.

We begin in the late 1960s, when the group of theoretical concepts clustered around the nature of knowledge, power, and language that came to be known as *postmodernism* emerged from within several humanities disciplines at once. At its core, postmodernism rejected what it calls *metanarratives*—broad, cohesive explanations of the world and society. It rejected Christianity and Marxism. It also rejected science, reason, and the pillars of post-Enlightenment Western Democracy. Postmodern ideas have shaped what has since mostly been called *Theory*—the entity which is, in some sense, the protagonist of this book. In our view, it is crucial to understand the development of Theory from the 1960s until the present day if we are to come to terms with and correct for the rapid shifts we have been experiencing in society ever since its inception, and especially since 2010. Of note, throughout this book, *Theory* (and related words, such as Theorist and Theoretical) with a capital T will refer to the approach to social philosophy that stems from postmodernism.

Cynical Theories explains how Theory has developed into the driving force of the culture war of the late 2010s—and proposes a philosophically *liberal* way to counter its manifestations in scholarship, activism, and everyday life. The book charts the development of the evolving branches of cynical postmodern Theory over the last fifty years and shows that it has influenced current society in ways the reader will recognize. In chapter 1, we will guide you through the key ideas of the original postmodernists of the 1960s and 1970s, and draw out two principles and four themes that have remained central to all the Theory that followed. Chapter 2 will explain how these ideas mutated, solidified, and were made politically actionable in a set

of new Theories that emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s. This we will refer to as *applied postmodernism*. Chapters 3 to 6 will delve into each of the following in more detail: post-colonial Theory, queer Theory, critical race Theory, and intersectional feminism. Chapter 7 will look at the relative newcomers, disability studies and fat studies, which draw on all these Theories.

In chapter 8, we explore the second evolution of these postmodern ideas, beginning around 2010, which asserted the absolute truth of the postmodern principles and themes. This approach we call *reified postmodernism*, as it takes the assumptions of postmodernism to be real, objective truths—The Truth According to Social Justice. This change occurred when scholars and activists combined the existing Theories and Studies into a simple, dogmatic methodology, best known simply as "Social Justice scholarship."

This book aims to tell the story of how postmodernism applied its cynical Theories to deconstruct what we might agree to call "the old religions" of human thought—which include conventional religious faiths like Christianity and secular ideologies like Marxism, as well as cohesive modern systems such as science, philosophical liberalism, and "progress"—and replaced them with a new religion of its own, called "Social Justice." This book is a story about how despair found new confidence, which then grew into the sort of firm conviction associated with religious adherence. The faith that emerged is thoroughly postmodern, which means that, rather than interpreting the world in terms of subtle spiritual forces like sin and magic, it focuses instead on subtle material forces, such as systemic bigotry, and diffuse but omnipresent systems of power and privilege.

While this new-found conviction has caused significant problems, it is also helpful that Theory has become increasingly confident and clear about its beliefs and goals. It makes it easier for liberals—from the political left, right, or center—to get at those ideas and counter them. On the other hand, this development is alarming because it has made Theory so much more

easily grasped and acted upon by believers who want to reshape society. We can see its impact on the world in their attacks on science and reason. It is also evident in their assertions that society is simplistically divided into dominant and marginalized identities and underpinned by invisible systems of white supremacy, patriarchy, heteronormativity, cisnormativity, ableism, and fatphobia. We find ourselves faced with the continuing dismantlement of categories like knowledge and belief, reason and emotion, and men and women, and with increasing pressures to censor our language in accordance with The Truth According to Social Justice. We see radical relativism in the form of double standards, such as assertions that only men can be sexist and only white people can be racist, and in the wholesale rejection of consistent principles of nondiscrimination. In the face of this, it grows increasingly difficult and even dangerous to argue that people should be treated as individuals or to urge recognition of our shared humanity in the face of divisive and constraining identity politics.

Although many of us now recognize these problems and intuitively feel that such ideas are unreasonable and illiberal, it can be difficult to articulate responses to them, since objections to irrationalism and illiberalism are often misunderstood or misrepresented as opposition to genuine social justice—a legitimate philosophy that advocates a fairer society. This dissuades too many well-intentioned people from even trying. In addition to the danger of being labelled an enemy of social justice that comes with criticizing the methods of the Social Justice Movement, there are two other obstacles to effectively addressing them. First, the underlying values of Social Justice are so counterintuitive that they are difficult to understand. Second, few of us have ever had to defend universally liberal ethics, reason and evidence against those claiming to stand for social justice. They have, until quite recently, always been understood as the best way to work *for* social justice. Thus, once we have finished making the underlying principles of Social Justice Theory comprehensible, we move on to discuss how to recognize them and counter them. In chapter 9, we look at the ways in

which these ideas have escaped the bounds of academia and are impacting the real world. Finally, chapter 10 will make a case that we should counter these ideas through a clearly articulated mass commitment to the universally liberal principles and rigorous, evidence-based scholarship that define modernity. With luck, our last two chapters will show how we might write the last chapter in the story of Theory—its hopefully quiet and inglorious end.

This book is therefore written for the layperson who has no background in this type of scholarship but sees the influence of it on society and wants to understand how it works. It is for the liberal to whom a just society is very important, but who can't help noticing that the Social Justice movement does not seem to facilitate this and wants to be able to make a liberal response to it with consistency and integrity. *Cynical Theories* is written for anyone from any part of the political spectrum who believes in the marketplace of ideas as a way to examine and challenge ideas and advance society and wants to be able to engage with Social Justice ideas as they really are.

This is not a book that seeks to undermine liberal feminism, activism against racism, or campaigns for LGBT equality. On the contrary, *Cynical Theories* is born of our commitment to gender, racial and LGBT equality and our concern that the validity and importance of these are currently being alarmingly undermined by Social Justice approaches. Nor will this book attack scholarship or the university in general. Quite the contrary, we seek to defend rigorous, evidence-based scholarship and the essential function of the university as a center of knowledge production against anti-empirical, anti-rational, and illiberal currents on the left that threaten to give power to anti-intellectual, anti-equality, and illiberal currents on the right.

This book, then, ultimately seeks to present a philosophically liberal critique of Social Justice scholarship and activism and argues that this scholarship-activism does not further social justice and equality aims. There are some scholars within the fields we critique who will be derisive of this

and insist that we are really reactionary right-wingers opposed to studies into societal injustice experienced by marginalized people. This view of our motivations will not be able to survive an honest reading of our book. More scholars within these fields will accept our liberal, empirical, and rational stance on the issues, but reject them as a modernist delusion that centers white, male, Western, and heterosexual constructions of knowledge and maintains an unjust status quo with inadequate attempts to incrementally improve society. "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house,"[3] they will tell us. To them, we concede that we are far less interested in dismantling liberal societies and empirical and rational concepts of knowledge and much more interested in continuing the remarkable advances for social justice that they have brought. The master's house is a good one and the problem has been limited access to it. Liberalism increases access to a solid structure that can shelter and empower everyone. Equal access to rubble is not a worthy goal. Then there will be a few scholars in these fields who believe our criticisms of Social Justice scholarship have some merits and will engage with us in good faith about them. These are the exchanges we look forward to and the ones that can set us back on the path of having productive and ideologically diverse conversations about social justice.

1 POSTMODERNISM

A Revolution in Knowledge and Power

A fundamental change in human thought took place in the 1960s. This change is associated with several French Theorists who, while not quite household names, float at the edges of the popular imagination, among them Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-François Lyotard. Taking a radically new conception of the world and our relationship to it, it revolutionized social philosophy and perhaps social *everything*. Over the decades, it has dramatically altered not only what and how we think but also how we think about thinking. Esoteric, academic, and seemingly removed from the realities of daily existence, this revolution has nevertheless had profound implications for how we interact with the world and with one another. At its heart is a radical worldview that came to be known as "postmodernism."

Postmodernism is difficult to define, perhaps by design. It represents a set of ideas and modes of thought that came together in response to specific historical conditions, including the cultural impact of the World Wars and how these ended, widespread disillusionment with Marxism, the waning credibility of religious worldviews in post-industrial settings, and the rapid advance of technology. It is probably most useful to understand

postmodernism as a rejection of both modern*ism*—an intellectual movement that predominated through the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth—and modern*ity*—that epoch known as the Modern period, which began after the end of the Middle Ages and in which we (probably) still live. This new kind of radical skepticism to the very possibility of obtaining objective knowledge has since rippled outward from the academy, to challenge our social, cultural, and political thinking in intentionally disruptive ways.

Postmodern thinkers reacted to modern*ism* by denying the foundations of some aspects of Modern thought, while claiming that other aspects of Modern thinking didn't go far enough. In particular, they rejected the underlying modernist desire for authenticity, unifying narratives, universalism, and progress, achieved primarily through scientific knowledge and technology. At the same time, they took the modernists' relatively measured, if pessimistic, skepticism of tradition, religion, and Enlightenment-era certainty—along with their reliance on self-consciousness, nihilism, and ironic forms of critique—to extremes.[1] Postmodernism raised such radical doubts about the structure of thought and society that it is ultimately a form of cynicism.

Postmodernism is also a reaction to and rejection of modern*ity*, meaning "the profound cultural transformation which saw the rise of representative democracy, the age of science, the supersedence of reason over superstition, and the establishment of individual liberties to live according to one's values."[2] Although postmodernism openly rejects the possibility of the foundations that have built modernity, it has nevertheless had a profound impact on the thinking, culture, and politics of those societies that modernity built. As literary theorist Brian McHale points out, postmodernism became "the dominant cultural tendency (it might be safer to say a dominant tendency) during the second half of the twentieth century in the advanced industrial societies of the West, spreading eventually to other regions of the globe."[3]

Since its revolutionary beginnings, postmodernism has evolved into new forms, which have preserved its original principles and themes, while gaining increasing influence over culture, activism, and scholarship, especially in the humanities and social sciences. Understanding postmodernism is therefore a matter of some urgency precisely because it radically rejects the foundations upon which today's advanced civilizations are built and consequently has the potential to undermine them.

Postmodernism isn't just hard to define; it's also notoriously difficult to summarize. It was and is a multifaceted phenomenon, encompassing vast tracts of intellectual, artistic, and cultural terrain. To make matters more difficult, its boundaries, nature, form, purpose, values, and proponents have always been disputed. This seems fitting for a mode of thought that prides itself on plurality, contradiction, and ambiguity, but it isn't very helpful when you're trying to understand it or its philosophical and cultural descendants.

The difficulties of defining postmodernism are not just philosophical; they are spatial and temporal because it has not been one unitary movement. The first manifestations of the cultural phenomenon called "postmodernism" were artistic and appeared around 1940, but, by the late 1960s, it was far more prominent within various fields of the humanities and social sciences, including psychoanalysis, linguistics, philosophy, history, and sociology. Further, postmodernism manifested differently in these different fields and at different times. As a result, nothing in postmodern thought is entirely new, and its original thinkers constantly draw upon their precursors in the realms of surrealist art, antirealist philosophy, and revolutionary politics. Postmodernism also manifested differently from country to country, producing distinct variations on common themes. Italian postmodernists tended to foreground its aesthetic elements and viewed it as a continuation of modernism, while American postmodernists leaned toward more straightforward and pragmatic approaches. The French postmodernists were altogether more focused on the social and on revolutionary and *deconstructive* approaches to modernism.[4] It is the French

approach that will be of most interest to us, because it is primarily some of the French ideas, especially about knowledge and power, which have evolved over the course of successive variants of postmodernism's central occupation, that which is often simply called *Theory*. In simpler and more actionable and concrete forms, these ideas have been incorporated into Social Justice activism and scholarship and into the mainstream social conscience—although, interestingly, this has occurred more in the English-speaking world than in France itself.

Since our ultimate focus is on the applied derivatives of postmodern thought that have become socially and culturally influential—even powerful—today, this chapter will not attempt to survey the vast terrain of postmodernism.[5] Nor will it address the ongoing debate about which thinkers it is acceptable to call "postmodern" and whether "postmodernism" is a meaningful term, or whether it would be better to separate the critics of postmodernity from the poststructuralists and those whose work is centered on the method of *deconstruction*. There are certainly distinctions to be made, but such taxonomies are primarily of interest to academics. Instead, we are going to highlight some consistent underlying themes of postmodernism that have come to drive contemporary activism, shape educational theory and practice, and inform our current national conversations. These include skepticism about objective reality, the perception of language as the constructor of knowledge, the "making" of the individual, and the role played by power in all of these. These factors underlie the "postmodern turn," which is primarily a product of the 1960s and 1970s. Within that broad change, more specifically, we wish to explain how these foundational ideas have gained cultural popularity and legitimacy through the academy, creating a conceptual schism that underlies many of our current social, cultural, and political divisions.

THE ROOTS, PRINCIPLES, AND THEMES OF POSTMODERNISM

Postmodernism arguably emerged between 1950 and 1970—the exact dates depending upon whether one is primarily interested in its artistic or social aspects. The earliest changes began in art—we can trace them as far back as the 1940s, in the work of artists such as Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges—but, for our purposes, the late 1960s are key, since they witnessed the emergence of French social Theorists such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-François Lyotard, who were the original architects of what later came to be known simply as "Theory."

In Europe, in the middle of the twentieth century, a number of profound social changes happened all at once. The First and Second World Wars had shaken Europe's confidence in the notion of progress and made people anxious about the power of technology. Leftwing intellectuals across Europe thereby became suspicious of liberalism and Western civilization, which had just allowed the rise of fascism, often by the will of aggrieved electorates, with cataclysmic results. Empires collapsed, and colonialism had ceased to be morally tenable for most people. Former imperial subjects began to migrate to the West, prompting the leftist intelligentsia to pay more attention to racial and cultural inequalities and, particularly, to the ways in which structures of power had contributed to them. Activism on behalf of women and the LGBT and, in the United States, the Civil Rights movement, were gaining broad cultural support, just as disillusionment with Marxism—until then, the main, longstanding leftist social-justice cause—was spreading through the political and cultural left. Given the catastrophic results of communism everywhere it had been put into practice, this disillusionment was well founded and radically altered the worldviews of leftist cultural elites. As a result, confidence in science, which was still ascendant in every meaningful regard, was interrogated for its role in enabling, producing, and justifying the previously impossible horrors of the preceding century.

Meanwhile, a vibrant youth culture was beginning to form, producing a powerful popular culture, which vied with "high culture" for dominance. Technology also began to advance rapidly, which, together with the mass production of consumer goods, enabled this "middle culture" to fuel a new postrationing desire for art, music, and entertainment. This, in turn, sparked fears that society was degenerating into an artificial, hedonistic, capitalist, consumerist world of fantasy and play.

This reaction often took the form of the pervasive pessimism that characterizes postmodern thinking, fueling fears about human hubris on one hand and the loss of meaning and authenticity on the other. This despair was so pronounced that postmodernism itself could be characterized as a profound cultural crisis of confidence and authenticity alongside a growing distrust of liberal social orders. Growing fears of the loss of meaning caused by rapid improvements in technology defined the era.

Postmodernism was particularly skeptical of science and other culturally dominant ways of legitimizing claims as "truths" and of the grand, sweeping explanations that supported them. It called them *metanarratives*,[6] which it viewed as a kind of cultural mythology and a significant form of human myopia and arrogance. Postmodernism posited a radical and total skepticism about such narratives. This skepticism was so profound as to be better understood as a type of cynicism about the entire history of human progress, and as such, it was a perversion of a sweeping cultural current of skepticism that long preceded it. Skepticism of sweeping narratives—though not cynicism about them—was prominent in Enlightenment thought and in modernism and had been gaining momentum in Western societies for several centuries by the time postmodernism showed up in the 1960s.

In its earlier forms, broad but reasonable cultural skepticism was crucial to the development of scientific and other forms of Enlightenment thought, which had had to break away from previous dominant metanarratives (mostly of a religious nature). For example, during the sixteenth century, Christianity was reevaluated as a result of the Reformation (during which

the religion splintered, forming numerous Protestant sects, all challenging both the preceding orthodoxy and each other). At the end of the sixteenth century, treatises against atheism also began to appear, which clearly suggests that disbelief in God had begun to circulate. During the seventeenth century, medicine and anatomy, which had previously been modeled on the knowledge of the ancient Greeks, underwent a revolution and knowledge of the body advanced rapidly. The Scientific Revolution was the result of widespread questioning of received wisdom and the rapid proliferation of different kinds of knowledge production. The development of the scientific method in the nineteenth century was centered on skepticism and the need for increasingly rigorous testing and falsification.

Beyond cynical "skepticism," the postmodernists had concerns about the deaths of authenticity and meaning in modern society that also carried considerable weight, especially with French Theorists. These concerns were especially acutely expressed by Jean Baudrillard. For Baudrillard, whose nihilistic despair at the loss of the "real" drew heavily on the work of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, all realities had become mere simulations (imitations of real-world phenomena and systems) and simulacra ("copies" of things without an original).[7] Baudrillard described three levels of simulacra: associated with the premodern, modern, and postmodern. In premodern times—those before Enlightenment thought revolutionized our relationship to knowledge—he said, unique realities existed, and people attempted to represent them. In the modern period, this link broke down because items began to be mass-produced and each original could therefore have many identical copies. In the postmodern period, he concluded, there is no original and all is simulacra, which are unsatisfactory imitations and images of the real. This state Baudrillard referred to as the *hyperreal*.[8] This evinces the postmodernists' tendency to seek the roots of meaning in language and to become overly concerned with the ways in which it shapes social reality through its ability to constrain and shape knowledge—that which represents what is true.

These same authenticity-threatening phenomena were central concerns of other postmodern thinkers as well. French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, for instance, argued that the self was being constrained by capitalist, consumer society.[9] In a similar vein, the American Marxist scholar Frederic Jameson particularly deplored the shallowness of postmodernity, which he saw as being all surface with no deeper meaning. Like Baudrillard, he regarded the postmodern state as one of *simulation*—everything is artificial and comprised of mere copies, not originals. In a typical expression of the despair at the heart of postmodernism, he diagnosed a *waning of affect*—the idea that there is no longer any heart to anything. For Jameson, surface aesthetics preoccupy our attention and distance and distract people from caring too deeply. In this way, he also openly complained about the cynicism at the heart of postmodernity. "The death of the subject," as he calls it, refers to a loss of individuality and confidence in a stable self. "Pastiche," he said, had replaced parody: there was no purpose or depth to mimicry, only a relentless borrowing and recycling. The satiety provided by cheaply available experiences had evoked a constant *sublime*—a perpetual artificial euphoria. Overall, this aimlessness and loss of purpose and grounding had resulted in *nostalgia*—a constant looking backwards in search of our present.[10] Crucially, all this profound hopelessness at the center of criticisms of postmodernity was largely descriptive rather than prescriptive. Prescriptions would come later.

The reactionary skepticism about modernism and modernity that characterizes postmodern thought found especially sharp expression in dissatisfaction with and anxiety about technology and consumer societies. This produced, at least in academics focused on cultural criticism, what the philosopher, sociologist, and literary critic Jean-François Lyotard would in 1979 summarize as "the postmodern condition." This he characterized as a profound skepticism of the possibility of any broad meaning-making structure underpinning people's lives. The anthropologist and geographer David Harvey refers to this situation as "the condition of postmodernity,"

which he sees as resulting from "the breakdown of the Enlightenment project."[11] Ultimately, these thinkers are referring to a general feeling that the scientific and ethical certainties that characterized much thought about modernity had become untenable, and the loss of their preferred analytic tools rendered the situation completely hopeless. Their summary of this state took the form of an extremely radical skepticism and profound cynicism, particularly about language, knowledge, power, and the individual.[12]

What, though, is postmodernism? The online *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines postmodernism as

> a late 20th-century movement characterized by broad skepticism, subjectivism, or relativism; a general suspicion of reason; and an acute sensitivity to the role of ideology in asserting and maintaining political and economic power.[13]

Walter Truett Anderson, writing in 1996, describes the four pillars of postmodernism:

1. The social construction of the concept of the self: Identity is constructed by many cultural forces and is not given to a person by tradition;
2. Relativism of moral and ethical discourse: Morality is not found but made. That is, morality is not based on cultural or religious tradition, nor is it the mandate of Heaven, but is constructed by dialogue and choice. This is relativism, not in the sense of being nonjudgmental, but in the sense of believing that all forms of morality are socially constructed cultural worldviews;
3. Deconstruction in art and culture: The focus is on endless playful improvisation and variations on themes and a mixing of "high" and "low" culture; and
4. Globalization: People see borders of all kinds as social constructions that can be crossed and reconstructed and are inclined to take their tribal norms less seriously.[14]

Many agree that postmodernism is centered on a number of primary themes, no matter how much postmodernists might resist such a characterization. (We might describe these themes as the basis of a "postmodern metanarrative.") For Steinar Kvale, professor of psychology and director of the Center of Qualitative Research, the central themes of postmodernism include doubting that any human truth provides an objective representation of reality, focusing on language and the way societies use it to create their own local realities, and denying the universal.[15] These, he explains, resulted in an increased interest in narrative and storytelling, particularly when "truths" are situated within particular cultural constructs, and a relativism that accepts that different descriptions of reality cannot be measured against one another in any final—that is, objective—way.[16]

The key observation, following Kvale,[17] is that the postmodern turn brought about an important shift away from the modernist dichotomy between the objective universal and the subjective individual and toward local narratives (and the lived experiences of their narrators). In other words, the boundary between that which is objectively true and that which is subjectively experienced ceased to be accepted. The perception of society as formed of individuals interacting with universal reality in unique ways—which underlies the liberal principles of individual freedom, shared humanity, and equal opportunities—was replaced by multiple allegedly equally valid knowledges and truths, constructed by groups of people with shared markers of identity related to their positions in society. Knowledge, truth, meaning, and morality are therefore, according to postmodernist thinking, culturally constructed and relative products of individual cultures, none of which possess the necessary tools or terms to evaluate the others.

At the heart of the postmodern turn is a reaction to and rejection of modernism and modernity.[18] According to Enlightenment thinking, objective reality can be known through more or less reliable methods. Knowledge about objective reality produced by the scientific method

enabled us to build modernity and permits us to continue doing so. For postmodernism, by contrast, reality is ultimately the product of our socialization and lived experiences, as constructed by systems of language.

The sociologist Steven Seidman, who coined the term "the postmodern turn," recognized the profundity of this change in 1994: "A broad social and cultural shift is taking place in Western societies. The concept of the 'postmodern' captures at least certain aspects of this social change."[19] Walter Truett Anderson, writing in 1996, puts it more strongly: "We are in the midst of a great, confusing, stressful and enormously promising historical transition, and it has to do with a change not so much in *what* we believe but *how* we believe…. People all over the world are making such shifts in belief —to be more precise, shifts in belief about belief."[20] What Seidman and Anderson are describing here are changes in *epistemology*—that is, in how we obtain and understand knowledge. The postmodern turn is primarily characterized by a rejection of Enlightenment values, especially its values regarding the production of knowledge, which it associates with power and its unjust application. The postmodern view of the Enlightenment is therefore a very narrow one that is accordingly easy to be cynical about.[21] Ultimately, the Enlightenment that postmodernists rejected is defined by a belief in objective knowledge, universal truth, science (or evidence more broadly) as a method for obtaining objective knowledge, the power of reason, the ability to communicate straightforwardly via language, a universal human nature, and individualism. They also rejected the belief that the West has experienced significant progress due to the Enlightenment and will continue to do so if it upholds these values.[22]

TWO PRINCIPLES AND FOUR THEMES

Postmodern thinkers approached the rejection of modernism and Enlightenment thought, especially with regard to universal truths, objective knowledge, and individuality, in strikingly different ways. But we can spot a

few consistent themes. The postmodern turn involves two inextricably linked core principles—one regarding knowledge and one regarding politics—which act as the foundation of four significant themes. These principles are

- **The postmodern knowledge principle**: Radical skepticism about whether objective knowledge or truth is obtainable and a commitment to cultural constructivism.
- **The postmodern political principle**: A belief that society is formed of systems of power and hierarchies, which decide what can be known and how.

The four major themes of postmodernism are

1. The blurring of boundaries
2. The power of language
3. Cultural relativism
4. The loss of the individual and the universal

Together, these six major concepts allow us to identify postmodern thinking and understand how it operates. They are the core principles of Theory, which have remained largely unchanged even as postmodernism and its applications have evolved from their deconstructive and hopeless beginnings to the strident, almost religious activism of today. This is the phenomenon we wish to examine, which arose from various theoretical approaches in the humanities, particularly that going by the term "cultural studies," mainly over the last century, and developed into the postmodernist Social Justice scholarship, activism, and culture we see today.

THE POSTMODERN KNOWLEDGE PRINCIPLE

Radical skepticism as to whether objective knowledge or truth is obtainable and a commitment to cultural constructivism

Postmodernism is defined by a radical skepticism about the accessibility of objective truth. Rather than seeing objective truth as something that exists and that can be provisionally known (or approximated) through processes such as experimentation, falsification, and defeasibility—as Enlightenment, modernist, and scientific thought would have it—postmodern approaches to knowledge inflate a small, almost banal kernel of truth—that we are limited in our ability to know and must express knowledge through language, concepts and categories—to insist that *all* claims to truth are value-laden constructs of culture. This is called *cultural constructivism* or *social constructivism*. The scientific method, in particular, is not seen as a better way of producing and legitimizing knowledge than any other, but as one cultural approach among many, as corrupted by biased reasoning as any other.

Cultural constructivism is not the belief that reality is *literally* created by cultural beliefs—it doesn't argue, for instance, that when we erroneously believed the Sun went around the Earth, our beliefs had any influence over the solar system and its dynamics. Instead, it is the position that humans are so tied into their cultural frameworks that all truth or knowledge claims are merely representations of those frameworks—we have decided that "it is true" or "it is known" that the Earth goes round the Sun *because of the way we establish truth in our current culture*. That is, although reality doesn't change in accordance with our beliefs, what *does* change is what we are able to regard as true (or false—or "crazy") about reality. If we belonged to a culture that produced and legitimated knowledge differently, within that cultural paradigm it might be "true" that, say, the Sun goes round the Earth.

Those who would be regarded as "crazy" to disagree would change accordingly.

Although the claim that "we make reality with our cultural norms" is not the same as the claim that "we decide what is true/what is known according to our cultural norms," in practice this is a distinction without a difference. The postmodern approach to knowledge denies that objective truth or knowledge is that which corresponds with reality as determined by evidence —regardless of the time or culture in question and regardless of whether that culture believes that evidence is the best way to determine truth or knowledge. Instead, the postmodern approach might acknowledge that objective reality exists, but it focuses on the barriers to knowing that reality by examining cultural biases and assumptions and theorizing about how they work.[23]

This is what the American postmodern philosopher Richard Rorty refers to when he writes, "We need to make a distinction between the claim that the world is out there and the claim that the truth is out there."[24] In this sense, postmodernism rests upon a broad rejection of the *correspondence theory of truth*: that is, the position that there are objective truths and that they can be established as true by their correspondence with how things actually are in the world.[25] That there are real truths about an objective reality "out there" and that we can come to know them is, of course, at the root of Enlightenment thinking and central to the development of science. Profoundly radical skepticism about this idea is central to postmodern thinking about knowledge.

French philosopher Michel Foucault—a central figure of postmodernism —expresses this same doubt when he argues that, "in any given culture and at any given moment, there is always only one episteme that defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge, whether expressed in a theory or silently invested in a practice."[26] Foucault was especially interested in the relationship between language, or, more specifically, *discourse* (ways of talking about things), the production of knowledge, and power. He explored

these ideas at length throughout the 1960s, in such influential works as *Madness and Civilization* (1961), *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), *The Order of Things* (1966), and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969).[27] For Foucault, a statement reveals not just information but also the rules and conditions of a discourse. These then determine the construction of truth claims and knowledge. Dominant discourses are extremely powerful because they determine what can be considered true, thus applicable, in a given time and place. Thus, sociopolitical power is the ultimate determiner of what is true in Foucault's analysis, not correspondence with reality. Foucault was so interested in the concept of how power influences what is considered knowledge that in 1981 he coined the term "power-knowledge" to convey the inextricable link between powerful discourses and what is known. Foucault called a dominant set of ideas and values an *episteme* because it shapes how we identify and interact with knowledge.

In *The Order of Things,* Foucault argues against objective notions of truth and suggests we think instead in terms of "regimes of truth," which change according to the specific episteme of each culture and time. As a result, Foucault adopted the position that there are no fundamental principles by which to discover truth and that all knowledge is "local" to the knower[28]—ideas which form the basis of the postmodern knowledge principle. Foucault didn't deny that a reality exists, but he doubted the ability of humans to transcend our cultural biases enough to get at it.

The main takeaway from this is that postmodern skepticism is not garden-variety skepticism, which might also be called "reasonable doubt." The kind of skepticism employed in the sciences and other rigorous means of producing knowledge asks, "How can I be sure this proposition is true?" and will only tentatively accept as a provisional truth that which survives repeated attempts to disprove it. These propositions are put forth in models, which are understood to be provisional conceptual constructs, which are used to explain and predict phenomena and are judged according to their ability to do so. The principle of skepticism common among postmodernists

is frequently referred to as "*radical* skepticism." It says, "All knowledge is constructed: what is interesting is theorizing about why knowledge got constructed this way." Thus, radical skepticism is markedly different from the scientific skepticism that characterized the Enlightenment. The postmodern view wrongly insists that scientific thought is unable to distinguish itself as especially reliable and rigorous in determining what is and isn't true.[29] Scientific reasoning is construed as a *metanarrative*—a sweeping explanation of how things work—and postmodernism is radically skeptical of all such explanations. In postmodern thinking, that which is known is only known within the cultural paradigm that produced the knowledge and is therefore representative of its systems of power. As a result, postmodernism regards knowledge as provincial and intrinsically political.

This view is widely attributed to the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, who critiqued science, the Enlightenment, and Marxism. Each of these projects was, for Lyotard, a prime example of a modernist or Enlightenment metanarrative. Ultimately, Lyotard feared that science and technology were just one "language game"—one way of legitimating truth claims—and that they were taking over all other language games. He mourned the demise of small local "knowledges" passed on in narrative form and viewed the loss of meaning-making intrinsic to scientific detachment as a loss of valuable narratives. Lyotard's famous characterization of postmodernism as a "skepticism towards metanarratives" has been extremely influential on the development of postmodernism as a school of thought, analytical tool, and worldview.[30]

This was the great postmodernist contribution to knowledge and knowledge production. It did not invent the skeptical reevaluation of well-established beliefs. It did, however, fail to appreciate that scientific and other forms of liberal reasoning (such as arguments in favor of democracy and capitalism) are not so much metanarratives (though they can adopt these) as imperfect but self-correcting processes that apply a productive and

actionable form of skepticism to everything, including themselves. This mistake led them into their equally misguided political project.

THE POSTMODERN POLITICAL PRINCIPLE

A belief that society is formed of systems of power and hierarchies, which decide what can be known and how

Postmodernism is characterized politically by its intense focus on power as the guiding and structuring force of society, a focus which is codependent on the denial of objective knowledge. Power and knowledge are seen as inextricably entwined—most explicitly in Foucault's work, which refers to knowledge as "power-knowledge." Lyotard also describes a "strict interlinkage"[31] between the language of science and that of politics and ethics, and Derrida was profoundly interested in the power dynamics embedded in hierarchical binaries of superiority and subordination that he believed exist within language. Similarly, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari saw humans as *coded* within various systems of power and constraint and free to operate only within capitalism and the flow of money. In this sense, for postmodern Theory, power decides not only what is factually correct but also what is morally good—power implies domination, which is bad, whereas subjugation implies oppression, the disruption of which is good. These attitudes were the prevailing mood at the Sorbonne in Paris through the 1960s, where many of the early Theorists were strongly intellectually influenced.

Because of their focus on power dynamics, these thinkers argued that the powerful have, both intentionally and inadvertently, organized society to benefit them and perpetuate their power. They have done so by legitimating certain ways of talking about things as true, which then spread throughout society, creating societal rules that are viewed as common sense and

perpetuated on all levels. Power is thus constantly reinforced through discourses legitimized or mandated within society, including expectations of civility and reasoned discourse, appeals to objective evidence, and even rules of grammar and syntax. As a result, the postmodernist view is difficult to fully appreciate from the outside because it looks very much like a conspiracy theory. In fact, the conspiracies it alludes to are subtle and, in a way, not *conspiracies* at all, since there are no coordinated actors pulling the strings; instead, we're all participants. Theory, then, is a conspiracy theory with no conspirators in particular. In postmodern Theory, power is not exercised straightforwardly and visibly from above, as in the Marxist framework, but permeates all levels of society and is enforced by everyone, through routine interactions, expectations, social conditioning, and culturally constructed discourses that express a particular understanding of the world. This controls which hierarchies are preserved—through, say, due process of law or the legitimizing mechanism of scientific publishing—and the systems within which people are positioned or coded. In each of these examples, note that it is the *social system* and its inherent power dynamics that are seen as the causes of oppression, not necessarily willful individual agents. Thus, a society, social system, or institution can be seen as in some way oppressive without any individual involved with it needing to be shown to hold even a single oppressive view.

The postmodernists do not necessarily see the system of oppression as the result of a consciously coordinated, patriarchal, white supremacist, heteronormative conspiracy. Instead, they regard it as the inevitable result of self-perpetuating systems that privilege some groups over others, which constitute an *un*conscious, *un*coordinated conspiracy inherent to systems involving power. They believe, however, that those systems are patriarchal, white supremacist, and heteronormative, and therefore necessarily grant unfair access to straight, white Western men and work to maintain that status quo by excluding the perspectives of women and of racial and sexual minorities.

Put more simply, one central belief in postmodern political thought is that powerful forces in society essentially order society into categories and hierarchies that are organized to serve their own interests. They effect this by dictating how society and its features can be spoken about and what can be accepted as true. For example, a demand that someone provide evidence and reasoning for their claims will be seen through a postmodernist Theoretical lens as a request to participate within a system of discourses and knowledge production that was built by powerful people who valued these approaches and designed them to exclude alternative means of communicating and producing "knowledge." In other words, Theory views science as having been organized in a way that serves the interests of the powerful people who established it—white Western men—while setting up barriers against the participation of others. Thus, the cynicism at the heart of Theory is evident.

Because they focused on self-perpetuating systems of power, few of the original postmodern Theorists advocated any specific political actions, preferring instead to engage in playful disruption or nihilistic despair. Indeed, meaningful change was largely regarded as impossible under the original postmodernism, due to the inherent meaninglessness of everything and the culturally relative nature of morality. Nevertheless, throughout postmodern Theory runs the overtly left-wing idea that oppressive power structures constrain humanity and are to be deplored. This results in an ethical imperative to deconstruct, challenge, problematize (find and exaggerate the problems within), and resist all ways of thinking that support oppressive structures of power, the categories relevant to power structures, and the language that perpetuates them—thus embedding a value system into what might have been a moderately useful descriptive theory.

This impulse generates a parallel drive to prioritize the narratives, systems, and knowledges of marginalized groups. Foucault is the most explicit about the ever-present danger of oppressive systems:

> My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So, my

> position leads not to apathy but to a hyper-and pessimistic activism. I think that the ethico-political choice we have to make every day is to determine which is the main danger.[32]

Postmodern Theorists often present this perception as innovative, but, again, it is hardly new except in its aims for revolution (in the French style). The gradual formation of liberal, secular democracy over the Enlightenment and the Modern periods was characterized by struggles against oppressive forces and the search for freedom. The battle against the hegemony of the Catholic Church was primarily an ethical and political conflict. The French Revolution opposed both church and monarchy. The American Revolution opposed British colonial rule and nonrepresentative government. Throughout these earlier periods, institutions like, first, monarchical rule and slavery, then patriarchy and class systems, and finally enforced heterosexuality, colonialism, and racial segregation were challenged by *liberalism*—and overcome. Progress occurred fastest of all in the 1960s and 1970s, when racial and gender discrimination became illegal and homosexuality was decriminalized. This all occurred *before* postmodernism became influential. Postmodernism did not invent ethical opposition to oppressive power systems and hierarchies—in fact, much of the most significant social and ethical progress occurred during the preceding periods that it rejects and continues to be brought about by applying the methods of liberalism.

The postmodern approach to ethically driven social critique is intangible and unfalsifiable. As the idea of radical skepticism shows, postmodern thought relies upon Theoretical principles and ways of seeing the world, rather than truth claims. Because of its rejection of objective truth and reason, postmodernism refuses to substantiate itself and cannot, therefore, be argued with. The postmodern perception, Lyotard writes, makes no claim to be true: "Our hypotheses, therefore, should not be accorded predictive value in relation to reality, but strategic value in relation to the question raised."[33] In other words, postmodern Theory seeks not to be factually true

but to be strategically useful: in order to bring about its own aims, morally virtuous and politically useful by its own definitions.

This generalized skepticism about the objectivity of truth and knowledge —and commitment to regarding both as culturally constructed—leads to a preoccupation with four main themes: the blurring of boundaries, the power of language, cultural relativism, and the loss of the individual and the universal in favor of group identity.

1. The Blurring of Boundaries

Radical skepticism as to the possibility of objective truth and knowledge, combined with a belief in cultural constructivism in the service of power, results in a suspicion of all the boundaries and categories that previous thinkers widely accepted as true. These include not only the boundaries between objective and subjective and between truth and belief, but also those between science and the arts (especially for Lyotard), the natural and the artificial (particularly for Baudrillard and Jameson), high and low culture (see Jameson), man and other animals, and man and machine (in Deleuze), and between different understandings of sexuality and gender as well as health and sickness (see, especially, Foucault). Almost every socially significant category has been intentionally complicated and problematized by postmodern Theorists in order to deny such categories any objective validity and disrupt the systems of power that might exist across them.

2. The Power of Language

Under postmodernism, many ideas that had previously been regarded as objectively true came to be seen as mere constructions of language. Foucault refers to them as "discourses" that construct knowledge; Lyotard, expanding upon Wittgenstein, calls them "language games" that legitimize knowledges. In postmodern thought, language is believed to have enormous power to

control society and how we think and thus is inherently dangerous. It is also seen as an unreliable way of producing and transmitting knowledge.

The obsession with language is at the heart of postmodern thinking and key to its methods. Few thinkers exhibit the neurotic postmodern fixation upon words more explicitly than Jacques Derrida, who, in 1967, published three texts—*Of Grammatology*, *Writing and Difference*, and *Speech and Phenomena*—in which he introduced a concept that would become very influential in postmodernism: *deconstruction*. In these works, Derrida rejects the commonsense idea that words refer straightforwardly to things in the real world.[34] Instead, he insists that words refer only to other words and to the ways in which they differ from one another, thus forming chains of "signifiers," which can go off in all directions with no anchor—this being the meaning of his famous and often-mistranslated phrase, "there is nothing [read: no meaning] outside of text."[35] For Derrida, meaning is always relational and deferred, and can never be reached and exists only in relation to the discourse in which it is embedded. This unreliability of language, Derrida argues, means that it cannot represent reality or communicate it to others.

In this understanding, language operates hierarchically through binaries, always placing one element above another to make meaning. For example, "man" is defined in opposition to "woman" and taken to be superior. Additionally, for Derrida, the speaker's meaning has no more authority than the hearer's interpretation and thus intention cannot outweigh impact. Thus, if someone says that there are certain features of a culture that can generate problems, and I choose to interpret this statement as a dog whistle about the inferiority of that culture and take offense, there is no space in Derridean analysis to insist that my offense followed from a misunderstanding of what had been said. The author's intentions are irrelevant, when those can be known, due to Derrida's adaptation of Roland Barthes' concept of "the death of the author."[36] Consequently, since discourses are believed to create and maintain oppression, they have to be carefully monitored and

deconstructed. This has obvious implications for moral and political action. The most common postmodernist response to this derives from Derrida's proposed solution: to read "deconstructively," by looking for internal inconsistencies (*aporia*) in which a text contradicts and undermines itself and its own purposes when the words are examined closely enough (which is to say, too closely and, especially since the 1990s, with an agenda—Theory's normative agenda). In practice, deconstructive approaches to language therefore look very much like nitpicking at words in order to deliberately miss the point.

3. Cultural Relativism

Because, in postmodern Theory, truth and knowledge are believed to have been constructed by the dominant discourses and language games that operate within a society, and because we cannot step outside our own system and categories and therefore have no vantage point from which to examine them, Theory insists that no one set of cultural norms can be said to be better than any other. For postmodernists, any meaningful critique of a culture's values and ethics from within a different culture is impossible, since each culture operates under different concepts of knowledge and speaks only from its own biases. All such critique is therefore erroneous at best and a moral infraction at worst, since it presupposes one's own culture to be objectively superior. Moreover, Theory insists that, although one can critique one's own culture from within the system, one can only do so using discourses available in that system, which limit its ability to change. Which discourses one can use is largely dependent on one's position within the system, therefore critiques can be accepted or dismissed depending on a political assessment of the status of the critic's position. In particular, criticism from any position deemed powerful tends to be dismissed because it is assumed either to be ignorant (or dismissive) of the realities of oppression, by definition, or a cynical attempt to serve the critic's own

interests. The postmodern belief that individuals are vehicles of discourses of power, depending on where they stand in relation to power, makes cultural critique completely hopeless except as a weapon in the hands of those Theorized to be marginalized or oppressed.

4. The Loss of the Individual and the Universal

Consequently, to postmodern Theorists, the notion of the autonomous individual is largely a myth. The individual, like everything else, is a product of powerful discourses and culturally constructed knowledge. Equally, the concept of the universal—whether a biological universal about human nature; or an ethical universal, such as equal rights, freedoms, and opportunities for all individuals regardless of class, race, gender, or sexuality—is, at best, naive. At worst, it is merely another exercise in power-knowledge, an attempt to enforce dominant discourses on everybody. The postmodern view largely rejects both the smallest unit of society—the individual—and the largest—humanity—and instead focuses on small, local groups as the producers of knowledge, values, and discourses. Therefore, postmodernism focuses on sets of people who are understood to be positioned in the same way—by race, sex, or class, for example—and have the same experiences and perceptions due to this positioning.

ISN'T POSTMODERNISM DEAD?

The prevailing view among many thinkers today is that postmodernism has died out. We don't think it has. We think it has merely matured, mutated, and evolved (at least twice since its origins in the 1960s) and that the two characteristic principles and four themes detailed above remain pervasive and culturally influential. Theory is intact, although the ways in which its core principles and themes are presented, used, and interacted with have changed significantly over the last half-century. It is Theory as it is currently being applied that concerns us most and forms the subject of the rest of this

book. Before explaining how Theory evolved, however, we should put to rest the common myth that postmodernism died two or three decades ago.

There are many arguments about when exactly postmodernism allegedly died. Some argue that it ended in the 1990s, giving way to postcolonialism; others that it ended with September 11, 2001, when we entered a new era whose character has yet to be determined. It is certainly true that the proliferation of postmodern texts in the second half of the 1960s, 1970s, and much of the 1980s did not continue into the 1990s. The early forms of postmodernism—with their ultimate meaninglessness, lack of direction, and concern only to deconstruct, disrupt, and problematize without providing any resources for rebuilding—could only survive for so long. In that sense, postmodern Theory's *high deconstructive phase* burnt itself out by the mid-1980s. But did postmodernism and Theory end there? They did not. Far from dying out, the ideas set out in this chapter evolved and diversified into distinct strands—the cynical Theories we have to live with today—and became more goal-oriented and actionable. For this reason, we call the next wave of activism-scholarship *applied postmodernism*, and it is to this development we now turn our attention.

2 POSTMODERNISM'S APPLIED TURN

Making Oppression Real

Postmodernism first burst onto the intellectual scene in the late 1960s and quickly became wildly fashionable among leftist and left-leaning academics. As the intellectual fad grew, its proselytes set to work, producing reams of radically skeptical Theory, in which existing knowledge and ways of obtaining knowledge understood as belonging to Western modernity were indiscriminately criticized and dismantled. The old religions—in the broadest sense of the word—had to be torn down. Thus, the ideas that we can come to know objective reality and that what we call "truth" in some way corresponds to it were placed on the chopping block, together with the assumptions that modernity had been built upon. The postmodernists sought to render absurd our ways of understanding, approaching, and living in the world and in societies. Despite proving simultaneously modish and influential, this approach had its limits. Endless dismantling and disruption —or, as they call it, *deconstruction*—is not only destined to consume itself; it is also fated to consume everything interesting and thus render itself *boring*.[1]

That is, Theory couldn't content itself with nihilistic despair. It needed something to do, something actionable. Because of its own morally and politically charged core, it had to apply itself to the problem it saw at the core of society: unjust access to power. After its first big bang beginning in the late 1960s, the high deconstructive phase of postmodernism burnt itself out by the early 1980s. But postmodernism did not die. From the ashes arose a new set of Theorists whose mission was to make some core tenets of postmodernism applicable and to *reconstruct* a better world.

The common wisdom among academics is that, by the 1990s, postmodernism had died.[2] But, in fact, it simply mutated from its earlier high deconstructive phase into a new form. A diverse set of highly politicized and actionable Theories developed out of postmodernism proper. We will call this more recent development *applied postmodernism*. This change occurred as a new wave of Theorists emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s. These new applied postmodernists also came from different fields, but, in many respects, their ideas were much more alike than those of their predecessors and provided a more user-friendly approach. During this turn, Theory mutated into a handful of Theories—postcolonial, queer, and critical race—that were put to work in the world to deconstruct social injustice.

We therefore might think of postmodernism as a kind of fast-evolving virus. Its original and purest form was unsustainable: it tore its hosts apart and destroyed itself. It could not spread from the academy to the general population because it was so difficult to grasp and so seemingly removed from social realities. In its evolved form, it spread, leaping the "species" gap from academics to activists to everyday people, as it became increasingly graspable and actionable and therefore more contagious. It mutated around a core of Theory to form several new strains, which are far less playful and far more certain of their own (meta)narratives. These are centered on a practical aim that was absent before: to reconstruct society in the image of an ideology which came to refer to itself as "Social Justice."

THE MUTATION OF THEORY

For postmodernists, Theory refers to a specific set of beliefs, which posit that the world and our ability to gather knowledge about it work in accordance with the postmodern knowledge and political principles. Theory assumes that objective reality cannot be known, "truth" is socially constructed through language and "language games" and is local to a particular culture, and knowledge functions to protect and advance the interests of the privileged. Theory therefore explicitly aims to *critically* examine discourses. This means something specific. It means to examine them closely so as to expose and disrupt the political power dynamics it assumes are baked into them so that people will be convinced to reject them and initiate an ideological revolution.

Theory, in this sense, has not gone away, but neither has it stayed the same. Between the late 1980s and roughly 2010, it developed the applicability of its underlying concepts and came to form the basis of entirely new fields of scholarship, which have since become profoundly influential. These new disciplines, which have come to be known loosely as "Social Justice scholarship," co-opted the notion of social justice from the civil rights movements and other liberal and progressive theories. Not coincidentally, this all began in earnest just as legal equality had largely been achieved and antiracist, feminist, and LGBT activism began to produce diminishing returns. Now that racial and sexual discrimination in the workplace was illegal and homosexuality was decriminalized throughout the West, the main barriers to social equality in the West were lingering prejudices, embodied in attitudes, assumptions, expectations, and language. For those tackling these less tangible problems, Theory, with its focus on systems of power and privilege perpetuated through discourses, might have been an ideal tool—except that, as it was wholly deconstructive, indiscriminately radically skeptical, and unpalatably nihilistic, it was not really fit for any productive purpose.

The new forms of Theory arose within postcolonialism, black feminism (a branch of feminism pioneered by African American scholars who focused as much on race as on gender[3]), intersectional feminism, critical race (legal) Theory, and queer Theory, all of which sought to describe the world critically *in order to change it*. Scholars in these fields increasingly argued that, while postmodernism could help reveal the socially constructed nature of knowledge and the associated "problematics," activism was simply not compatible with fully radical skepticism. They needed to accept that certain groups of people faced disadvantages and injustices based on who they were, a concept that radically skeptical postmodern thinking readily deconstructed. Some of the new Theorists therefore criticized their predecessors for their privilege, which they claimed was demonstrated by their ability to deconstruct identity and identity-based oppression. Some accused their forebears of being white, male, wealthy, and Western enough to afford to be playful, ironic, and radically skeptical, because society was already set up for their benefit. As a result, while the new Theorists retained much Theory, they did not entirely dispense with stable identity and objective truth. Instead, they laid claim to a limited amount of both, arguing that some identities were privileged over others and that this injustice was objectively true.

While the original postmodern thinkers dismantled our understanding of knowledge, truth, and societal structures, the new Theorists reconstructed these from the ground up, in accordance with their own narratives, many of which derived from the means and values of New Left political activism, which in turn had been the product of the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School. Thus, while the original (postmodern) Theorists were fairly aimless, using irony and playfulness to reverse hierarchies and disrupt what they saw as unjust power and knowledge (or power-knowledge) structures, the second wave of (*applied*) postmodernists focused on dismantling hierarchies and making truth claims about power, language, and oppression. During its applied turn, Theory underwent a *moral* mutation: it adopted a number of

beliefs about the rights and wrongs of power and privilege. The original Theorists were content to observe, bemoan, and play with such phenomena; the new ones wanted to reorder society. If social injustice is caused by legitimizing bad discourses, they reasoned, social justice can be achieved by delegitimizing them and replacing them with better ones. Those social sciences and humanities scholars who took Theoretical approaches began to form a left-wing moral community, rather than a purely academic one: an intellectual organ more interested in advocating a particular *ought* than attempting a detached assessment of *is*—an attitude we usually associate with churches, rather than universities.

A NEW DEFAULT VIEW

New Theories arose, which primarily looked at race, gender, and sexuality, and were explicitly critical, goal-oriented, and moralistic. They retained, however, the core postmodern ideas that knowledge is a construct of power, that the categories into which we organize people and phenomena were falsely contrived in the service of that power, that language is inherently dangerous and unreliable, that the knowledge claims and values of all cultures are equally valid and intelligible only on their own terms, and that collective experience trumps individuality and universality. They focused on cultural power, regarding it as objectively true that power and privilege are insidious, corrupting forces, which work to perpetuate themselves in almost mysterious ways. They explicitly stated that they were doing this with the purpose of remaking society according to their moral vision—all while citing the original postmodern Theorists.[4]

Brian McHale, the American literary theorist whose work centers on postmodernism, observes this change when he writes,

> With the arrival of poststructuralism in North America, "theory" was born, in the freestanding sense of the term that became so familiar in subsequent decades: not theory of this or that—not, for instance, theory of narrative, as structuralist narratology aspired to be—

> but theory in general, what in other eras might have been called speculation, or even indeed philosophy.[5]

Elsewhere, he notes,

> "[T]heory" itself, in the special sense that the term began to acquire from the mid-sixties on, is a postmodern phenomenon, and the success and proliferation of "theory" is itself a symptom of postmodernism.[6]

That is, by the late 1990s, postmodernism in its purest, original form had fallen out of fashion, but Theory had not. It provided radical activists, including scholar-activists, with an all-encompassing way of thinking about the world and society, which still informs much scholarship in the humanities and has made considerable inroads into the social sciences, especially sociology, anthropology, and psychology.[7] Postmodernism had been reenvisioned and has since become the backbone of dominant forms of scholarship, activism, and professional practice around identity, culture, and Social Justice.

Nevertheless, it is not uncommon for academics who work according to the postmodern knowledge and political principles to be disparaging of postmodernism and insist that they do not use it in their work. Jonathan Gottschall, noted scholar of literature and evolution, offers an explanation of this strange phenomenon. He argues that what he calls the "liberationist paradigm"—an understanding of society that seeks to detach human nature from biology—has become so pervasive among left-wing academics as to be simply the default in many fields. "Buzzing rumors of the demise of Theory," Gottschall therefore tells us, "are clearly premature."[8]

Perhaps, ironically, Theory has been internalized by—and thus rendered invisible to—many academics, even those who consider themselves to have eschewed Theory and claim to work with empirical data.[9] As Brian McHale argues,

> "[T]heory" itself has survived down to the new millennium. If it is less conspicuous now than it was in the peak years of postmodernism in the seventies and eighties, this is only because it

> has become so pervasive as to pass largely unnoticed. Since the late eighties, "theory" has especially animated the discourses of feminism, gender studies, and sexuality studies, and it underwrites what has come to be called "cultural studies."[10]

Whether we call it "postmodernism," "applied postmodernism," "Theory," or anything else, then, the conception of society based on the postmodern knowledge and political principles—that set of radically skeptical ideas, in which knowledge, power, and language are merely oppressive social constructs to be exploited by the powerful—has not only survived more or less intact but also flourished within many identity-and culture-based "studies" fields, especially in the so-called "Theoretical humanities." These, in turn, influence and often hold sway over the social sciences and professional programs like education, law, psychology, and social work, and have been carried by activists and media into the broader culture. As a result of the general academic acceptance of Theory, postmodernism has become applicable, and therefore accessible to both activists and the general public.

APPLYING THE INAPPLICABLE

In the early seventeenth century, as the Enlightenment began to take hold and revolutionize human thought in Europe, a number of thinkers of the time started to grapple with a new problem: radical doubt—a belief that there is no rational basis to believe *anything*. Most famous among these was the French mathematician, scientist, and philosopher René Descartes, who articulated what was, for him, a bit of philosophical bedrock upon which belief and philosophy could rest. In 1637, he first wrote the phrase, "*Je pense, donc je suis,*" in *Discourse on the Method*,[11] which was later rewritten in the far more famous Latin—"*Cogito, ergo sum*" (I think, therefore I am). This was Descartes' response to the deconstructive power that Enlightenment skepticism introduced to the world.

Something similar occurred some three and a half centuries later, in the 1980s. Faced with the far more intense deconstructive power of postmodern radical skepticism, an emerging band of cultural Theorists found themselves

in a similar crisis. Liberal activism had won tremendous successes, the radical New Left activism of previous decades had fallen well out of favor, and the antirealism and nihilistic despair of postmodernism wasn't working and couldn't produce change. The correction to this problem required grasping upon something both radically actionable and real, and Theory and activism therefore started to coalesce on a new idea in parallel to Descartes' most famous meditation. For him, the ability to think implied existence—that *something* must be real. For the activist-scholars of the 1980s, the suffering associated with oppression implied the existence of something that could suffer and a mechanism by which that suffering can occur. "I think, therefore I am" was given new life under the axiomatic acceptance of new existential bedrock: "I experience oppression, therefore I am … and so are dominance and oppression."

As postmodernism progressed, building itself upon this new philosophical rock, a number of new academic enclaves emerged. These drew upon Theory, often heavily, focusing on specific aspects of the ways in which language and power influence society. Each of these fields—postcolonial, queer, and critical race Theories, along with gender studies, disability studies, and fat studies—will receive detailed treatment in its own chapter. Among them, queer Theory is the only field that exclusively applies postmodern Theoretical approaches, but all these fields of study have come to be dominated by applied postmodernist thinking. The Theorists who took elements of postmodernism and sought to apply them in specific ways were the progenitors of the applied postmodern turn and therefore of Social Justice scholarship.

Postcolonial studies was the first applied postmodern discipline to emerge. Although other approaches to studying the aftermath of colonialism exist, postmodern Theory formed so much of the basis of this discipline that postmodernism and postcolonialism are often taught together. Edward Said, the founding father of postcolonial Theory, drew heavily on Michel Foucault, and his work therefore focused on how discourses construct

reality.[12] For Said, it was not enough to simply deconstruct power structures and show how perceptions of the East had been constructed by the West. It was necessary to revise and rewrite history. In his ground-breaking book, *Orientalism*, he argues that "history is made by men and women, just as it can also be unmade and rewritten…so that 'our' East, 'our' Orient becomes 'ours' to possess and direct."[13]

Said's successors, Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, also valued Foucault, but relied more on Derrida. They distrust the ability of language to convey meaning at all—but they also believe it conceals within it unjust power dynamics. Because of this focus on power conveyed through language, postcolonial Theory developed an explicitly political purpose: to deconstruct Western narratives about the East in order to uncover and amplify the voices of colonized peoples. As the postcolonial scholar Linda Hutcheon puts it,

> The post-colonial, like the feminist, is a dismantling but also constructive political enterprise insofar as it implies a theory of agency and social change that the postmodern deconstructive impulse lacks. While both "post-"s use irony, the post-colonial cannot stop at irony.[14]

Another new Theory developed within women's studies—and, later, gender studies—which grew out of the overlap between feminist thought and literary theory. Women's studies did not begin as postmodern, however. For the most part, it tracked with other forms of feminist theory, many of which analyzed the status of women through a critical Marxist lens, according to which Western patriarchy is largely an extension of capitalism, through which women are uniquely exploited and marginalized. Foucault famously rejected this top-down understanding of power, in favor of a society-permeating grid, produced by discourses. The Foucauldian Theorists who established queer Theory followed him in this.

By the late 1980s, this distinction had begun to drive a wedge between various types of feminists, who disagreed as to how far to take deconstructive methods,[15] a disagreement which persists today. Mary

Poovey, a materialist feminist—a feminist who focuses primarily on how patriarchal and capitalist assumptions force women into socially constructed gender roles—described this clearly. Poovey was attracted to deconstructive techniques for their ability to undermine what she saw as socially constructed gender stereotypes (the belief that such stereotypes reflect intrinsic human nature is often referred to as "essentialism"), but as a materialist she was concerned that deconstruction in its purest form did not allow the category "woman" to exist at all.[16] This was new.

Like the postcolonial Theorists, Poovey wanted to adapt postmodern techniques for the purposes of activism. She therefore advocated a "toolbox" approach to feminism, in which deconstructive techniques could be used to dismantle gender roles, but not sex. She argued that we must accept as true the oppression of one class of people—women—by another—men—in order to combat it. This requires giving a sense of stable and objective reality to the classes of "women" and "men" and the power dynamic between them. She introduced some aspects of Theory into feminism and gender studies.

Judith Butler, a feminist and LGBT scholar and activist who was foundational to the development of queer Theory, epitomizes the opposite approach to this dilemma. In her most influential work, *Gender Trouble,*[17] published in 1990, Butler focuses on the socially constructed nature of both gender *and* sex. For Butler, "woman" is not a class of people but a performance that constructs "gendered" reality. Butler's concept of *gender performativity*—behaviors and speech that make gender real—allowed her to be thoroughly postmodern, deconstruct everything, and reject the notion of stable essences and objective truths about sex, gender, and sexuality, all while remaining politically active. This worked on two levels. Firstly, by referring to "reality-effects" and social or cultural "fictions," Butler is able to address what she sees as the reality of social constructions of gender, sex, and sexuality. For Butler, the specific constructions themselves are not real, but it is true that constructions exist. Secondly, because the "queer" is understood to be that which falls outside of categories, especially those used

to define male and female, masculine and feminine, heterosexual and homosexual, disrupting and dismantling those categories is essential to activism. "To queer" can therefore be used as a verb in the Butlerian sense, and the "queering" of something refers to the destabilization of categories and the disruption of norms or accepted truths associated with it. The purpose of this is to liberate the "queer" from the oppression of being categorized.

Despite drawing heavily on both Foucault and Derrida, Butler does not consider herself a postmodernist. In fact, she does not consider "postmodernism" a coherent term. However, this is not a disparagement of postmodernism, since incoherence and indefinability are central to Butler's queer Theory. In her 1995 essay, "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism,'" Butler writes, in her usual semi-incomprehensible prose, that the point of postmodernism is to understand that oppressive power structures form as a result of firm definitions and stable categories and that recognizing this enables queer political activism.[18] Therefore, rather than denying postmodern assumptions or methods, Butler argues that—just as it is better not to define sexes, genders, or sexualities—it is better not to define postmodernism. To do so would allow or even cause it to become yet another powerful oppressive force—a violence of categorization, an idea which she derives from Jacques Derrida.

Butler avoided the aimlessness that handicapped the original postmodernism by making indefinability and ambiguity integral to her own philosophies. She explains that "the task is to interrogate what the theoretical move that establishes foundations authorizes, and what precisely it excludes or forecloses."[19] In Butlerian thought, the endless examination and deconstruction of categories can enable us to liberate those who do not fit neatly into categories.

In a different Theoretical thread, another highly influential feminist, whose work began in the late 1980s and who saw the need to modify postmodern Theory, is bell hooks (the pen name of Gloria Watkins, which

she intentionally writes in lower case). hooks is an African American scholar and activist who took issue with postmodernism—especially postmodern Theory and feminism—for its exclusion of black people, women, and the working class, which she felt limited its ability to achieve social and political change. She criticized postmodernism not for its assumptions or thought, but for its association with, development by, and popularity among elite white male thinkers. hooks' 1990 essay, "Postmodern Blackness," criticizes postmodernism for being dominated by white male intellectuals and academic elites, even as it usefully draws attention to difference and otherness. She was particularly critical of its dismissal of stable identity, arguing that postmodernism should apply the politics of identity:

> The postmodern critique of "identity," though relevant for renewed black liberation struggle, is often posed in ways that are problematic. Given a pervasive politic of white supremacy which seeks to prevent the formation of radical black subjectivity, we cannot cavalierly dismiss a concern with identity politics.[20]

She asks,

> Should we not be suspicious of postmodern critiques of the "subject" when they surface at a historical moment when many subjugated people feel themselves coming to voice for the first time?[21]

For hooks, the problem was not that postmodernism was useless; it was that it was tailored to the experiences of white male intellectuals and did not allow for identity politics. hooks claimed that postmodern thought erred in destabilizing the concept of identity, which led it to exclude the unified voices and experiences of black Americans—particularly black women—and their aspirations to disrupt dominant narratives for the purposes of pursuing racial equality. She even suggested that postmodernism had silenced the black voices that had arisen in the 1960s, who had achieved civil rights by adopting a modernist universalizing agenda.[22] To be of value, hooks argued, postmodernism needed to come out of the universities and into the world; question the perspective of the white male, who could afford to doubt the

importance of identity because of his privilege; and serve everyday activism being done by the politically radical black layperson. She writes,

> Postmodern culture with its decentered subject can be the space where ties are severed or it can provide the occasion for new and varied forms of bonding. To some extent ruptures, surfaces, contextuality and a host of other happenings create gaps that make space for oppositional practices which no longer require intellectuals to be confined by narrow, separate spheres with no meaningful connection to the world of every day.[23]

hooks' ideas arose in parallel with critical race Theory, which originated with critical legal scholars, most notably Derrick Bell. One of Bell's students was a legal scholar much influenced by black feminists like hooks: Kimberlé Crenshaw. Crenshaw makes a similar critique of postmodernism in her groundbreaking 1991 essay, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,"[24] which developed the groundwork for the hugely influential concept of *intersectionality*, which she had introduced two years earlier, in a more polemic piece (see chapter 5).

Intersectionality accurately recognizes that it is possible to uniquely discriminate against someone who falls within an "intersection" of oppressed identities—say black and female—and that contemporary discrimination law was insufficiently sensitive to address this. Crenshaw noticed that it would be possible, for example, to legally discriminate against black women in a workplace that hired plenty of black men and white women, but almost no black women. She also rightly recognized that the prejudices that intersecting identity groups face can include not only the ones directed against both identity groups but also unique ones. For example, a black woman might face the usual prejudices that come with being black and with being a woman while also experiencing additional prejudices that apply specifically to black women. Crenshaw makes some important points. Simultaneously, she was generally positive about the deconstructive potential of postmodern Theory and centered it in her new "intersectional" framework for addressing discrimination against women of

color. She wrote, "I consider intersectionality to be a provisional concept linking contemporary politics with postmodern theory,"[25] and set out a more politicized form of postmodernism that would be actionable for race activists.[26]

Like Poovey, Butler, and hooks, Crenshaw wanted to both keep the Theoretical understanding of race and gender as social constructs and use deconstructive methods to critique them, *and* assert a stable truth claim: that some people were discriminated against on the grounds of their racial or sexual identities, a discrimination she planned to address legally, using identity politics. She writes,

> While the descriptive project of postmodernism of questioning the ways in which meaning is socially constructed is generally sound, this critique sometimes misreads the meaning of social construction and distorts its political relevance…. But to say that a category such as race or gender is socially constructed is not to say that that category has no significance in our world. On the contrary, a large and continuing project for subordinated people—and indeed, one of the projects for which postmodern theories have been very helpful in thinking about—is the way power has clustered around certain categories and is exercised against others.[27]

Crenshaw argues that (identity) categories "have meaning and consequences";[28] that is, they are objectively real. She distinguishes between a "black person" and a "person who happens to be black,"[29] and sides with the former, arguing that this distinction is integral to identity politics and marks its difference from the universal liberal approaches that characterized the civil rights movements. These are common themes within the applied turn in postmodernism.

Once identity and power had been made objectively real and analyzed using postmodern methods, the concept of intersectionality very rapidly broke the bounds of legal theory and became a powerful tool for cultural criticism and social and political activism. Because applied postmodern Theory explicitly applied postmodernism to identity politics, it began to be used by scholars who were interested in myriad aspects of identity, including race, sex, gender, sexuality, class, religion, immigration status, physical or

mental ability, and body size. Following Crenshaw's recommendation, these rapidly emerging fields of critical studies of culture all rely heavily on social constructivism to explain why some identities are marginalized, while arguing that those social constructions are themselves objectively real.

For example, fields like disability studies[30] and fat studies[31] have recently become notable presences on the Social Justice scholarship scene. While disability studies and fat feminism already existed and addressed prejudice and discrimination against the disabled and the obese, these movements have taken a radically socially constructivist approach in recent years, explicitly applying postmodern principles and themes, particularly those of queer Theory. They have become part of the intersectional framework and adopted much of the applied postmodern Theoretical approach, in which the disabled and the fat are believed to have their own embodied knowledge of disability and fatness, which is worth more than scientific knowledge. This is not simply about the obvious truth that disabled and fat people know what it is like to be disabled or fat in a way that able-bodied and slim people do not. Scholars and activists in these fields insist instead that the understanding of disability or obesity as a physical problem to be treated and corrected where possible is itself a social construct born of systemic hatred of disabled and fat people.

THE POSTMODERN PRINCIPLES AND THEMES IN APPLICATION

Despite mutating to become actionable for identity politics, applied postmodernism has retained the two postmodern principles at its core.

- **The postmodern knowledge principle**: Radical skepticism about whether objective knowledge or truth is obtainable and a commitment to cultural constructivism.

This denial of objective knowledge or truth and commitment to cultural constructivism, and belief that whatever it is we call truth is nothing more than a construct of the culture calling it that, has been largely retained, with one important proviso: under applied postmodern thought, identity and oppression based on identity are treated as known features of objective reality. That is, the conception of society as comprised of systems of power and privilege that construct knowledge is assumed to be objectively true and intrinsically tied to social constructions of identity.

- **The postmodern political principle**: A belief that society is formed of systems of power and hierarchies, which decide what can be known and how.

This has also been retained. In fact, this is central to the advocacy of identity politics, whose politically actionable imperative is to dismantle this system in the name of Social Justice.

The four key themes of postmodern thought also survived the death of the high deconstructive phase and the subsequent applied postmodern turn.

1. The Blurring of Boundaries

This theme is most evident in postcolonial and queer Theories, which are both explicitly centred on ideas of fluidity, ambiguity, indefinability, and hybridity—all of which blur or even demolish the boundaries between categories. Their common concern with what they call "disrupting binaries" follows from Derrida's work on the hierarchical nature and meaninglessness of linguistic constructions. This theme is less evident in critical race Theory, which can be quite black-and-white (double meaning intended), but, in practice, the intersectional feminist element of critical race Theory encompasses many identity categories simultaneously and tries to be inclusive of "different ways of knowing." This results in a messy mixing of the evidenced with the experiential, in which a personal interpretation of

lived experience (often informed—or misinformed—by Theory) is elevated to the status of evidence (usually of Theory).

2. The Power of Language

The power and danger of language are foregrounded in all the newer applied postmodern Theories. "Discourse analysis" plays a central role in all these fields; scholars scrutinize language closely and interpret it according to Theoretical frameworks. For example, many films are watched "closely" for problematic portrayals and then disparaged, even if their themes are broadly consistent with Social Justice.[32] Additionally, the idea that words are powerful and dangerous has now become widespread and underlies much scholarship and activism around discursive (or verbal) violence, safe spaces, microaggressions, and trigger warnings.

3. Cultural Relativism

Cultural relativism is, of course, most pronounced in postcolonial Theory, but the widespread use of intersectionality in Social Justice scholarship and activism and the understanding of the West as the pinnacle of an oppressive power structure have made cultural relativism a norm in all applied postmodern Theories. This applies both in terms of how knowledge is produced, recognized, and transmitted—one cultural artifact—and in terms of moral and ethical principles—another cultural artifact.

4. The Loss of the Individual and the Universal

The intense focus on identity categories and identity politics means that the individual and the universal are largely devalued. While mainstream liberalism focuses on achieving universal human rights and access to opportunities, to allow each individual to fulfill her potential, applied

postmodern scholarship and activism is deeply skeptical of these values and even openly hostile to them. Applied postmodern Theory tends to regard mainstream liberalism as complacent, naive, or indifferent about the deeply engrained prejudices, assumptions, and biases that limit and constrain people with marginalized identities. The "individual" in applied postmodernism is something like the sum total of the identity groups to which the person in question simultaneously belongs.

THE EMERGENCE OF SOCIAL JUSTICE SCHOLARSHIP

These changes may seem too slight to consider Theory a serious departure from postmodernism—yet they are significant. By losing the ironic playfulness and despair of meaning characteristic of high-deconstructive postmodernism and by becoming goal-oriented, Theorists of the 1980s and 1990s made postmodernism applicable to institutions and politics. By recovering the idea of identity as something that—although culturally constructed—provided group knowledge and empowerment, they enabled more specific forms of activism-scholarship to develop. Theory therefore turned from being largely descriptive to highly prescriptive—a shift from *is* to *ought*. After the applied postmodern turn, postmodernism was no longer a mode of describing society and undermining confidence in long-established models of reality: it now aspired to be a tool of Social Justice. This ambition would come to fruition in the early 2010s, when a second significant evolutionary mutation in postmodernism occurred.

The new Theories emerging from the applied postmodern turn made it possible for scholars and activists to *do* something with the postmodern conception of society. If knowledge is a construct of power, which functions through ways of talking about things, knowledge can be changed and power structures toppled by changing the way we talk about things. Thus, applied postmodernism focuses on controlling discourses, especially by *problematizing* language and imagery it deems Theoretically harmful. This means that it looks for then highlights ways in which the oppressive

problems they assume exist in society manifest themselves, sometimes quite subtly, in order to "make oppression visible." The intense scrutiny of language and development of ever stricter rules for terminology pertaining to identity often known as *political correctness* came to a head in the 1990s and has again become pertinent since the mid-2010s.

This carries politically actionable conclusions. If what we accept as true is only accepted as such because the discourses of straight, white, wealthy, Western men have been privileged, applied Theory indicates this can be challenged by empowering marginalized identity groups and insisting their voices take precedence. This belief increased the aggressiveness of identity politics to such an extent that it even led to concepts like "research justice." This alarming proposal demands that scholars preferentially cite women and minorities—and minimize citations of white Western men—because empirical research that values knowledge production rooted in evidence and reasoned argument is an unfairly privileged cultural construct of white Westerners. It is therefore, in this view, a moral obligation to share the prestige of rigorous research with "other forms of research," including superstition, spiritual beliefs, cultural traditions and beliefs, identity-based experiences, and emotional responses.[33]

As these methods can be applied to virtually anything, a vast body of work drawing on any (or all) identity-based fields has emerged since roughly 2010. It asserts the objective truth of socially constructed knowledge and power hierarchies with absolute certainty. This represents an evolution that began with the applied turn in postmodernism as its new assumptions became known-knowns—that which people take for granted because it is known that they are "known." This work incorporates methodologies known as "feminist epistemology," "critical race epistemology," "postcolonial epistemology," and "queer epistemology," together with the study of broader "epistemic injustice,"[34] "epistemic oppression,"[35] "epistemic exploitation,"[36] and "epistemic violence."[37] ("Epistemology" is the term for the ways in which knowledge is produced and "epistemic" means "related to

knowledge.") Frequently, all these approaches are combined to produce what is usually known as "Social Justice scholarship." Though apparently diverse, these approaches to "other knowledges" are all premised on the idea that people with different marginalized identities have different knowledges, stemming from their shared, embodied, and lived experiences as members of those identity groups, especially of systemic oppression. Such people can both be disadvantaged as knowers, when they are forced to operate within a "dominant" system that is not their own, and also enjoy unique advantages, because of their familiarity with multiple epistemic systems. They can alternately be victims of "epistemic violence" when their knowledge is not included or recognized or of "epistemic exploitation" when they are asked to share it.

These changes have been steadily eroding the barrier between scholarship and activism. It used to be considered a failure of teaching or scholarship to work from a particular ideological standpoint. The teacher or scholar was expected to set aside her own biases and beliefs in order to approach her subject as objectively as possible. Academics were incentivized to do so by knowing that other scholars could—and would—point out evidence of bias or motivated reasoning and counter it with evidence and argument. Teachers could consider their attempts at objectivity successful if their students did not know what their political or ideological positions were.

This is not how Social Justice scholarship works or is applied to education. Teaching is now supposed to be a political act, and only one type of politics is acceptable—identity politics, as defined by Social Justice and Theory. In subjects ranging from gender studies to English literature, it is now perfectly acceptable to state a theoretical or ideological position and then use that lens to examine the material, without making any attempt to falsify one's interpretation by including disconfirming evidence or alternative explanations. Now, scholars can openly declare themselves to be activists and teach activism in courses that require students to accept the

ideological basis of Social Justice as true and produce work that supports it.[38] One particularly infamous 2016 paper in *Géneros: Multidisciplinary Journal of Gender Studies* even *favorably* likened women's studies to HIV and Ebola, advocating that it spread its version of feminism like an immune-suppressing virus, using students-turned-activists as carriers.[39]

Surprising or worrying as these changes may be, this is not the result of a hidden agenda. The agenda is open and explicit and always has been. For example, in 2013, as activist and scholar Sandra Grey insisted,

> Part of being active academic citizens involves challenging our students to do and be more. In early universities it was students who took the ideas of universities to the illiterate, acting as missionaries, teaching new ideas to peasants, thus spreading movements like Lutheranism through the countryside. While not suggesting that our students should be out in society professing Lutheran ideals, I would like to think we provide the tools of critique, debate and research to students to enable active citizenship and even inspire some to take up activist roles. Finally, there is a need for academics as part of their normal working lives to form alliances and connections, and even at times to become members of political and advocacy organisations. Rigorous research carried out "for a cause" must again be accepted as legitimate knowledge generation.[40]

In 2018, activist-scholars published a collection of essays entitled *Taking It to the Streets: The Role of Scholarship in Advocacy and Advocacy in Scholarship*.[41] While scholars can, of course, be activists and activists can be scholars, combining these two roles is liable to create problems and, when a political stance is taught at university, it is apt to become an orthodoxy, which cannot be questioned. Activism and education exist in a fundamental tension—activism presumes to know the truth with enough certainty to act upon it, while education is conscious that it does not know for certain what is true and therefore seeks to learn more.[42]

Applied postmodern ideas have escaped the boundaries of the university in ways that the original postmodern Theory did not, and they did so at least in part because of their ability to be acted upon. Out in the world, these ideas have gained sway. The postmodern knowledge and political principles

are now routinely evoked by activists and increasingly also by corporations, media, public figures, and the general public.

We, everyday citizens who are increasingly befuddled about what has happened to society and how it happened so quickly, regularly hear demands to "decolonize" everything from academic curricula to hairstyles to mathematics. We hear laments about cultural appropriation at the same time we hear complaints about the lack of representation of certain identity groups in the arts. We hear that only white people can be racist and that they always are so, by default. Politicians, actors, and artists pride themselves on being intersectional. Companies flaunt their respect for "diversity," while making it clear that they are only interested in a superficial diversity of identity (not of opinions). Organizations and activist groups of all kinds announce that they are inclusive, but only of people who agree with them. American engineers have been fired from corporations like Google for saying that gender differences exist,[43] and British comedians have been sacked by the BBC for repeating jokes that could be construed as racist by Americans.[44]

For most of us, this is both confusing and alarming. Many people are wondering what's happening, how we got here, what it all means, and how (and how soon) we can fix it and restore some common ground, charity, and reason. These are difficult questions. What has happened is that applied postmodernism has come into its own, been *reified*—taken as real, as The Truth according to Social Justice—and widely spread by activists, and (ironically) turned into a dominant metanarrative of its own. It has become an article of faith or an operational mythology for a wide swathe of society, especially on the left. To fail to pay obeisance to it can be literally or—more often figuratively—fatal. One does not merely challenge the dominant orthodoxy.

Fortunately, it is unlikely that the majority of people—let alone corporations, organizations, and public figures—really are radical cultural constructivists, with postmodern conceptions of society and a commitment

to intersectional understandings of Social Justice. However, because these ideas offer the appearance of deep explanations to complicated problems and work within the Theory, they have successfully morphed from obscure academic theories—the sorts of things that only intellectuals can believe—to part of the general "wisdom" about how the world works. Because these ideas are so widespread, matters won't improve until we show them for what they are and resist them—ideally by using consistent liberal principles and ethics.

To understand how Social Justice scholarship developed from postmodern Theory via the applied postmodern turn, we have to explore the new Theories in greater depth and specificity. It is these applied Theories—postcolonial, gender, queer, critical race, and so on—not postmodernism itself, that have gone out into the world and manifested themselves in scholarship, activism, and our institutions. Over the next five chapters, we hope to explain how these applied Theories have developed. Then, in chapter 8, we will explain how they came to be taken for granted as capital-T Truth, through the ideology of Social Justice.

3 POSTCOLONIAL THEORY

Deconstructing the West to Save the Other

Postcolonial Theory looks to deconstruct the West, as it sees it, and this ambitious demolition project was undoubtedly the first emanation of applied postmodernism. Unlike race and gender Theories, which had already developed fairly mature lines of thought and scholarship before postmodernism took hold in cultural studies, postcolonial Theory derived directly from postmodern thought. Moreover, postcolonial Theory came about to achieve a specific purpose, *decolonization*: the systematic undoing of colonialism in all its manifestations and impacts.

While postmodernism saw itself as both moving beyond and dismantling the key features of modernity, postcolonialism restricts this project to issues surrounding colonialism. Prominent within postcolonial Theory, more specifically, are both the postmodern knowledge principle, which rejects objective truth in favor of cultural constructivism, and the postmodern political principle, which perceives the world as constructed from systems of power and privilege that determine what can be known. The four primary themes of postmodern thinking—the blurring of boundaries, belief in the overwhelming power of language, cultural relativism, and the

loss of the individual and denial of the universal—are found throughout postcolonialism. Though not all postcolonial scholars are postmodern in their outlook, the key figures certainly were and are, and this approach dominates postcolonial Social Justice scholarship and activism today.[1]

Postcolonialism and the related Theory arose in a specific historical context: the moral and political collapse of European colonialism, which had dominated global politics for more than five centuries. European colonialism began in earnest in around the fifteenth century and continued into the middle of the twentieth, and it proceeded upon the assumption that the European powers had a right to expand their territories and exert their political and cultural authority over other peoples and regions. Though this sort of empire-building attitude was a standard one typical to many, if not most, cultures before the twentieth century, European colonialism was equipped with sweeping explanations, stories, and justifications of itself—or metanarratives—that proclaimed and sought to legitimize this right in its own terms. These included *la mission civilisatrice* (the civilizing mission) in French colonialism and Manifest Destiny in North America—concepts central to knowledge production and political organization from before the Enlightenment right through the Modern period.[2]

Then, with surprising rapidity, European colonialism faltered and collapsed in the middle of the twentieth century. Following World War II especially, decolonization efforts proceeded quickly on both the material and political levels, and, by the early 1960s, moral concerns about colonialism were prominent in both the academy and among the general public, especially on the radical left. The collapse of colonialism was therefore at the heart of the social and political milieu in which postmodernism arose, especially in the academies of Continental Europe. Eventually postcolonial Theorists established themselves by rejecting colonialist metanarratives by focusing on the discourses (ways of speaking about things) of colonialism. Postcolonialism is therefore mainly a narrowing of postmodernism to focus on one specific element of modernity

—colonialism—and the tool it applies is *postcolonial Theory*, which is Theory adapted to that problem. The postcolonial Theorists studied the discourses of colonialism, which sought to protect the interests of the powerful and privileged, not least the so-called right to dominate other cultures that hegemonic "civilized" Western (and Christian) discourses construed as "uncivilized" and "barbaric."

POSTCOLONIALISM AS AN APPLIED POSTMODERN PROJECT

As concerns about colonialism grew through the middle part of the twentieth century, the work of psychiatrist Frantz Fanon rapidly gained influence. Fanon, who was born on Martinique under French colonial rule, is often considered foundational to postcolonial Theory. His 1952 book, *Black Skins, White Masks*,[3] offers a powerful critique of both racism and colonialism. His 1959 work, *A Dying Colonialism*,[4] chronicles the changes in culture and politics during the Algerian War of independence from France. Then, his 1961 book, *The Wretched of the Earth*,[5] set the stage for postcolonialism and postcolonial Theory. Its thesis marked a profound change in thought on the subject. To Fanon, by 1961, colonialism represented, above all else, a systematic denial of the humanity of colonized people: so central is this theme to Fanon's analysis that he speaks throughout of the literal erasure of people's identity and dignity. This, he insists, colonized people must resist violently in order to maintain their mental health and self-respect. Fanon's book was simultaneously deeply critical and openly revolutionary—attitudes that have informed postcolonialism and the more radical aspects of leftist activism ever since.

Writing in 1961, however, Fanon was hardly a postmodernist. His approach is usually understood to be modernist because—while it is profoundly skeptical and clearly both critical and radical—his criticisms draw mainly on Lenin's Marxist critiques of capitalism, his analysis relies

heavily on psychoanalytic theory, and his philosophy is essentially humanist. Nevertheless, later thinkers, including Edward Said, the father of postcolonial Theory, took inspiration from Fanon's depiction of the psychological impacts of having one's culture, language, and religion subordinated to another. Fanon argued that the colonialist *mind-set* has to be disrupted and, if possible, reversed within people who have been subjected to colonial rule and the colonialist worldview that justified it.

This focus on attitudes, biases, and discourses fits well with postmodernism. The scholars who look at postcolonialism in a postmodern way—postcolonial Theorists—also see their work as a project geared towards overcoming certain *mind-sets* associated with and putatively legitimizing colonialism (rather than focusing on its practical and material effects). They draw primarily on postmodern ideas of knowledge as a construct of power that is perpetuated by discourses. The key idea in postcolonial Theory is that the West constructs itself in opposition to the East, through the way it talks. "We are rational, and they are superstitious." "We are honest, and they are deceptive." "We are normal, and they are exotic." "We are advanced, and they are primitive." "We are liberal, and they are barbaric." The East is constructed as the foil to which the West can compare itself. The term *the other* or *othering* is used to describe this denigration of other people in order to feel superior. Said called this mind-set "Orientialism"—a move that allowed him to attach a powerful pejorative to Orientalists, meaning contemporary scholars who studied the Far East, South Asia, and especially the Middle East from other perspectives.

Said presented his new ideas in the book *Orientalism*, published in 1978.[6] This book not only laid a foundation for the development of postcolonial Theory, but also brought the concept of applicable postmodern Theory to an American audience. Said, a Palestinian-American Theorist, drew primarily on Fanon and Foucault,[7] especially the latter's notions of "power-knowledge." Although he ultimately had many criticisms of Foucault's approach, he considered power-knowledge instrumental to

understanding Orientalism. Of primary significance to Said were Foucault's arguments that how we speak constructs knowledge and that powerful groups in society therefore get to direct the discourse and thus define what constitutes knowledge. For example, Said writes,

> I have found it useful here to employ Michel Foucault's notion of a discourse, as described by him in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and in *Discipline and Punish*, to identify Orientalism. My contention is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period.[8]

Said argues that at the core of Orientalism lies a Western discourse, and it was this discourse that constructed the East, by imposing upon it a character that both denigrated and exoticized it. The postmodernist influence on Said would be impossible to miss, even if he hadn't insisted that Orientialism "cannot possibly" be understood without Foucault's ideas.

This desire to deconstruct the allegedly hegemonic West has dominated postcolonial Theory ever since: much postcolonial scholarship consists of reading Orientalism into texts. This is in part because Said's project was a thoroughly literary endeavor—he took particular umbrage at Joseph Conrad's 1899 novella, *Heart of Darkness*,[9] an allegory that raises significant questions about both racism and colonialism. Rather than advocating a broad understanding of thematic elements of the text, Said preferred to scrutinize texts through "close reading," in order to uncover the various ways in which Western discourses construct, perpetuate, and enforce the Orientalist binary.

In Said, we see applied postmodern discourse analysis, which reads power imbalances into interactions between dominant and marginalized (regional) cultural groups, and aims to rewrite history from the perspective of the oppressed. Such rewriting often takes the highly productive form of recovering lost voices and perspectives to give a fuller and more accurate picture of history, but it is also frequently used to rewrite history in

accordance with local or political narratives or to simultaneously elevate multiple irreconcilable histories and thereby implicitly reject any claim to objective knowledge.

We also see the postmodern idea that knowledge is not found but made in the introduction to *Orientalism*, in which Said writes,

> My argument is that history is made by men and women, just as it can also be unmade and rewritten, always with various silences and elisions, always with shapes imposed and disfigurements tolerated, so that "our" East, "our" Orient becomes "ours" to possess and direct.[10]

This, then, is not merely deconstruction, but a call to reconstruction. Postcolonial Theory encompasses a (typically radical) political agenda that the original postmodernism lacked. The prominent postcolonial feminist scholar, Linda Hutcheon, also makes this clear.[11] Speaking of feminist and postcolonial scholarship, she writes, "Both have distinct political agendas and often a theory of agency that allow them to go beyond the postmodern limits of deconstructing existing orthodoxies into the realms of social and political action."[12] Like many of the critical Theorists who followed the postmodernists and sought to apply their ideas, Hutcheon advocates adapting postmodern Theory to support political activism. Explicitly activism-oriented, postcolonial Theory is thus the earliest category to arise within the *applied postmodern* school of thought.

Two other scholars are, with Said, held to be foundational to postcolonial Theory: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi K. Bhabha. Like Said's, their work is thoroughly and explicitly postmodern in both derivation and orientation but, due to a greater focus on Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of language, it is linguistically and conceptually difficult to the point of obscurity. Spivak's most significant contribution to postcolonial Theory is probably her 1988 essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?,"[13] which focuses intensely on language and expresses concern about the role power structures play in constraining it.

Spivak argues that *subalterns*—colonized peoples of subordinate status—have no access to speech, even while seemingly representing themselves. This, she contends, is a direct result of the way power has permeated discourse and created insurmountable barriers to communication for those existing outside of the dominant discourses. Drawing upon Said and Foucault, she developed the concept of *epistemic violence* within "Can the Subaltern Speak?" to describe the injury done to the colonized when their knowledge and status as knowers is marginalized by dominant discourses.

Spivak's postmodernism is especially evident when she adopts from Derrida the deconstructive idea that there is subversive power in maintaining stereotypes within power-laden binaries, while inverting their hierarchy. She calls this "strategic essentialism."[14] *Essentialism*, she tells us, is a linguistic tool of domination. Colonizers justify their oppression of the subordinated group by regarding it as a monolithic "other" that can be stereotyped and disparaged. *Strategic essentialism* applies this same sense of monolithic group identity as an act of resistance, suspending individuality and in-group diversity within the subordinated group for the purpose of promoting common goals through a common identity. In other words, it defines a particular kind of identity politics, built around intentional double standards.

This is typical of Spivak's Theory. Spivak relies more on Derrida than on Said and Foucault—because Foucault is too politically oriented. Because of Derrida's focus on the ambiguity and fluidity of language and his use of deeply incomprehensible prose—which resists saying anything concrete on principle—Spivak's work is deeply ambiguous and obscure. For example, she writes,

> I find [Derrida's] morphology much more painstaking and useful than Foucault's and Deleuze's immediate, substantive involvement with more "political" issues—the latter's invitation to "become woman"—which can make their influence more dangerous for the U.S. academic as enthusiastic radical. Derrida marks radical critique with the danger of appropriating the other by assimilation. He reads catachresis at the origin. He calls for a

> rewriting of the utopian structural impulse as "rendering delirious that interior voice that is the voice of the other in us."[15]

Impenetrability and impracticality were the Theoretical fashion at the time, especially among postcolonial Theorists. Homi K. Bhabha, another noteworthy postmodern example who held much sway over the field through the 1990s, eclipses Spivak in his ability to produce nearly incomprehensible prose. Bhabha is arguably the most deconstructive of the prominent postcolonial scholars, having been influenced primarily by Lacan and Derrida. He focuses mainly on the role language plays in constructing knowledge.[16]

As befits one who is radically skeptical of the ability of language to convey meaning at all, Bhabha's writing is notoriously difficult to read. In 1998, he won second place in *Philosophy and Literature*'s Bad Writing Contest—beaten only by Judith Butler—for the sentence,

> If, for a while, the ruse of desire is calculable for the uses of discipline, soon the repetition of guilt, justification, pseudo-scientific theories, superstition, spurious authorities, and classifications can be seen as the desperate effort to "normalize" formally the disturbance of a discourse of splitting that violates the rational, enlightened claims of its enunciatory modality.[17]

This bewildering sentence does have a meaning—a thoroughly postmodern one. Broken down, it means that racist, sexual jokes are told by colonizers initially to control a subordinate group, but that, ultimately, they are attempts by colonizers to convince themselves that their own ways of talking about things make sense because they are secretly terrified that they don't. This particular mind-reading claim permeates Bhabha's work and underlies his belief that the rejection of stable descriptive categories can subvert colonial dominance.[18] This is, of course, entirely unfalsifiable and, when expressed as above, incomprehensible.[19]

Bhabha's work is frequently criticized for being unnecessarily obscure and thus difficult to put to use in addressing postcolonial issues. Unlike other postcolonialist scholars, he also explicitly rejects the materialist,

political approach to postcolonial studies, along with Marxism and nationalism. Bhabha even finds the language of the postmodern Theory he uses potentially problematic, asking, "Is the language of theory merely another power ploy of the culturally privileged Western élite to produce a discourse of the Other that reinforces its own power-knowledge equation?"[20] Here he manages to cite Foucault explicitly and Derrida implicitly, while invalidating them both and, consequently, himself.

Postcolonial Theory's most notable progenitors formed the first branch of the applied postmodern tree, as it grew from its Theoretical trunk. This postmodern focus has consequences. Theirs is not an investigation of the material realities affecting countries and people that were previously under colonial power and the aftermath of that but an analysis of attitudes, beliefs, speech, and mind-sets, which are sacralized or problematized. These they construct simplistically from assumptions that posit white Westerners (and knowledge that is understood as "white" and "Western") as superior to Eastern, black, and brown people (and "knowledges" associated with non-Western cultures) despite that being precisely the stereotype they claim to want to fight.[21]

MIND-SETS COMPARED

Of course, colonialist narratives existed—there is plenty of evidence of them in colonial history (European and otherwise). For example, consider this repulsive passage from 1871:

> The regeneration of the inferior or degenerate races, by the superior races is part of the providential order of things for humanity.… Nature has made a race of workers, the Chinese race, who have wonderful manual dexterity, and almost no sense of honour; govern them with justice, levying from them, in return for the blessing of such a government, an ample allowance for the conquering race, and they will be satisfied; a race of tillers of the soil, the Negro; treat him with kindness and humanity, and all will be as it should; a race of masters and soldiers, the European race.… Let each do what he is made for, and all will be well.[22]

But this isn't an attitude one encounters much today. It gradually became less and less morally tenable over the twentieth century, with the fall of colonialism and rise of the civil rights movements, and would now rightly be recognized as far-right extremism. Nevertheless, these attitudes are cited in postcolonial Theory as though their past existence produced an indelible imprint upon how people discuss and view issues today. Postcolonial Theory establishes much of its claim to importance by assuming there must be permanent problems that have been handed down to us through language constructed centuries ago.

The real social changes that rendered the attitudes in the above paragraph almost universally objectionable weren't predicated on postmodern analysis, or postmodern in orientation. They preceded those developments and proceeded from and functioned by means of universal and individual liberalism. This form of liberalism holds that science, reason, and human rights are the property of every individual and do not belong exclusively to any set of people—whether they be men or white Westerners or anyone else. Postmodern postcolonial approaches differ radically from this liberal approach and are often criticized for perpetuating Orientalist binaries, rather than seeking to overcome them.

> **A (Western) colonial mind-set says**: "*Westerners are rational and scientific while Asians are irrational and superstitious. Therefore, Europeans must rule Asia for its own good.*"
>
> **A liberal mind-set says**: "*All humans have the capacity to be rational and scientific, but individuals will vary widely. Therefore, all humans must have all opportunities and freedoms.*"
>
> **A postmodern mind-set says**: "*The West has constructed the idea that rationality and science are good in order to perpetuate its own power and marginalize nonrational, nonscientific forms of knowledge production from elsewhere.*"

So, while the liberal mind-set rejects the arrogant colonial claim that reason and science belong to white Westerners, the postmodern one accepts it, but regards reason and science themselves as just one way of knowing and as oppressive—an oppression they attempt to redress by applying the core tenets of postmodernism. The applied postmodern mind-set on colonialism is similar to the postmodern mind-set, but adds an activist conclusion.

> **An applied postmodern mind-set says**: "The West has constructed the idea that rationality and science are good in order to perpetuate its own power and marginalize nonrational, nonscientific forms of knowledge production from elsewhere. *Therefore, we must now devalue white, Western ways of knowing for belonging to white Westerners and promote Eastern ones (in order to equalize the power imbalance).*"

This practice is frequently referred to as *decolonizing* and seeking *research justice.*

DECOLONIZE EVERYTHING

While, initially, postcolonial Theory scholarship mostly took the form of literary criticism and the discursive analysis of writing about colonialism—and was frequently couched in highly obscure postmodern Theoretical language—the field gradually expanded and simplified. By the early 2000s, the concept of *decolonizing* everything had begun to dominate scholarship and activism, and new scholars were using and developing the concepts in different ways, with more actionable elements. They retained the postmodern principles and themes and extended the focus beyond ideas and speech about literal colonialism to perceived attitudes of superiority towards people of certain identity statuses. These included displaced indigenous groups and people from racial or ethnic minorities who could be considered in some way subaltern, diasporic, or hybrid, or whose non-Western beliefs, cultures, or customs had been devalued. The aims of

postcolonial Theory also became more concrete: focusing less on disrupting discourses they saw as colonialist in the fairly pessimistic way typical of postmodernism and more on taking active steps to decolonize these, using the militant Social Justice approach that has taken hold since 2010. This has mainly occurred via various *decolonize* movements, which can be taken as the product of more recent Theorists having reified the assumptions of postcolonial Theory and put them into action.

What it means to decolonize a thing that is not literally colonized varies considerably. It can refer simply to including scholars of all nationalities and races: this is the primary focus of the United Kingdom's National Union of Students (NUS) campaigns, "Why is My Curriculum White?" (2015) and #LiberateMyDegree (2016).[23] Such campaigns focus on reducing reliance on white scholars from former colonizing powers and replacing them with scholars of color from formerly colonized regions. However, we also see a drive for a diversity of "knowledges" and epistemologies—ways of deciding what is true—under Theory often described as "(other) ways of knowing." This comes with a strong inclination to critique, problematize, and disparage knowledge understood as Western.

This can take the form of reading physical spaces as though they were "texts" in need of deconstruction—an example of how postmodern Theory blurs boundaries and focuses on the power of "language." The 2015 Rhodes Must Fall movement, which began at the University of Cape Town in 2015 as an effort to remove a statue commemorating Cecil Rhodes and later spread to other universities, including Oxford, provides a good example. As a British businessman and politician in southern Africa, Rhodes had been responsible for much of the legal framework of South African apartheid, and therefore it is perfectly reasonable to object to depictions that paint him in a solely favorable light. However, the rhetoric around this movement went far beyond objecting to the exploitative and illiberal practices of apartheid and colonialism. At Oxford, for instance, demands for symbolic changes, such as the removal of "offensive" colonialist statuary and imagery, were wrapped up

with other activist demands.[24] This included yet another push to increase representation of ethnic and racial minorities who agree with Theory on campus and increased focus on *what* was studied in the curriculum and *how* it was being studied.

To elaborate, in the introduction to *Decolonising the University*, volume editors Gurminder K. Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial, and Kerem Nişancıoğlu explain that decolonization can refer to the study of colonialism both in its material manifestations and through discourses, and it can also offer *alternative ways of thinking*.[25] This is a form of *standpoint theory*—the belief that knowledge comes from the lived experience of different identity groups, who are differently positioned in society and thus see different aspects of it.[26] For decolonial scholars, both "Eurocentric forms of knowledge" and "the epistemological authority assigned uniquely to the Western university as the privileged site of knowledge production"[27] are problems, and "the point is not simply to deconstruct such understandings, but to transform them."[28] In other words, by using activism to achieve a symbolic "textual" aim, affecting the statuary on campus, decolonization activists also attempted to bolster their ranks, while "reforming" education to rely more explicitly on their applications of Theory.

Thus, two focal points of postcolonial Theory are evident in the effort to decolonize everything: national origin and race.[29] Bhambra and colleagues, for instance, influenced by Said, see knowledge as situated geographically: "The content of university knowledge remains principally governed by the West for the West."[30] For the Theorist Kehinde Andrews, critical race Theory is more influential, and knowledge is more closely related to skin color: "The neglect of Black knowledge by society is no accident but a direct result of racism." We must, Andrews tells us, "forever leave behind the idea that knowledge can be produced value free. Our politics shape our understanding of the world and the pretence of neutrality ironically makes our endeavours less valid."[31]

Note the assertion that "value free" and "neutral" knowledge is impossible to obtain and must be abandoned forever. Theory holds that objective knowledge—that which is true for everyone, regardless of their identity—is unobtainable, because knowledge is always bound up with cultural values. This is the postmodern knowledge principle. For Theory, the knowledge that is currently most valued is intrinsically white and Western, and it interprets this as an injustice—no matter how reliably that knowledge was produced. This is the postmodern political principle. This common belief is represented by the word "universal" in the "Aims" of the Rhodes Must Fall movement at Oxford, which sought to: "remedy the highly selective narrative of traditional academia—which frames the West as sole producers of universal knowledge—by integrating subjugated and local epistemologies … [and creating] a more intellectually rigorous, complete academy."[32]

Throughout even the most recent applications of Theory, then, we see radical skepticism that knowledge can be objectively, universally, or neutrally true. This leads to a belief that rigor and completeness come not from good methodology, skepticism, and evidence, but from identity-based "standpoints" and multiple "ways of knowing."[33] That such an approach doesn't tend to work is considered unimportant because it is deemed to be more *just*. That is, this belief proceeds from an *ought* that is not necessarily concerned about what *is*.

This view is used to advocate and engage in historical revisionism—rewriting history, often in the service of a political agenda—by accusing rigorous methods of being "positivist" and thus biased. As Dalia Gebrial puts it in *Decolonising the University*:

> The public's sense of what history is remains influenced by positivist tendencies, whereby the role of the historian is to simply "reveal" facts about pasts that are worth revealing, in a process removed from power. This epistemological insistence on history as a positivist endeavour functions as a useful tool of coloniality in the institution, as it effaces the power relations that underpin what the "production of history" has thus far looked like.[34]

The complaint here is, effectively, that history cannot be trusted because it is "written by the winners." While there is some truth beneath that concern, most rigorous, empirical historians attempt to mitigate the tendency of history to be written from the bias of the writer by seeking disconfirming evidence of their claims, to help them get at the truth—which they, unlike Theorists, believe exists. For example, medieval war historians often advise naive readers of accounts of battles to divide the number of soldiers claimed to have been present by ten to get a more realistic figure. This tendency to massively overstate numbers (probably to make the story more exciting) was discovered by empirical historians seeking out records of soldiers' pay. Similarly, empirical feminist scholars have used legal and financial records to reveal that women played a much more active role in society, law, and business than had long been assumed. Our knowledge of history is skewed by the biased records that survive, but the way to mitigate this is to investigate such claims empirically and reveal the falsity of biased narratives, rather than include a greater range of biases and declare some of them immune to criticism.

In addition to criticizing empirical scholarship, decolonial narratives frequently attack rationality, which postcolonial scholars see as a Western way of thinking. For example, the 2018 essay, "Decolonising Philosophy," which appears in the book *Decolonising the University*, begins,

> it will be difficult to contest the idea that, generally speaking, philosophy as a field or a discipline in modern Western universities remains a bastion of Eurocentrism, whiteness in general, and white heteronormative male structural privilege and superiority in particular.[35]

They relate the worth of philosophical concepts to their authors' gender, race, sexuality, and geography—in the typical style of standpoint theory. Ironically, the authors do this by introducing Foucault's idea of "power-knowledge," despite the evidence that Foucault was, in fact, a white Western man, whose influence has been most strongly felt in the West.

Foucault's concept of knowledge and the way in which it is used to deconstruct categories accepted as real is influential on this entire line of

Theoretical thought. It appears, for example, in this description of the mission of decolonization:

> Any serious effort to decolonise philosophy cannot be satisfied with simply adding new areas to an existing arrangement of power/knowledge, leaving the Eurocentric norms that define the field as a whole in place, or reproducing such norms themselves. For example, when engaging in non-European philosophies it is important to avoid reproducing problematic conceptions of time, space and subjectivity that are embedded in the Eurocentric definition of European philosophy and its many avatars.[36]

That is, it is not enough to add other philosophical approaches to the field one wishes to decolonize. Postcolonial Theorists insist European philosophy must be entirely rejected—even to the point of deconstructing *time and space* as Western constructs. (As we shall see, this sort of claim is also found in queer Theory, which operates on very similar postmodern terms, derived from Michel Foucault.)

Within this matured postcolonial Theory, all four of the postmodern themes are evident—the blurring of boundaries, the power of language, cultural relativism, and the loss of the universal and individual in favor of group identity. These themes are explicitly central to the postcolonial Theory mind-set and decolonize movement. We can find them all in this statement of the purpose of decolonizing philosophy:

> Philosophy seems to have a special place among discourses in the liberal arts because it focuses on the roots of the university at large: reason. This includes providing criteria for identifying and demarcating the humanities, the natural sciences and the social sciences, as well as for distinguishing reason from faith, secularism from religion, and the "primitive" and the ancient from the modern. These are central columns in the edifice that sustains modern Western rationality and the modern Western university. The modern Western research university and liberal arts therefore owe much of their basic conceptual infrastructure to philosophical formulations of rationality, universalism, subjectivity, the relationship between the subject and object, truth and method—all of which become relevant targets of critical analysis in the decolonial turn.[37]

This is a textbook example of applied postmodernism, and it is, of course, actionable. The action it advocates is often referred to as "research justice."

ACHIEVING RESEARCH JUSTICE

Research justice acts upon a belief that science, reason, empiricism, objectivity, universality, and subjectivity have been overvalued as ways of obtaining knowledge while emotion, experience, traditional narratives and customs, and spiritual beliefs have been undervalued. Therefore, a more complete and just system of knowledge production would value the latter at least as much as the former—in fact, more, because of the long reign of science and reason in the West. The 2015 book, *Research Justice: Methodologies for Social Change*, edited by Andrew Jolivette, is a key text here. Jolivette, professor and former department chair of American Indian Studies at San Francisco State University, defines the aims of this method in his introduction:

> "[R]esearch justice" is a strategic framework and methodological intervention that aims to transform structural inequalities in research…. It is built around a vision of equal political power and legitimacy for different forms of knowledge, including the cultural, spiritual, and experiential, with the goal of greater equality in public policies and laws that rely on data and research to produce social change.[38]

This is activism. It seeks not only to revolutionize understandings of knowledge and rigor in university curricula—not necessarily to improve them—but also to influence public policies away from evidenced and reasoned work and towards the emotional, religious, cultural, and traditional, with an emphasis on *lived experience*. It seeks to challenge the core understanding of "scholarly research" as the gathering of empirical data for analysis, in order to better understand social issues. This theme comes across most strongly in the 2004 book, *Decolonizing Research in Cross-Cultural Contexts: Critical Personal Narratives*,[39] which focuses on indigenous studies and is edited by Kagendo Mutua, professor of special education at the University of Alabama, and Beth Blue Swadener, Professor of Culture, Society and Education / Justice and Social Inquiry at the University of Arizona. Citing Homi Bhabha, the editors introduce the essays by claiming,

> These works stand at the center of the "beginning of the presencing" of a disharmonious, restive, unharnessable (hence unessentializable) knowledge that is produced at the ex-centric site of neo/post/colonial resistance, "which can never allow the national (*read: colonial/western)* history to look itself narcissistically in the eye."[40] (emphasis in original)

This means that the authors of the essays within this volume are not obliged to make sense, produce reasoned arguments, avoid logical contradiction, or provide any evidence for their claims. The normal expectations of scholarly "research" do not apply when pursuing research justice. This is alarming, and it is justified Theoretically. In the words of professor of indigenous education at the University of Waikato in New Zealand, Linda Tuhiwai Smith,

> [F]rom the vantage point of the colonised, a position from which I write and choose to privilege, the term "research" is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself "research" is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary.[41]

It is unclear how this attitude is likely to help people in the "indigenous world," which, barring the decolonization of time, also happens to have entered the twenty-first century.

Ultimately, "research justice" amounts to judging scholarly productions not by their rigor or quality but by the identity of their producer and privileging those understood by postcolonial theory as marginalized as long as they are advocating knowledge production methods and conclusions that conform to those of postcolonial theory. This is an understandable move for postmodernists, who deny that there can be any objective criteria of rigor or quality, only those that have been privileged and those that have been marginalized. But in science (including social science) there is an objective criterion of quality, namely, correspondence to reality. Some scientific theories work and others don't. It is hard to see how scientific theories that don't correspond with reality and consequently don't work can benefit marginalized people, or anyone.

MAINTAINING THE PROBLEM, BACKWARDS

The attitude that rigorous, evidence-based research and reasoned, non-contradictory arguments belong to the West while experiential, irrational, and contradictory "knowledge" belongs to colonized or displaced indigenous people is of course not universally accepted by colonized and indigenous scholars. Many of them continue to produce empirical and materialist analyses of economic, political, and legal issues in various settings. These scholars criticize the postmodern approach to postcolonialism. Perhaps the most outstanding critic is the Indian postcolonial scholar Meera Nanda. She argues that, by assigning science and reason to the West and traditional, spiritual, experiential beliefs to India, postmodern scholars perpetuate Orientalism and make it very difficult to address the many real issues that can best be tackled using science and reason. In these critics' view, she observes, "modern science is as much a local tradition of the West, as the indigenous knowledge of the non-Western subaltern is a local knowledge of his culture."[42] Thus, criticizing traditional knowledge using science is understood from within postcolonial Theory to be, as Nanda puts it,

> the stuff of "Orientalist" Enlightenment, a colonial modernity which privileges a Western conception of reason and modernity over non-Western ways of knowing and being. We postcolonial hybrids are supposed to have seen through the claims of "universality" and "progress" of science (the scare quotes are obligatory). We no longer believe in the "binaries" between science and non-science, or truth and customary beliefs, but see them both as a little bit of each. This condition of permanent hybridity thus does not put any pressure to resolve any contradiction … : Let a thousand contradictions bloom![43]

Nanda recognizes that the Theoretical approach to postcolonialism maintains the problem of Orientalism by attempting to erect the same categories and simply reverse the power structures (the same very Derridean trick intentionally employed by Spivak). While colonialism constructs the East as a foil to the West, postcolonial Theory intentionally constructs the East in nobly oppressed opposition to the West (while liberalism says that

people are people, wherever they live). For Nanda, this postmodern approach, with its focus on nonclass identities, hinders the technological and social progress that would benefit the poorer people of India and thus is much more in keeping with conservative attitudes than progressive ones.[44] Furthermore, Nanda maintains that it is demeaning to Indian people to assign irrational and superstitious knowledge to them and to assume that science is a tradition that belongs to the West, rather than a uniquely human development that is difficult to achieve, but extremely beneficial to all societies.[45]

Indeed. The postmodern position that Western society is dominated by discourses of science and reason is not supported by the evidence that most of us still value our group narratives, cultures, and beliefs and know little of science. Attacks on science from the religious right and the postmodern left are strong influences on society that always have to be struggled against.

A DANGEROUS, PATRONIZING THEORY

As an applied postmodern Theory, postcolonial Theory is of considerable real-world concern and poses threats to society that the original postmodernism did not. The drives to decolonize everything from hair[46] to English literature curricula,[47] to tear down paintings and smash statues, and to erase history while opening up revisionist discussions of it, are particularly alarming. When Winston Churchill, Joseph Conrad, and Rudyard Kipling become nothing more than symbols of racist imperialism and their achievements and writings are too tainted to be acknowledged, we lose not only the potential for any nuanced discussion of history and progress but also the positive contributions of the men themselves.

More egregiously still, postcolonial Theory, with its disparagement of science and reason as provincial Western ways of knowing, not only threatens the foundations of advanced contemporary societies but also impedes the progress of developing ones. Since many developing countries

would benefit from technological infrastructure, which could ameliorate some of the world's most significant causes of human suffering—malaria, water shortages, poor sanitation in remote rural areas, and the like—this claim is not only factually wrong, morally vacant, and patronizing; it is also negligent and dangerous.

Great practical harm is also done by postcolonialism's cultural relativism, which is found in both its scholarship and activism. It believes that the West, having trampled other cultures and enforced alien moral frameworks on them, must now cease to criticize, or in some cases help more directly, any aspect of those cultures. This results in great ethical inconsistency in human rights activism, with serious real-world consequences. For example, when feminists from Saudi Arabia, secular liberals from Pakistan, and LGBT rights activists from Uganda have attempted to raise the support of the English-speaking world by using hashtags in English on social media to draw attention to human rights abuses, they have received little response from the applied postmodern scholars and activists who might otherwise be assumed to be in their corners. This may seem baffling or hypocritical, but it makes sense within a theoretical framework that does not operate according to universal principles of human rights but believes in binary systems of power, which allow only for the Western oppressor and Eastern (or globally Southern) oppressed. This results in two common claims:

First, postcolonial Theory insists that getting a non-Western culture to accept that there are human rights abuses taking place locally requires colonizing that culture with Western notions of human rights and their violation. This is verboten, because it reinforces the power dynamic that postcolonial Theory exists to dismantle.

Second, postcolonial Theory frequently claims that any human rights abuses occurring in previously colonized countries are the legacy of colonialism and its analysis stops there. This obviously makes such abuses difficult to address in their own contexts and with their own stated

motivations, which are often connected to non-Western religious and cultural beliefs. For instance, the widespread abuse of women, secularists, and LGBT in strict Islamist cultures is not taken as a feature of authoritarian interpretations of Islam—as the Islamists themselves claim—but interpreted as a result of Western colonialism and imperialism, which perverted that culture and caused it to become abusive. This is a direct hindrance to the very secularization campaigns that could help ameliorate those problems.

This arises from first assuming the cause of a phenomenon and then looking for evidence of that cause. Since they look at oppression only in terms of colonialism, colonialism is all these scholars and activists are equipped to find. As a result, not only do they hamstring their ability to understand—and therefore ameliorate—the problems they are seeking to solve, but they also tend to make them worse. This commonly results in a marked tendency to neglect the rights of women and of sexual and religious minorities, unless they are threatened by white Westerners. This goes against achieving social justice—but it's integral to the ideology called Social Justice.

Because they view knowledge and ethics as cultural constructs perpetuated in language, postcolonial Theorists can be extremely difficult to discuss disagreements with. Evidenced and reasoned arguments are understood Theoretically as Western constructs and are therefore considered invalid or even oppressive. Those who disagree with postcolonial Theory are seen as confirming the Theory and as defending racist, colonialist, or imperialist attitudes for their own benefit and to shut out the viewpoints of others.

Furthermore, this scholarship, which proceeds on the assumption that there are power imbalances to be discovered if language and interactions are deconstructed, cannot help but "find" increasing examples of "othering," "Orientalism," and "appropriation" in ever more tendentious ways. This is not a bug, but a feature. It is what the *critical* approach in Theory *means*. There is always more to interpret and more to deconstruct, and, with enough motivation and creativity, anything can be problematized. Intense

sensitivity to language and the reading of power imbalances into all interactions that involve an individual with a marginalized identity and a white Westerner are common to all forms of applied postmodern Social Justice scholarship.

This problem should not be underestimated. We can only learn from the realities of colonialism and its aftermath by studying them rigorously. Those postcolonial scholars and activists who deny the attainability of objective reality and seek to revise history along Theoretical lines are not doing this. Neither are those who reject logical reasoning, evidence-based research, science, and medicine, nor those who argue that space and time themselves are Western constructs, nor those who write incomprehensible, obfuscatory prose and deny that language can have meaning anyway.

These scholars, whose influence far outweighs their numbers, generally trained or work in elite Western academia and operate according to a densely theoretical framework that originated in France and proliferated in the United States and the United Kingdom. Their work is of very little practical relevance to people living in previously colonized countries, who are trying to deal with the political and economic aftermath. There is little reason to believe that previously colonized people have any use for a postcolonial Theory or decoloniality that argues that math is a tool of Western imperialism,[48] that sees alphabetical literacy as colonial technology and postcolonial appropriation,[49] that views research as the production of totalizing meta-texts of colonial knowledge,[50] or that confronts France and the United States about their understanding of big black butts.[51]