

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 under-

stand postmodernism as a rejection of both *modernism*—an intellectual movement that predominated through the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth—and *modernity*—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 *modernism* 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 *modernity*, 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 postmod-

ern 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 intellec-

tuals 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 prostration 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 *meta-narratives*,⁶ which it viewed as a kind of cultural mythology and a signifi-

cant 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 so-

cieties. 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 objec-

tive 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 knower²⁸—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 suprema-

cist, heteronormative conspiracy. Instead, they regard it as the inevitable result of self-perpetuating systems that privilege some groups over others, which constitute an *unconscious*, *uncoordinated* 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 post-colonialism; others that it ended with September 11, 2001, when we entered a new era whose character has yet to be determined. It is cer-

tainly 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.