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Freudianism and Post-Structuralism

The post-structuralist mutation in social theory has a longer history but I see its key sources in two intellectual legacies. One is Freudianism, the idea that the ills of society crystallise in the individual's psyche and have to be cured there; the other is the resistance to egalitarian mass society, in which this individual appears to lose its separate identity. This second root is perhaps best associated with the thinking of Friedrich Nietzsche.

Freud fled to Britain and many Freudians migrated to the United States to escape the Nazi terror in the 1930s. In Germany, Freud's thinking had by that time been absorbed, among others, by Marxists dissatisfied with the economistic undertow of the Marxism of the Second (mainstream Social Democrats) and Third (Soviet) Internationals. In the migration across the Atlantic, this Freudian Marxism, the 'Frankfurt School', was an important strand. In the 1960s, some of its most prominent representatives, such as Herbert Marcuse, became icons of the student movement that exploded in 'May 68'. Others wanted a more complete break with Marxism and it was out of this more radical strand, in combination with the anti-egalitarian individualism of Nietzsche and his mentor, Schopenhauer, that post-structuralism formed. Its success in the 1980s and 90s had to do with the heightened individualism that resulted from the neoliberal economic policies of the epoch, which still today have a powerful hold on the dominant ideology.

In this chapter we look first at the legacy of Freudianism and the Frankfurt School. We then turn to the approach associated with Michel Foucault, who sees power as exercised through language and discourse. Finally we turn to the notion of post-rationality, the idea of randomness and contingency taken to its logical conclusion.

1. THE FREUDIAN LEGACY

In key respects, post-structuralism was a product of the May 68 movement and the role played in that tumultuous event. by bureaucratic-representational socialist/communist parties and trade union organisations. The French Communist party, notably, saw the upsurge of social contestation at the time as a chance to improve the material position of the working class, very much in the way in which the Popular Front movement in which it participated in the 1930s, had resulted in the Matignon agreements which brought a shorter working week, higher wages and paid vacation to the French working class. Factory occupations, let alone Flower Power and sexual liberation, were not things the party machine was particularly keen on. In the circumstances this led it to try and keep the student movement. in which these themes were floating around freely, away from the workers' movement. Here the party and its powerful trade union, CGT, exerted real influence. In these circumstances a group of intellectuals broke with the Communist Party on the grounds that there was no point in exchanging a bureaucratic capitalist machinery of control, for a bureaucratic machinery of control operating in the name of socialism.

One key intellectual resource mobilised by this heterogeneous group was the legacy of Sigmund FREUD (1856-1939), the founder of *psychoanalysis*. in his psychiatric practice and theoretical work, Freud developed themes distilled from individual patients' histories into sometimes spectacular theories of

civilisation and society. His work inspired the 1930s Frankfurt School of Marxists as well as later developments such as the work of Deleuze and Guattari.

De-Centring the Subject

Psychoanalysis can be argued to have emerged when the bourgeois family in the West lost its function as a commodity-producing unit in the reproduction of society (a function shifting to the factory employing wage labour). The family now developed into a refuge in which an older, less cruel and demanding life, could perhaps be preserved. Personal relations, 'privacy' in this way became abstracted from society, the public sphere. Freud's theories aimed to gain insight into the construction of *identity* in this context.

Freudianism, writes Yuri Slezkine (2004: 319), shared key concerns with Marxism about the ills of urban capitalist society.

> The salvation it promised, however, was strictly individual, always provisional, and ultimately dependent on marketable professional enterprise. Freudianism aspired to be the religion of modern capitalism as much as Marxism aspired to be the religion of anti-capitalism: it appeared to provide a scientific justification for the liberal focus on the incorrigible individual; applied the tenets of political liberalism to the mysteries of the human soul; applied the American Declaration of Independence to the religious search for personal redemption. The pursuit of individual happiness—like the maintenance of a decent society—turned out to be a matter of managing imperfection, of imposing fragile checks and balances on ineradicable internal pressures.

Let us look at what these pressures are and how Freud conceptualised them (cf. relevant texts in the *Freud Archive*).

Modern bourgeois society, and one major strand of theories it brings forth (our subjectivist theories), are constructed around the conception of the *Ego*, the 'I' first recognised in this sense by Descartes in the 17th century. Conceptions of the private (life, property, interest) are grafted on this ego, and both the development of commercial society and capital, and theories of rational subjectivity, can be traced back to it.

Freud in his studies took the position that the 'Ego' one encounters is not a unity but a fragmented construction. It unifies, in a concrete, single person, certain attributes of identity which are passed on to the child growing up in a family (and attending school and other instances of socialisation) through which society impresses itself on the individual. The authority of the father in this way transfers social authority (of the state, the church, etc.) Freud calls this the *Super-ego*. But there is also a force at work in the Ego which he designates as the *'Id'*, Latin for 'it', the life-force as such. As a result, the subject is de-centred into a three-dimensional entity, in which the Super-ego 'over-determines' the Ego, which rests on the Id as its substratum.

Freud argued that this composite subject is no longer driven by instincts alone—instincts that provide the inborn reflexes through which an animal adapts to its surroundings and which ensure its reproduction. Instead, a specifically human force, *Eros*, (after the Greek god of love) is at work here—not just as sexuality, but also more broadly as social action, fantasy, creativity, etc. However, the lust for life is accompanied by its opposite, the death wish, from the Greek, *thanatos*.

Freud locates the subject's drives in the context of the family and the process of growing up. In fin-de-siècle Vienna, Freud's practice brought scores of young women to his psychiatrist's couch. They were often subject to 'hysteria' and repeated fainting (according to cynics, because they could not breathe in their tight corsets fashionable in the upper and middle classes at the time). The women revealed to him a shocking catalogue of sexual harassment by their fathers, but after the initial elation about having found the clue to their psychological condition, Freud soon had to conclude that in most cases he had been told their fantasies rather than their real experiences.

This led him, paradoxically, to a better explanation: that the erotic-libidinal identity of the young person develops through the complex interaction between child and parents. Certain desires, such as the young girl's arousal of sexual feeling for the father and hence rivalry with the mother, and the same for the young boy 's lust for his mother and hatred of his father, within the family are repressed and displaced to the

subconscious, a level in human consciousness where feelings of shame and guilt, affection, etc. are stored once the *pleasure principle*, the idea of instant gratification of libidinal desire, is repressed by the inculcation and acceptance of the *reality principle*. This is the realisation that there is a society out there in which you cannot always have what you want. Thus the Super-ego is integrated into the Ego, the Id is tamed, and ideally a balanced, mature personality emerges at the end of the line.

The *neurotic*, in whose personality this balance is not achieved, according to Freud not only tells the story of his/her own personal life. In fact, the personal life-history repeats an anthropological 'story' which Freud reconstructed in a series of writings between 1912 and 1939 (*Totem and Taboo*, *Civilisation and its Discontent*, and *Moses and Monotheism*) as the common background of the individual neurosis. Freud also does not fail to note that the inventory of all myth and religion tends to revolve around particular versions of this grand story.

- It begins with the original human horde, which is ruled by the all-powerful father, who is entitled to all females in the horde, and who is the father of all the young. He rules with terrible brutality. To the other men (brothers, sons) this rule includes their castration or their being driven out to live on their own.

- The next step in civilisation is that the brothers club together to kill the father. After killing him, they eat him in a ritual act to appropriate his qualities, an act in which hatred and rejection and the expression of admiration and honour, are conflated.

- Next, the brothers, fearing a fratricidal fight over succession, agree a social contract which prescribes that the men renounce the claim to be the ruler, and renounce the right to marry mothers and sisters (the incest taboo). The original father however is revered in the form of a *totem*, a sacred animal or other token which signifies the origin of the group. The totem is honoured with dedicated festivals but also ritually eaten, testifying to the ambivalence of the attitude towards the father figure (totemism) (Freud, 1967: 102-4).

Freud's thesis is that this original story is the counterpart of the individual life-cycle. His psychological practice led him to the conclusion that a child experiences all kinds of sexual emotions until around the age of five, after which (as a result of the mutation from animal existence and the need for a longer period of learning and training, *neotenia*) the so-called latency period sets in. In puberty, sexuality resurfaces for reproductive purposes, but its content (sexual orientation and complexes) in the case of each personality has by then already been determined by experiences, including traumas, incurred during the first five years. This individual story is broadly a repeat performance of the original anthropological one.

As a result, the original fearful admiration of the all-powerful father, which in girls is expressed in sexual desire for the father, and lust for the mother on the part of the son (but compounded by fear of castration by the father), can result in traumata, inhibitions and phobias if not properly balanced (Freud, 1967: 94-6). The technique of *psychoanalysis* is to try and reach the part of memory (the subconscious) that goes back to the first five or so years by letting a patient relate his/her anxieties by way of free association, and thus find the source of any neurosis.

Whether the anthropological narrative stands up in light of what we know today, is one thing. But what is very plausible (and is supported by the work of psychologists like Jean Piaget), is that the sedimented history of the human species and the evolution of its social forms, is somehow inscribed in the development of the personality.

Libido, the emotional force that drives the human being (and which is not to be equated with sexuality only, but with a lust for life generally, like Eros) also has an economic aspect. Freud writes that it is expressed in the vital role of work for the development of the personality.

> No other technique for the conduct of life binds the individual so firmly to reality as an emphasis on work, which at least gives him a secure place in one area of reality, the human community. The possibility of shifting a large number of libidinal components—narcissistic, aggressive, even erotic—towards professional work and the human relations connected with it lends it a value that is in no way inferior to the indispensable part it plays in asserting and justifying a person's existence in society (Freud, 2002: 22 note).

This idea has also been interpreted differently, by not seeing work as such as libidinal economy, but by assuming that the libido must be suppressed, displacing the drive to other, more 'worthy' preoccupations. This was taken up by the thinkers of the *Frankfurt School* in the 1920s, the first group of Marxists who tried to synthesise the legacy of Marx (emphasis on society and classes) with the legacy of Freud (emphasis on the personal and the psychological).

Anti-Fordism : The Critique of Consumerism

The Frankfurt School (the Institute of Social Research at the University of F.) was founded in 1923 but is primarily associated with Max HORKHEIMER (1895-1973), who became its director in 1930 (pictured left) and with Theodor ADORNO (1903-1969). (The man scratching his head is Jürgen Habermas).

The Institute brought together a range of scholars concerned with how contemporary capitalist society affected the personality. Wilhelm Reich (1897-1957), who developed a Freudian Marxism based on the analysis of the libido, was not part of this group but not less important.

The use of Freudian insights (repression, libido, identification…) by the Frankfurt School thinkers to account for the often erratic, or at least unexpected ways in which people dealt with the experience of crisis and rapid social change, extended the application of dialectics to the entire range of individual and social psychological processes. Uncovering the paradoxical turns of the collective mind-set in response to capitalist development and liberalisation. Erich Fromm's title 'Fear of Freedom' thus suggests that freedom is in fact an often threatening condition, to which people may respond by fighting for the social bonds, however oppressive, they feel protected by.

Horkheimer and Adorno in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* of 1944 (sample chapter) argue that it is not enlightenment, but totalitarianism which looms at the end of the road of liberal-capitalist development. In exile in the United States after Hitler closed down the Frankfurt institute, the refugees had reason to reflect on why, if a capitalist crisis like the Great Depression struck, people did not rally to socialism but to the violent attempt to uphold the existing property regime by fascism. But they were no less horrified by what they saw as the breathtaking emptiness and superficiality of American consumer culture.

copyright Marcuse family

Herbert MARCUSE (1898-1979), another prominent member of the Frankfurt School, also fled to the United States but unlike Adorno and Horkheimer, he remained there. Marcuse would become the icon of the May 1968 movement.

In *Eros and Civilisation* of 1955 Marcuse develops Freud's idea that the inhibition of the primary instincts produces civilisation. However, he tends to subsume Freud's insights into a materialist ontology again.

> The metapsychological implications of Freud's theory go … beyond the framework of sociology. The primary instincts pertain to life and death—that is to say, to organic matter as such. And *they link organic matter back with unorganic matter, and forward with its higher mental manifestations*. In other words, Freud's theory contains certain assumptions on the structure of the principal modes of being: it contains *onto*-logical implications (Marcuse, 1969: 94, first emphasis added).

Note how the connections here are ordered between unorganic matter, to organic matter, to 'higher mental *manifestations*', i.e., the classical naturalistic-materialist position. The alternative is to assume that *society* is the medium through which ideas are formed relatively independently of the natural foundations of life or the economy; they are not the highest

form of matter.

Marcuse's work, like Adorno's and Horkheimer's before him, focused on the failure of the workers to actually revolt against the capitalist order. Consumer society corrupts the working class and turns its members from workers into consumers. *Not the libidinal aspects of work, but those associated with consumption, are what drive people and this disables them as revolutionary subjects.*

In *One-Dimensional Man* of 1964, Marcuse articulated his disillusion with this corrupted working class. Instead he placed his hopes in a motley collection of marginalised groups, schizophrenics and other socially disqualified people. This became one of the themes in the 1960s student movement. The idea that declaring somebody mentally ill is a form of social discipline, and that illness should be treated not in an asylum but by changing society, branched off into a field of its own, with 'anti-psychiatrists' such as R. D. Laing and Thomas Szasz in the forefront.

Libidinal Political Economy

Freud's idea of libidinal economy is also taken up by Gilles DELEUZE (1925-'95)

and co-author Félix GUATTARI (1930-'92).

Deleuze and Guattari see society as a complex of energy flows that are driven by libido. In a foreword to the essays which Guattari wrote between 1965 and '70, Deleuze argues that a new conception of the subject, a new group subjectivity, must be developed to understand the

structure of society. Guattari's essays document their rejection of a straightforward, linear class model of exclusive belonging: you are either on the capitalist side, or, with the party, on the worker's side.

In the May movement, the French Communist party had denounced the rival left formations that sprang up everywhere around it, as *groupuscules* (tiny little groups). In his essays Guattari makes the statement, 'we are all groupuscules' by which he means that one can belong to a range of groups without ever being entirely enclosed in one. These multiple small groups can change and dissolve, and a person moves through them as they (the groups) communicate with each other. Because all groups are open to each other and none of them can claim to represent/offer complete security and protection, or being a force on the high road of history or even for eternity, *the reality in which individuals move is fluid and the individual itself is a 'groupuscule'* (Deleuze in Guattari, 1976: 7).

This goes back to the original Freudian idea of the de-centred subject. It also identifies the potential schizophrenia in these multiple memberships and the fragmented and elusive nature of the identity of the subject. The Ego and the Superego come about in this confusing mishmash of constitutive forces; not, says Deleuze, in the family (not primarily). Our loves and choices of partners etc., he argues, 'derive less from a mythical Mummy/Daddy than from a social real, from the interferences and effects of flows which have been libidinally captured' (Deleuze in Guattari, 1976: 8). Why bother about a castration complex (a Freudian psychological condition) if the tasks of repression are taken on directly by the state? (the example given is the state of Soviet-style socialism).

These are the themes raised by Deleuze and Guattari and to which they provide the answer that social problems (and issues of political economy) do not manifest themselves in the subject through his/her growing up in a family, but *are directly present in the constitution of the subject's identity, socially*.

> The wish as libido is everywhere and is always already present, sexuality penetrates the entire social field, interconnects with it, is coincident with the flows that are at the basis of objects, persons and group symbols, whose intersection and constitution are dependent on it themselves.... Thus the political economy as such, the economy
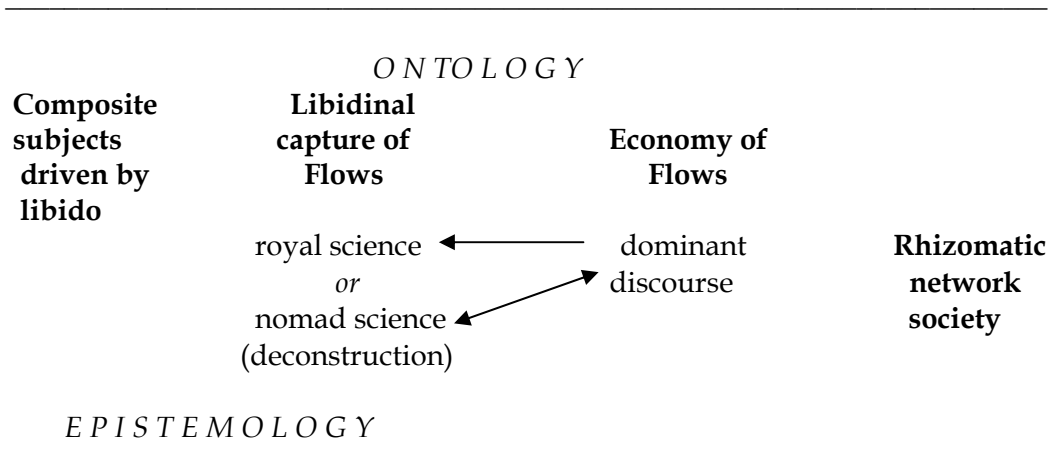
of flows, is subconsciously libidinal: there are no two economies; *the wish or libido is nothing else but the subjectivity of political economy* (Deleuze in Guattari, 1976: 10).

Teresa Brennan in her book, *The Exhaustion of Modernity*, takes up this theme by claiming that contemporary capitalism has succeeded in mobilising the infantile desire for instant gratification (the baby's desire to be fed by the mother's breast) by consumer credit and other means. Thus it works to effect a more general infantilisation of society which is organised around the pleasure principle and rejects the reality principle (Brennan, 2000).

The ontology of this strand of post-structuralism thus presents the image of a world of socially fragmented individuals (people with manifold roles and identities: one is a respected doctor or a stock broker in the daytime, a gambling addict or 'blade runner' at night). Drivers and triggers work on this subject from all sides, inside/outside. Manuel Castells' idea of a network society is a 'light' version of this multi-dimensional universe. Deleuze and Guattari in their later work compare the network society to a *rhizome*, the root systems of mushrooms, which are not systemically subdivided like tree roots, but are randomly interconnected webs, through which nutrients likewise pass randomly. In terms of epistemology, they claim that mainstream knowledge, or *royal science*, is confronted by *nomad* science. This is the free-flowing, uninhibited exploration of theoretical space by the roving element that faces the fixed positions in which the dominant discourse has entrenched itself.

In our figure, the post-structuralist strand would look like the following. A few terms such as discourse (Foucault) and deconstruction (Derrida) from sections that follow, have been added to give body to the epistemological side, which here should be identified as such; 'history' as a comprehensive structure in which humanity evolves, in this tradition tends to be dismissed as a 'grand narrative' (Lyotard, cf. below) that only leads to bloodbaths.

Figure 10.1. The Freudian Lineage of Post-Structuralism in GPE

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O N TO L O G Y

**Composite
subjects
driven by
libido**

**Libidinal
capture of
Flows**

**Economy of
Flows**

royal science   ◄——————   dominant
            or   discourse
nomad science ◄
(deconstruction)

**Rhizomatic
network
society**

E P I S T E M O L O G Y

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As all figures, this can only be a tentative one. Post-structuralism is even more difficult than other approaches to pin down because it evades or even rejects a systematic exposition of its own principles, and in that is not a single approach, but a field.

2. DISCOURSE AND POWER

The struggle against the ideological hold of an ossified party Marxism over the Left also stimulated reflection on how the ability to craft a particular political language is itself an aspect of power—ultimately, the power of liberal capitalist society in which everything today has become immersed.

Language and Semiotics

In the twentieth century, neo-positivism came to rely strongly on new developments in the understanding of language. The study of language as a system of meaning and communication systems was placed on a new foundation by the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de SAUSSURE (1857-1913), at the beginning of the century.

It has to be stressed that this was a deeply *structuralist* enterprise (influencing the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss among others) that only later became part of the post-structuralist strand via Foucault. Since Saussure is concerned primarily with the accuracy of meaning and the rules of communication procedure through language or signs, his insights filtered into neo-positivist thinking about meaningful statements.

The science Saussure established is called *semiotics*, the science of all communication systems other than natural languages—the science of 'signals, signs and symbols' (Mounin, 1970: 226; cf. 7). But since we will interpret these signs always in language terms, the one cannot be separated from the other (cf. Saussure's *Lectures on General Linguistics*, 1910).

Language and communication are made up of the following elements.

- The parties between whom the communication takes place: somebody 'makes a sign' intended to be recognised by an intended receiver, who will be influenced by it. The signal and its effect can be *intentional* or *unintentional* or a combination of both: when we blush when we say something, we give a signal we may not have intended to add to what we said. The same with intonation, body language, but also choice of words.

- This sign can be part of *temporal sequence* or set in a *spatial* context. Language has a time dimension, we have to wait for a sentence to be finished or almost, or a line to come to an end, before we know what is meant. A pictogram, on the other hand, a diagram, or a map, we take in at once as a single image.

- In every message, there is a *signified aspect*: that which is being conveyed by (sign) language; and a *signifier*: the word, the picture. Many words or signs are imbalanced in this respect in the sense that there are signifiers which are widely used but not necessary refer to something we can unequivocally identify. The word 'freedom' for instance is sometimes referred to as an 'empty signifier' although it tends to be highly emotive. According to Saussure, a sign (word, sound) is *arbitrary*. The word 'horse' has no inherent connection to the animal (if we would use 'knurk' to denote it, nobody would complain as long as everybody is aware that it refers to what we now know is a horse). Clearly this poses a fundamental problem for restoring a connection between a word, let alone a more complex statement, and the aspect of the world it refers to. A sign is also *discrete.* Where 'horse' ends, and 'cat' begins, is equally clear. A *symbol* on the other hand is not arbitrary and its limits are not drawn neatly either (Mounin, 1970: 70). When a leader's statue presents him on horseback, this symbolic attribute usually means to evoke an association of power which would be lacking if he would be represented sitting in a chair with a cat on his lap. It becomes more fuzzy when for instance Dutch queen Emma's statue in Amsterdam pictures her on horseback, but not on a war horse but an elegant riding horse.

- A natural language is made up of two types of units, it is 'doubly articulated' (Mounin, 1970: 43, 77): *units of meaning*, 'morphèmes' in Saussure, from the Greek for 'form' (the actual words, 'first articulation'); and 'phonèmes', *sound units* ('second articulation'). A natural language works as an optimal code because with some tens of phonemes and several thousands of morphemes, billions of messages are made possible in the most economical way.

Even if taken apart into its components and separated as above, language poses enormous problems for the neat procedures envisaged by the neo-positivist thinkers. If the aim is to lay down the rules for what constitutes an unequivocally meaningful statement, a natural language is about the worst possible medium to use. Leibniz already argued that ultimately, real science would be expressed entirely in numbers, and the

preference for mathematics in science, justified or not, expresses the same sort of exasperation with language.

A natural language is subjective and emotive, it is an expression and reflection of the reality as a subject lives it. Whereas a 'code' (say, for horse we use knurk) is closed and explicit, language is implicit, full of hidden messages and loaded with symbolisms (intonation, gesture and other body language are ways in which symbols are enmeshed into a message). Also, the natural language is always in development and infinite in its uses—new words, new ways of using words, new associations. Yet we treat and teach language as if it is a closed system, a finite collection of words and rules (which is why the linguist, Noam Chomsky, has famously claimed that we can establish the rules of any living language on common principles) (Mounin, 1970: 82).

Adam Smith already wrote about language and there is also an important strand of thought in the pragmatist tradition which sees language as a set of speech and communication *habits* (a key term in the pragmatist/institutionalist tradition). The pragmatist, Charles Peirce, is important here (Mounin, 1970: 57-9, 202, cf. our Chapter 5).

Discourse, Truth and Power

Through Michel FOUCAULT (1926-1984) semiotics was made part of an analysis of structures of power.

Foucault's thinking incorporates key insights of the lineage discussed in section 1 concerning the shaping of a person's identity and the imposition of authority on it, the aspect that Freud called the Superego. Deleuze was one of Foucault's students; he certainly completed the leap from structuralism (which is still very strong in Foucault) to post-structuralism.

In Foucault's history of ideas, every age is seen as producing a

particular intellectual horizon, or *episteme*, before which truth is conceptualised and translated into social practice and power over it. Each age in other words has its own 'truth', a dominant truth against which it is difficult to rebel without coming into conflict with the power structures of society (cf. first three chapters of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 1969; and Selby, 2007).

The routinisation of certain language patterns and discourses is made possible thanks to a reservoir of accepted 'wisdom' which underlies day-to-day judgements (Gramsci's 'common sense'). As Wertheim has argued (1977), there certainly exists a *counterpoint* to ruling ideas, but it is usually not present as an alternative, coherent set of ideas, but as sayings, jokes, folk songs, and slang. But just as we would not assign a label like 'truth' to sayings, folk songs etc., so post-rationalism denies the claim to truth to the alternative—officially enshrined rationality, produced by Deleuze's and Guattari's 'royal science' (cf. above). This denial rests on the *dismissal of the claim to objectivity*, not on formal grounds (a folk-song is a valid a source of truth as is the Encyclopaedia Britannica).

Now if the world of 'things' is so comprehensively enveloped in 'words', it may well be that the things are not what they seem either, and indeed may not be things to begin with. Here we encounter a radical re-interpretation of the very idea of the objectivity of the social structure, a deepening of the critique of (social) reality that was already begun by institutionalism, constructivism, and other approaches.

The state for instance, at one extreme will be understood as such a 'thing', a fixed structure. As we saw, this was challenged already by Poulantzas and others. Slavoj Žižek takes this critique of the objectivity of social structures further by his notion of a 'sublime object', a term originally coined by the post-Freudian psycho-analyst, Jacques Lacan. In Bratsis' words (2006: 22), 'Beyond the physical characteristics of an object, an abstract quality, one secured by the symbolic order, can come to be ascribed to it—raising the functional status of that object to an acute level of ideological importance' (cf. Vighi & Feldner, 2007).

The concept of the state is such a *sublime object*: its importance derives

from its place in the order of things, its representation in discourse, and the hold of that discourse over people's minds. Hence the state is not an objective reality in its own right (a collection of state apparatuses), but it is (re-) produced in social practice, in everyday life. Here the essential demarcations of the state's domain (the distinction between public and private, politics and the economy, the domestic and the foreign) take shape and are reproduced (Bratsis, 2006: 23).

Occupying a particular terrain by successfully introducing a discourse to describe and situate it in a context and connect it with definite (positive or negative) associations, is a key factor in establishing these demarcations. Thus a privatisation policy is made successful in part because of the effective association of 'private' with efficient, unburdened by bureaucracy, fast and result-oriented, and so on. As a sublime concept, 'private' can be moulded by words to a considerable degree.

In the same way, 'reform' and 'change' are subject to such word-play and changes of meaning and association. In the hegemonic discourse of the 1970s (following on the student and workers' revolt), the use of the terms reform and change served to satisfy the groundswell of desire for a more profound social change, because the class struggles of the period fed the idea that true democracy was only possible by seriously limiting private capital's grip on society, or even transcend capitalism altogether. Reforms included socialising slices of corporate profit (wage-earner funds and comparable proposals), reinforcing co-determination structures in the corporation, and other means of rolling back the discipline of capital on society.

In the neoliberal counteroffensive of the 1980s and 90s, an important role was played by changing the practical association of reform. Indeed its thrust was entirely reversed, although it retained the more fundamental association of shaking up encrusted structures. So the idea breaking up the old order that animated the May 1968 movement was retained, but it was now applied to deepening the discipline of capital. Reform now meant the opposite of what it meant a decade before — privatisation, liberalisation, flexibilisation of labour and reducing social protection. Change is the process in which reform never ends, although

cynics have commented that the daily use of 'change' also serves to suggest speed and purposefulness when there are no actual proposals to make and those in charge don't even know where to go except that they should not be seen doing nothing. If the mood that change is ongoing, takes hold, the idea of resisting existing circumstances and changing society is made meaningless: change is already at the heart of the government programme!

The point to retain is that the ability to mould the discourse and ensure its broad adoption in society, is a key aspect of power. With 'truth' we don't get very far in analysing this; the truth is that reform in the 1970s meant something opposite from how it is used today, *there is no objective standard somewhere outside the actual social process against which we can measure whether social-democratic reform or neoliberal reform go to the heart of what reform means.* One aspect of this is that in the exercise of power through discourse, there is a preference for 'empty signifiers' of which the meaning can be inflected in all kinds of directions—freedom, progress, reform, change, the general interest, universal well-being, the peace process, human rights, humanitarian intervention, …and so on.

3. POST-RATIONALITY

In many ways, post-structuralism is already announced in constructivism (intersubjectivity) and in institutionalism with its idea of random habit formation. Indeed in our first few chapters, the idea of a rational subject was more and more eclipsed while going through the different subjectivist theories: from Rational Choice to Weberian action theory and on to institutionalism. By several steps, the rationality of self-interested utility maximising is replaced by instrumental + value rationality, and then further by habits. So in a sense, there is nothing new in claiming that the notion of the rational subject can be subverted, because this occurred in the development of subjectivist theories itself already.

But how about the objective world? If rationality (conceived loosely as a 'logic', a principle of order) is not in the subject in one way or another, can we accept that it is not in the objective world either?

Rationality as a Function of Power

One key element in post-rationalist thought is that claims made about the objective world are themselves an expression of power relations, and cannot be assumed to have any status outside of them. The objectification of the political economy, Daly (2004: 1) argues, 'has to be considered in strictly hegemonic terms; terms that… are the condition of possibility for a politicisation of political economy.'

Politics in other words occupies a position of supremacy here, for there is no way in which a truth can exist and be accepted as such on a meaningful scale that would basically contradict existing patterns. Critique, then, turns into critical practice which cannot possibly be confined to the realm of contemplative thought. This idea of truth as power, developed by Foucault, is at the basis of his understanding of how a governing discourse operates.

Rationality in this perspective is itself an aspect of rule. Laws in the scientific sense and laws in the juridical sense are not just using identical words by accident, but in Foucault's terms, 'one of the Enlightenment's tasks was to multiply Reason's political powers' (quoted in Amin and Palan, 2001: 563). Indeed, as Daly writes, the materialist understanding of political economy, interpreting society as a straightforward emanation of nature, via the economy, established a continuity between objective rationality (nature) and subjective rationality (self-interested utility maximisation).

> As the figure of God progressively receded, the thinkers of the Enlightenment began to put their faith in the analytic discovery of founding principles for the construction of a rational social order that would in turn secure the conditions for secular emancipation. Such principles became the essential focus for an emerging 'natural science' of political economy. If the medieval period was dominated by a theological project of interpreting God's laws, the success of the new age was seen largely in terms of working with what were perceived as the underlying laws of economic reality. In this way, the economy was idealised as an object of first principles, of *a priori* foundation, around which it was rationally and morally incumbent to construct society (Daly, 2004: 1).

In classical political economy this was still entirely explicit; between its materialist ontology and the 'correct' subjective rationality there existed no discontinuity or inconsistency. To Smith, political economy actually constituted 'a branch of the science of the statesman or legislator', which would allow *rational government* (quoted in Daly, 2004: 2). This illustrates what Foucault means when he sees rationality as part of the state's extended reach in society.

Marxism broke up the continuity and consistency of materialist political economy, throwing into disarray the notion of the naturalness of market economy and the rationality of 'economic man'. This opened the field for indeterminacy which the post-structuralists have taken to its extreme. For Marxism, rationality is historical: what Hegel calls the 'world spirit', the rationality of the world, is turned into a *result* of the historical process, rather than its presupposition. In post-structuralism, however, the world as it is (being experienced) and the subject's mental powers in coming to grips with it/with the experience, are rational only in the immediate, temporally and spatially bounded, encounter of subject and object. There are continuities here with hermeneutics. In the footsteps of Martin Heidegger's notion of 'destructive retrieval', which strips experience of superfluous philosophising and retains the primordial from which real insights flow (Odysseos 2007: 46), Jacques Derrida developed his method of *deconstruction* (see 'What Is Ideology' from *Spectres of Marx*).

This easily leads to a return to subjectivism altogether. Thus Amin and Palan argue that constructivism and institutionalism, from different angles, prefigure what they term a non-rationalist approach (what I prefer to call post-rationality).

- In hermeneutics and radical constructivism (a constructivism denying the existence of an objective referent and only recognising socially constructed reality), post-rationality is contained in the acceptance that reason is intra/inter-subjective (Amin and Palan, 2001: 564-5)

- In institutionalism, habit of mind already suggests we are moving away from anything like a measurable truth. In post-rationality

this is then developed to its final conclusion: truth as practice, the habit of accepting a particular line of thought as true. 'All we have …are contingent truths, based on cognition through enactment and dwelling in the world, as well as through highly contextualized cultural filters', 'truth as institutional recurrence' (Ibid.)

The very idea that truth/knowledge is the result of a movement of some facticity from the objective into the subjective realm, has been dropped here.

One line in post-rationality is therefore towards extreme subjectivity — to everyone their own life-world, experience, truth. The other is to refer back to the Freudian lineage (discussed in section 1), and see the interconnections, networks of action, encounter, and perception, as premised on libidinal flows.

As Daly notes, action itself, acts which (re-)produce power, 'politics', cannot possibly be an entirely subjective undertaking. They are *a systemic effect of disturbance which brings to light the non-naturalness of society*, the fact of its being engaged in the process of its own re-making. Action may be driven by libido and can therefore not be understood as political (or economic) but only as *a totality of existence reflected in the libidinous drives* of humanity and therefore requiring, for its understanding, all the traditional fields of social science plus literature, aesthetics, linguistics, history of art (Amin and Palan, 2001: 566-7).

This takes us to the very end of the enterprise that began with lifting out the economy from the social whole in theory and practice (capitalism in real life and economics in academia). It does not mean that it is the conclusive end: the very notions of post-structuralism and post-rationality rebel against their being cast as the ultimate truth. All approaches discussed are (if not in equal measure) necessary to be studied and critically assimilated to obtain an understanding of the shifting grounds of history and how its lived and experienced. Each on the other hand also has regressive and sectarian aspects which hinder the grasping of the world around/inside us, and post-structuralism is no

exception. This takes us to the anti-modernist undertow in this (field of) approach(es).

Post-Modernism and Anti-Modernism

The Enlightenment was about establishing the authority of the modern state and with it, the establishment of an incontrovertible, authoritative rationality with its claim to objectivity (albeit either in the subject or in the object). The contemporary experience, in which the maxim of 'people making their own history' has become central, is (in Daly's words)

> characterised by the steady erosion of the logic of necessity that we find in orthodox Marxism. This movement is most notably associated with "postmodernists" like Foucault, Lyotard and Derrida, among others, but is also reflected in such thinkers as Gramsci, Hilferding and paradoxically Marx himself' (Daly, 2004: 5).

It has been accompanied by an undertow of anti-modernism that goes back to fin de siècle romanticism, exemplified notably by the figure of Nietzsche.

Friedrich NIETZSCHE (1844-1900) followed in the footsteps of Arthur Schopenhauer, who after initial attempts to join the ranks of the great philosophical system builders of his generation (Hegel, Schelling and the Schlegel brothers), shifted to a new, highly literary, romantic pessimism (fragments of *The World as Will and Representation*, 1819). The literary form that Schopenhauer pioneered was that of glosses and aphorisms rather than systematic exposition, and Nietzsche took over this method. Thus he avoided the presentation of a formalised system but rather worked through ironic and iconoclastic comments on society.

Nietzsche was of the same generation, and shared the outlook of, the Italian elitists; he was a close friend of Richard Wagner for a time. Wagner

shared his anti-modernism and the harking back to an heroic age in the Middle Ages or antiquity. All these men resisted modernity throughout, not just the labour movement and grimy urban life, but liberalism and capitalism as well. Nietzsche in this sense expresses, in Deppe's phrase, 'the pessimistic mood of young bourgeois intellectuals' in the closing stages of the 19th century (Deppe, 1999: 109). Burckhardt, who as noted wrote a history of the Renaissance in this spirit, bitterly complained (as in Jaspers 1964: 48) that once material improvement becomes the guiding principle in society, a great figure embodying the 'pathos of the age' is no longer possible.

Indeed, Nietzsche's diatribes against the equalisation tendency of modern society which elevates the dumb masses ('the herd') to a position of power, and his heroisation of a supposed integral human being of the Renaissance, the *Übermensch*, articulate key aspects of this transition. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche identified the Jews as the primary force in the rebellion of the masses. They had succeeded in imparting a new attractiveness of life on earth by blending wealth and violence, evil and sensuality into one single concept, just as they prepared the way for the dangerous conflation of 'poor' with 'holy'. 'They mark the beginning of the slave rebellion in morals' (quoted in Slezkine 2004: 55).

Nietzsche specifically rails against the new middle class in his posthumous *The Will to Power*:

> today, in the era in which the state has acquired an absurdly fat belly, in all fields and disciplines, there are, in addition to the workers proper, also "representatives"… Our modern life is extremely costly because of this mass of intermediaries; in a city of antiquity on the other hand…one acted for oneself and would have given nothing for such a modern representative or intermediary— except then, a kick in the ass! (Nietzsche 1959: 59, aphorism 75).

From this vantage point, any form of collective undertaking is suspect and a radical, romanticised subjectivism emerged from it. For Nietzsche the world is without logic, historical development, or meaning. 'Gone is the idea, so much a part of the natural law tradition, of an objective order of being and value' (Seidman, 1983: 58). Instead, 'value, meaning and identity are creations or projections of the imaginative, reasoning, or

moral activity of the free subject' (cf. his *Beyond Good and Evil*, 1886). Like many other thinkers in this strand, Nietzsche also questions the notion of the rational subject: 'The subject is multiplicity that built an imaginary unity for itself,' he writes in *The Will to Power* (quoted in Odysseos, 2007: 7; for an application of his method to the idea of Europe, cf. Elbe, 2001).

Now if we assume that *everybody* is in this position (which has to be the case if we accept the argument as a statement about the world as such), we arrive at as many different worlds as there are people; everybody is a maker of his/her own imagined universe, people float through each other's worlds on different wavelengths. Occasional shared experiences, inevitably of a fleeting nature, are the most we can hope for in terms of social bonds. Can this still be seen in terms of a historical period, a particular phase of human social existence? This takes us to the idea of *post*-modernism, the idea that we have reached a world beyond the ordered patterns of reality and experience.

To explain the appearance of post-modernism as a trend, with this reference—the reference to a stage of development of the comprehensive production process (appropriation/transformation of nature, (re-) production of social relations), the following theories have been proposed.

- Sociological theory (Collins, 1998): post-modernism expresses that stage of social development in which the sheer number of people in intellectual functions has become so large that the world they experience, is the world of words. This develops to a degree where it appears that everything is only discourse, there is no objective reality, only opinion, discourse, advertising.

- Managerial thinking: as more and more people are employed in managerial roles as supervisors and providers of mental labour, the education system has to adjust and stop disseminating grand narratives of supposed truth. Lyotard's plea for a new academic education system (cf. the concluding section) was actually written for the Quebec education authorities. People managing or employed and managed in mental labour functions cannot be

committed to a single comprehensive truth (-system) because they would not be employable. The counterpart of this is *the commodification of knowledge itself* (Giesen, 1992) which turns thinkers into experts for hire.

- Finally, post-modernism has been explained in a materialist theory by Harvey (1990). Harvey claims in this work that it is the fluidity and instability of experience generated by the dominance, within the global political economy, of financial forms of capital, which is expressed in post-modern theories from which the reference to some outside objectivity, indeed the exploitative labour process itself, has been removed.

It is important to realise that such judgements, trying to situate post-modernism in a historical context, strictly speaking cannot be made from a post-structuralist position: placing post-modernism in time implies that we claim to know the determinants of its appearance. However, for a post-structuralist, social events are primarily indeterminate, contingent and 'imagined'.

Applying the Method

The post-structuralist approach is not a 'tool' to be applied. It rather should be seen as an inflection of a range of approaches that have already been discussed in our earlier chapters. As Lyotard puts it, 'postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable. Its principle is not the expert's homology, but the inventor's paralogy' (Lyotard, 1984: xxv; cf. 5 chapters of the *Postmodern Condition*).

Therefore, what the post-structuralists do to every theory they encounter, is to not allow this theory to become a force in its own right, that dictates our thought as if it had a fixed social existence.

This can be done by 'deconstruction' and more generally reflects what Lyotard calls a crisis of the 'narrative'. Science, he claims, has always been in conflict with narratives (basically the explicit meta-theories we have

been discussing in this text). Let me indicate how Lyotard does this by quoting a few passages from his 'Postmodern Condition' of 1979 (1984).

> To the extent that science does not restrict itself to stating useful regularities and seeks the truth, it is obliged to legitimate the rules of its own game. It then produces a discourse of legitimation with respect to its own status, a discourse called *philosophy*.

This is indeed what we have been doing in this text so far. Lyotard then continues to explain (he has already indicated that the majority of perspectives have turned out to be fables) the theory prior to the post-modern is seriously compromised by its crystallisation into grand narratives that begin to live a life of their own.

> I will use the term modern to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse…. making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of the Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, of the creation of wealth (1984: xxiii)

Postmodernism, then, begins with incredulity towards these meta-narratives. To this end, Lyotard relies on what he calls 'a pragmatics of language particles', which are all around us and which our existence must hold its own. (There is strong individualist aspect to this perspective which sometimes seems to point back to a subjective rationality which is completely subjectivised, that is, the inter-subjectivity of it is discarded—to each his/her own critical theory).

The 'pragmatics of language particles' is traced by Lyotard to Wittgenstein (cf. our Chapter 3) except that he no longer seeks to trace the source of language games to culture as suggested by Wittgenstein. It gives it a status which rather resembles a karaoke performance: it lends each contribution to the language game an authentic value which cannot be reduced to anything like a culture. So the application of post-structural method stops short of tracing language to a broader culture because such a culture is seen as too static a concept to be of use. In Lyotard's words,

> One is always located at a post through which various kinds of messages pass. No one, not even the least privileged among us, is ever entirely powerless over the messages that traverse and position him at the post of sender, addressee, or

referent. One's mobility in relation to these language game effects… is tolerable, at least within certain limits… it is even solicited by regulatory mechanisms, and in particular by the self-adjustments the system undertakes in order to improve its performance.

He then suggests an argument that reminds us of chaos theory (cf. our Chapter 7) in that the 'system' (i.e., the social order) treats the limited creative behaviour and spontaneous contributions of anyone participating in a language game as useful (if it does not stray too far from the axis of functional behaviour). Indeed

It may even be said that the system can and must encourage such movement to the extent that it combats its own entropy; the novelty of an unexpected "move", with its correlative displacement of a partner of group of partners, can supply the system with that increased performativity it forever demands and consumes (Lyotard, 1984: 15).

Hence the post-structuralist (post-modern) method suggests we look for the authentic utterance in a language game, and see *to what extent it stretches the functioning of the wider social system, functions within or challenges from without*, the systemic connections of which the individual is assumed to be part.

This questioning of whether thought still is part of the functioning system, and legitimates it, or whether it belongs to the sphere created by the subject for him/herself, then leads to defining the knowledge gained as the attribute of the subject, and no longer as the added increment to general knowledge. 'Knowledge is no longer the subject, but in the service of the subject: its only legitimacy (though it is formidable) is the fact that it allows morality to be become reality' (Lyotard, 1984: 36).