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**Postmodernist thought in geography:
a realist view**

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"Once upon a time a valiant fellow had the idea that men were drowned in water only because they were possessed with the *idea of gravity*. If they were to knock this notion out of their heads, say by stating it to be a superstition, a religious concept, they would be sublimely proof against any danger from water. His whole life long he fought against the illusion of gravity, of whose harmful results all statistic bought him new and manifold evidence. This valiant fellow was the type of the new revolutionary philosophers in Germany." (Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, Preface.)

1. Introduction

In the last few years, poststructuralist and postmodernist ideas have attracted increasing attention in the more philosophically-inclined literature in geography (Bondi, 1990; Bondi and Domosh 1992; Cloke et al, 1991; Dear, 1989; Deutsche, 1991; Doel, 1992; Gregory, 1989a, 1989b; Graham, 1990; Harvey, 1989; Johnson, 1989; Pile and Rose, 1992; Soja, 1989; Strohmer and Hannah, 1992). The origins of these ideas are diverse, but I shall dub them 'postmodernist' as a shorthand. The chief characteristics of postmodernist thought of concern here are: a preoccupation with discourse and language; a suspicion of concepts of truth and falsity and of empirical testing; an 'incredulity towards metanarratives' like philosophical systems or marxism; a distrust of the idea of a progressive development of knowledge having an emancipatory role; an openness to difference and an advocacy of 'local knowledges' (Lyotard, 1984); and new versions of idealism and relativism, which make knowledge relative to the holder or to particular social groups.

As such they are generally anti-realist in character, though with the exception of Cloke et al's recent book (1991), there has been little commentary on this opposition, and realist and anti-realist articles have frequently been found side-by-side in the same journals without this occasioning comment.

But there are some areas of similarity and partial agreement between realism and postmodernism; so much so that some commentators have attributed postmodernist influences to concerns owing more to realism. The best example is that of 'difference'. Many realist-orientated geographers became increasingly concerned with difference and differentiation (e.g. Massey, 1984), only to find this being read by some other geographers - particularly in North America - as inspired by postmodernist influences

(Beauregard, 1988; Graham, 1988). Similarly realists have been critical of the totalising pretensions of marxism, regarding them as a cover for reductionism, though this does not stem from any a priori or universal distrust of grand theories, but rather from a belief in the open nature of social systems.

Realists are also critical of the ideas of absolute truth and of absolute foundations to knowledge, and they recognise the social and linguistic character of knowledge, yet postmodernists and realists draw very different conclusions from this. The former typically oppose themselves to a crude and long-discredited version of 'objectivism'. In reacting against this they then flip over into an anti-realism which rules out any possibility of empirical/practical evaluation and makes truth relative to discourse.¹ Realists also reject naive objectivism but argue that this need not make us flip over into relativism or idealism, or make us doubt the possibility of scientific progress or abandon the Enlightenment project.

I shall call the former reaction a 'pomo flip', but there are other pomo flips too: from a rejection of grand narratives or totalizing discourses to an incapacitating fragmentation of the world and its discourses; from a rejection of ethnocentrism, androcentrism and imperialism to an equally self-defeating cultural and judgemental relativism. In these cases too, realism offers a third way between the polarities. In what follows I shall discuss these three pomo flips in turn, comparing the postmodernist and realist angles. Before concluding I shall also comment on the postmodernist challenge to philosophy'.

2. Pomo flip 1: foundationalism to idealism

Postmodernists make a great deal of fuss about their rejection of 'foundationalism' - the belief that some kind of ultimate foundations for knowledge can be found, and absolute truth can be established. They rightly point out that there is no way of getting outside available knowledge/discourses to see how they compare with the reality to which they claim to refer: i.e. there is no 'Archimedean point' from which we can evaluate knowledge.

Another angle on this, deriving from Derrida, is the critique of the 'metaphysics of presence', by which is meant the assumption that the intentions of an author, both subjective and concerning references to real objects, are transparent, as if there were no complications to do with language and textuality. Against this, postmodernists see language and textuality as opaque and slippery, and yet constitutive of knowledge.

¹ This reaction is reminiscent of that made by many in the 1960s upon encountering the arguments of Kuhn and Feyerabend against logical empiricism. In place of paradigms we have discourses, in place of the critique of neutral observation languages we have the critique of the 'metaphysics of presence', in addition to doubts about scientific progress we have a wider critique of the 'Enlightenment project', and so on.

So far, fairly good, only it's irritating to see this old idea presented as a first for postmodernism. It's not too inaccurate to say that almost everyone had been an anti-foundationalist for a long time, certainly well before postmodernism became popular. Contemporary realism (variously referred to as transcendental, scientific or critical realism) is included in this since it is openly fallibilist.

This often surprises people. Doesn't a realist philosophy imply some kind of guaranteed or privileged access to reality? Not at all. If the world always appeared as we expected it to in thought, if nothing ever took us by surprise, if wishful thinking always worked, there would be no good reason to believe in an external reality (the minimum criterion for realism). On the contrary, there would be good reason for being an idealist. So it's precisely because the world often does *not* conform to our pictures and expectations that gives one reason for being a realist. This probably annoys postmodernists, because they seem reluctant to believe that their opponents could be anything but died-in-the-wool foundationalists or naive objectivists. Thus, despite realists' repeated insistence on fallibilism, Cloke et al (1991, 171) assert that realism is one of a number of 'isms' that "claim to be sole guardians of 'truth'". However, to reject foundationalism and then deny the possibility of empirical evaluation or criticism from rival discourses is to readmit a different kind of foundationalism by the back door.

So while realists and postmodernists agree on anti-foundationalism, they diverge on what follows from this.

On the postmodernist side, we find the '*Pomo-flip*'; i.e. having rejected the idea of absolute truth and absolute foundations, they flip to the other extreme of relativism/idealism. They then tend to do some or all of the following:

- (i) - refuse *all* talk of truth and falsity, deny any kind of correspondence between thought and the world and deny the possibility of any kind of empirical test;
- (ii) - bracket out 'reality', or - fearing the absurdity of denying the existence of the real - subscribe to a token or empty realism, which accepts the existence of a real world but denies that we can claim to know what it is like;
- (iii) - assert that we do not 'discover' things, but socially or discursively constitute them (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Deutsche, 1991);
- (iv) - refuse any distinction between fiction and fact;
- (v) - claim that signifiers do not refer to any real objects, but 'float free', with the implication that meanings are inherently unstable and endlessly reinterpretable.

A common accompaniment to these inferences, and a vital support for relativism, is the assumption that knowledge is split up into numerous self-contained, incommensurable,

local discourses between which communication is impossible (e.g. Lyotard and Thebaud, 1985). But this is an extraordinary view of discourse - one whose absurdity is exposed by the fact that advocates of this position try to communicate their ideas - and with some success - to people in other discourses. Academic discourses are set within much wider, common discourses and their differences are accompanied by considerable overlap and people move between them as a matter of course.

An extreme example of relativism can be found in a recent article by Graham, who writes approvingly of a kind of knowledge "unburdened by its representational responsibilities" (1990, p.60):

"Thought processes are *sui generis* and complexly determined rather than representations or reflections of something else...theory cannot be validated on the basis of its correspondence to the 'real world'" (p.59)... "The criteria for validating some thoughts rather than others are internal to a theory" (p.59-60)... "We cannot argue that our theory has more explanatory power or greater proximity to the truth than other theories because there is no common agreed standard which could serve as the instrument of such a metatheoretical validation process." (p.60)

This, of course, is said in an article in which she 1), *does* argue with rival theories,² and 2), *does* assert what is and what is not the case (in reality), though it's not clear why a relativist should bother to argue anything.

In arguing with rivals, in living and conducting our business in the same social world, we presuppose that our theories are not discrete and wholly incommensurable, but overlapping, and only incommensurable in limited areas.

"...to say that two theories conflict, clash or are in competition presupposes that there is something - a domain of real objects or relations existing and acting independently of their descriptions - *over* which they clash. No-one bothers to say that the rules of cricket and football are incommensurable." (Bhaskar, 1989, 32-3)

Again, it's utterly contradictory first to say that not only must foundationalism be rejected but also any notion of truth, and then to write a few sentences later, say, 'men and women are not x but y', for this is the same as saying that it is true that men and women are not x but y.

Having seen an example of the contradictions of relativism, let us examine the key elements of anti-realist thinking in more detail.

² She is not alone in this, for these are standard contradictions of relativism (See Davidson, 1967).

(i) Truth, falsity, reference and empirical evaluation.

The notion of absolute truth is clearly highly problematic. It is not only that we can't say how we could ever know that we had found it but also that it's far from clear what it could mean to say that a statement is absolutely true of some state of affairs. From this, some postmodernists conclude that truth has nothing to do with correspondence with or representation of the real, and instead is purely a matter of convention and/or the 'will to power'. One immediate problem with the latter view is that there seems to be no reason why we should accept such an idea, for any reasoned argument for it must be self-defeating.

I shall argue that while the notion of absolute truth (or falsity) is untenable, especially where truth and falsity are seen as categorical opposites, we cannot afford to do without some kind of differentiation between the representational and practice-guiding capabilities of discourses. Thus the rejection of notions of absolute truth need not stop us differentiating between statements such as:

1. No-one died in the Gulf War.
2. Thousands died in the Gulf War.

Nor need we reduce the warrant for such statements to pure agreement or power.

If science discovered absolute truths then the history of science would be unintelligible for scarcely any ideas have escaped revision. Yet presumably there is also scientific progress, otherwise we would be using quill pens and stage coaches rather than wordprocessors and fax machines. The ability of scientists to manipulate nature has clearly increased enormously, even though their interventions often also have unforeseen effects.

Consider an historical example. The first steam engines were built in the belief that heat was a substance, and yet they worked. The theory obviously had some practical adequacy. Similarly stone age astronomers had no idea of what stars were, and yet managed to predict their movements. It's tempting to say their knowledge was 'false', but I suggest it would be fairer to say that it had less practical-adequacy than current knowledge of these things. We have to accept that knowledge is fallible, but that does not mean that it is all equally false or true, or equally practically-adequate. (I will give a social example shortly.)

A common and older response to our inability to claim absolute truth for any beliefs is to say that our beliefs are therefore not objective but 'individual, subjective matters of opinion'. Thus the reaction of Archer (1987, 392) and Cloke et al, (1991, p.169) to the acknowledged fallibility of realists' claims about necessity in the world was to say that this admission shows them to be nothing more than 'individual judgement'. In subscribing to such an impoverished schema, Archer and Cloke et al show themselves to

be still in the grip of a dualism of naive objectivism and idealism, for they can apparently see no alternatives other than those of absolute truth and mere 'subjective' opinion.

In order to understand the implications of the subjective side of knowledge, it is essential to counter a common elision between two different senses of 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity'. Objective1 can mean pertaining to objects and subjective1 can mean pertaining to subjects (i.e. knowing subjects and their consciousness, social character, identity). 'Objective2', meaning 'true', or at least practically adequate, encourages a contrast with 'subjective2' as fallible, speculative, 'mere opinion', hence as not true or cognitively inferior. The conflation of these two senses of the dualism is particularly damaging, because, by a sleight of hand it blocks the important questions: why should knowledge of external objects be superior to knowledge of self?; why should consciousness, identity and social context be assumed to be antithetical to objectivity2?; are we not interested in getting an objective2 understanding of people's subjectivity1?.

Sometimes the writers' subjectivity1 *can* be a hindrance, particularly where it is unacknowledged, as Deutsche (1991) and Massey (1991) argue - rightly, in my view - for Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity*. But it doesn't mean that it is necessarily a hindrance, or that deficiencies in an author's account must automatically be attributable to his or her social coordinates. On occasion one's subjective1 standpoint might be more of an aid than a hindrance to understanding, though having the right credentials in terms of subjective1 identity is obviously no guarantee of objectivity2. This is the problem with any kind of 'standpoint theory' of knowledge (Harding, 1989). The point of acknowledging one's own subjective1 positioning is not thereby to concede cognitive inferiority (subjective2); on the contrary by assessing how one is positioned (objectively1 as well as subjectively1) with respect to our object1 of study we can improve our chances of being objective2.

Consider again our natural science example: was the heat-as-substance theory flawed because it was merely 'subjective opinion' or 'individual judgement'? To say that it was does justice to neither subjectivity nor objectivity. The ideas were not an isolated 'subjective' opinion but were held collectively and hence were *intersubjective*. Moreover, as we saw, they 'worked' in practice; they could be objectified.

Whatever is *accepted* as true is obviously in one sense conventional, but that does not mean to say that there is no relationship of representation or correspondence. Just because knowledge does not 'mirror' nature, to use Rorty's metaphor, it does not follow that it cannot also represent it or serve as a guide to material practice (Rorty, 1980). Whatever the difficulties of explaining what correspondence or representation might mean, the alternative of truth *purely* as a matter of convention is far worse, for it cannot debar 'silly relativism' (another of Rorty's terms), according to which we can safely

adhere to just *any* conventions. Not just anything goes. If truth were purely a matter of convention, we would be able to live by any convention we cared to invent: we don't because we can't. We can act more successfully on the basis of some conventions than others because their relationship to the structures of the world are different.

So fallibilism provides no warrant for the idea that our beliefs are unconstrained, and that people could, like Marx and Engels' new revolutionary philosopher, believe anything they liked with impunity. If they could, they would surely be infallible. This is why idealism is so dogmatic, why ironically it can support authoritarianism. Moreover, idealism and relativism invite opponents of critical social theories like feminism to ignore them; if they don't even purport to be true, why should anyone listen? (Hartsock, 1989)

The 'linguistic turn' in philosophy has established that words or utterances do not refer singly and permanently to objects and that their meaning always depends on the 'play of difference' within wider fields of signifiers, which are open to multiple and ever shifting interpretations, as one text is read in the light of others. Authors or speakers are therefore never fully in control of language, there is always slippage and scope for alternative readings.

This weakening of traditional ideas of meaning and reference has prompted another version of our first Pomo-flip. Having realised that words do not establish meanings singly and through reference/denotation (naive objectivism) it is concluded that they neither convey authors'/speakers' intentions nor refer to anything outside discourse at all; meanings are endlessly 'deferred' intra-discursively without reference to any extra-discursive reality, and we are free to interpret texts as we wish.

Taken to the extreme, this embodies a standard contradiction of relativism, for if we are free to interpret what postmodernists write as we like, then we can interpret them against their intentions, attributing to them views diametrically opposed to those which they (appear to) profess, and of course they have denied themselves grounds for complaining about this!

While we *can* endlessly reinterpret 'texts', it is a precondition of communication and social life that a large proportion of signifiers and sense relations are relatively stable. The very intelligibility of language and its use in material practice depends on it having fairly stable and successful reference (Davidson, 1987); ironically this applies to postmodernists arguing for the instability of relations between word and object as much as anyone else!

The arguments commonly put forward to challenge the belief that we can make stable reference to objects tend to take two forms.

One concerns the arbitrary nature of the relationship between any individual word and

object (why should an object be called 'tree' rather than 'arbre' or whatever?). However, it does not follow that the relationship between lexemes is arbitrary, so that trees or arbres can have not only leaves and roots but heart attacks. Once objects have been 'arbitrarily' given names, the conventions governing how terms are combined to make meaningful discourse which can inform successful action are far from arbitrary (Giddens, 1979, p.11-16 ; 1987, pp. 81ff). Where discursively-guided actions are successful, this suggests some relationship between the structure of the discourse applying to those actions and the structure of the material actions and objects which are its referents. This relationship is, again, not usefully characterized as one of absolute truth. Failures of discourse to guide practice suggest that the world is not the creature of the play of difference among signifiers - which is precisely why we worry about the status of our beliefs as we do.

A second argument concerns the impossibility of explaining the 'vertical' relationship between word and object without a 'horizontal' move within language. As Strohmayr and Hannah (1992) put it, "whenever we speak or write *about* a reality, the language we use *is not* the reality to which it is supposed to refer... Descriptive language, no matter how precise and exhaustive, can never succeed in anchoring itself to reality; it can only move 'sideways' through the realm of words in attempting to do so." (p.36). This is an elaborated version of the old point that we cannot escape from language to see how it compares with an unconceptualized reality. However, it doesn't follow from this that there can be no vertical relationship, only that the relationship can't be explained except through horizontal moves within language. But then it is, of course, no surprise that explanations are unavoidably linguistic! Nor does it necessarily render the relationship between 'tree' or 'arbre' and their object unstable. Nor, in turn, does accepting that relationships between discourse and object can have considerable stability entail that they capture some absolute truth, whatever that might mean. It just implies that the concepts are practically-adequate for the time being, that they enable us to do a certain range of things successfully and that there is *some* kind of rough relationship - which needn't be thought of in terms of 'truth' - between the structure of discourse and the structure of the world. If there were no relationship between discourse and the world then presumably we could do anything we liked, including defying gravity. The fact that even the most persistent idealists are obliged to do much the same as the rest of us, shows the extent to which discursive systems and their referents are pretty stable. Thus when postmodernists receive an invitation to a conference at place x at time y to discuss the implications of the undecidability of meaning, they do not treat the meaning of the invitation as undecidable, but as both stable, intersubjectively verifiable and as capable of successfully referring to something real (a conference centre, a gathering of similar people). Those who took their nocturnal philosophy seriously enough to make it a diurnal philosophy would never turn up.

A related issue is that of *ambiguity* in social life, for even where meanings are relatively stable they can still be multiple and ambiguous. It has become common in humanistic and postmodern geography to celebrate ambiguity - to see a multiplicity of interpretations as a positive, rather than a problematic, feature. In conversation with such geographers I have found that they often suppose that realism has to deny and suppress ambiguity. However, I would argue that we can and must recognize ambiguity in social life, but not mistake this for a licence for just any interpretation. Some social situations are objectively ambiguous. An army parade on Remembrance Day is a case in point, for it combines a recognition of the horrors of war ('Never again...') with a glorification of the army and perhaps war itself. But to interpret an event as ambiguous or having multiple meanings is not to admit just any interpretation (e.g. a Remembrance Day parade is not a wedding or a rock concert), for not all interpretations can do justice to the particular ambiguities of a situation. Paradoxically, if we are to do justice to ambiguities we cannot interpret them just any way.

It is no accident that the concern with the undecidability of interpretations comes from literary studies, whose object does not have to serve as a basis for social practice in the same way that the rules of, say, an institution do. To be sure, even these are always being reinterpreted, but the survival of the institution depends on sense and reference changing sufficiently gradually for successful cooperative action to occur. While indeterminacy of meaning is not the preserve of paintings or poems, it is relatively limited in everyday practices.

What is so conspicuously absent from postmodernist critiques of reference and representation such as those of Strohmer and Hannah or Hutcheon is any mention of *practice*. Knowledge is only discussed in terms of speaking and writing, never doing. Hence the 'linguistic turn' in philosophy has been a mixed blessing. While it has alerted us to the constitutive role of language and textuality in understanding, it ignores non-linguistic knowledge and is strikingly ignorant of our ability to do things without language. Thus, many fine musicians do not know musical notation and don't have any names for the things that they do. Deaf and dumb people who have never learned a language can still know a lot.

In life we make not only discursive or conversational references to the world (involving some kind of juxtaposition of discourse and objects), but *practical* references, in which, as material beings, we intervene in and manipulate objects (Bhaskar, 1991, 112). As Taylor puts it,

"We can draw a neat line between my *picture* of an object and that object, but not between my *dealing* with the object and that object. It may make sense to ask one to focus on what one *believes* about something, say a football, even in the absence of that thing; but when it comes to *playing* football, the corresponding objection would

be absurd. The actions in the game cannot be done without the object; they include the object. Take it away and we have something quite different - people miming a match on the stage, perhaps. The notion that our understanding of the world is grounded in our dealings with it is equivalent to the thesis that this understanding is not ultimately based on representations at all, in the sense of depictions that are separately identifiable from what they are of." (Taylor, 1987, 477).

This doesn't mean that we don't need representations as well, but just because I can only refer to sticks and stones - or male violence - in words, it does not mean that the effects I impute to these objects are actually purely the discursive effects of their concepts, as if it were the words, rather than their referents, which are capable of producing physical and psychological injury. Moreover these objects can have their effects regardless of whether we recognize them in language - unless, that is, one seriously wants to entertain the idea - like Marx and Engels' new revolutionary philosopher - that we would be free from harm if we only got rid of the concept of harm.

Postmodernists are right to note the importance of naming in empowering or disempowering people, but naming is only important if it has effects in terms of practical reference, and hence makes people *act* differently. Names and concepts are important, but not as important as the things (including people and practices) to which they refer. Which should we fear more: war or the concept of war?

What is needed after the 'linguistic turn' is for it to be integrated within a further 'practical turn'. There are signs of such a turn in the philosophy of natural science, which is beginning to recognize the long-neglected role of scientists' practical interventions in physical processes (Hacking, 1983; Harre, 1987), but the time is ripe for social science to take this turn too.

What all this boils down to is the question of whether we can simultaneously accept the following two propositions:

- a) there is no neutral access to the world, that knowledge is linguistic (by and large) and social, that language is not a transparent medium, but opaque and slippery.

AND

- b) that we can nevertheless develop reliable knowledge of the world, have scientific progress.

The anti-realist answer to this question is either no, or yes on condition that the status of knowledge depends purely upon agreement or conventions about what is the case, and not at all on its relationship to the world. Thoroughly undialectical in character, it cannot appreciate that knowledge can be both social and linguistic *and* be capable of grasping something of the nature of the world (Bhaskar, 1991).

Realists' see a) and b) as compatible. The fact that observation is theory-laden, does not entail that it is theory-determined and hence that theory is observation-neutral. The fact that language itself is constitutive of knowledge, need not prevent us distinguishing discourses which do provide a successful guide to action in the social and natural worlds from those which don't. But though sometimes two or more kinds of discourse or knowledge may perform equally well in this respect, not just any discourse or convention will be practically-adequate. We can't get outside discourse to see how it compares with real objects, but it is evident from observation and action within a particular world-view or discourse that some conventions about what is the case hold and others don't.

Just as assessing truth or practical adequacy is not an all-or-nothing affair, neither is falsification. In practice it is messy, provisional and often partial. But that does not mean that all theories are immune to empirical evaluation. Take the example of the reserve army of labour thesis in accounting for women's role in labour markets. This has been largely falsified by reference to the substantial numbers of women who are employed in sectors like local government and the health service where they are a permanent part of the labour force and are not dispensable during slumps (Walby, 1986). This does not mean that there are no cases where women do form a reserve army, but it will not stand as a universal explanation. This is typical of falsification in social science. It's messy (there are fuzzy areas where its applicability is uncertain), it's partial (it's not falsified for all cases), it's provisional (maybe some of the currently permanent jobs may be abolished in the future, or maybe we shall become dissatisfied with the *concept* of reserve army even for cases to which it currently seems to apply). Of course this doesn't mean that we have arrived at the absolute truth, whatever that might mean, but in putting forward this explanation, and coming up with this falsification or critique of it, progress surely has been made in sorting out the relative practical adequacy of rival theories. Do we seriously want to claim that this is merely an intra-discursive or intra-theoretical skirmish, purely a matter of a change in what we choose to believe, purely a function of suasive rhetoric or the relative power of the theories' proponents, and absolutely nothing to do with social reality?

(ii) Bracketing out "So-called 'reality'"

For postmodernists, talk of reality is often too much to stomach, sniffing of 'the metaphysics of presence'. On discovering the incoherence of absolute truth, they often start putting 'reality' in scare quotes. In its favour, this practice highlights that reality is not directly or immediately present to us, but is always represented fallibly through a medium which is not transparent; this practice also distinguishes objects from their concepts. However, these points need not make us suspend all belief in the truth or practical adequacy of all knowledge claims. Significantly, those who bracket out 'reality'

do so only selectively, and often one finds that a few paragraphs later they are talking about the real world as something different from that claimed by the discourses with which they disagree (e.g. Boyle and Hughes, 1991). To be consistent about suspending belief in 'reality' one would have to write things like 'so-called male violence', 'so-called Saddam Hussein', the 'so-called Gulf War' and its 'so-called thousands of dead'. The fact that people don't suspend belief in all references to reality simultaneously is salutary: how could they?

(iii) The social or discursive constitution of reality.

According to discourse theory, objects are not 'given' to us, or out there waiting to be 'discovered', they are *constituted* socially and discursively. This is a classic case of an 'epistemic fallacy' - conflating and confusing knowledge or discourse with its object (Bhaskar, 1975). Of course we discursively and socially constitute concepts of objects, but it does not follow that the objects themselves are so constituted, or that they can't be discovered via discursively constituted concepts. In her critique of Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Deutsche claims that reality is constructed rather than discovered (Deutsche, 1991). Are we to believe then that she constructed Harvey's book? Of course she produced a construction of it, but the book itself was still there for her to discover, via the socially/discursively constituted concepts available to her. One can still acknowledge that, of course, social objects are socially constructed and concept-dependent, but that does not make the entire social world dependent on *our* own particular concepts. We should therefore avoid eliding the difference between the social construction of books or cities or whatever *by others* and the construction that observers and researchers not involved in their constitution put upon those objects. Yes the pyramids and Rome were socially constructed, but they were still objectified, and we weren't involved in those projects; hence they can still be objects of discovery.

As Bhaskar's critique of Rorty shows, epistemic fallacies in which thought and object are conflated are endemic in postmodernism and other forms of relativism (Bhaskar, 1991). Likewise, Deutsche repeatedly elides the distinction between objects and thought objects, and seems to believe that to make this distinction is to claim some privileged access to reality (Deutsche, 1991, p. 12).³ On the contrary, as we have seen, it is precisely the evident fallibility of our thinking, when our expectations fail, that makes us believe there is a difference between objects and thought objects. If we do not distinguish them, then we fall prey to the illusion that thinking makes things so, and what could be more dogmatic and foundationalist than that?

Deutsche repeatedly imputes to 'truth' an absolute, 'ultimate' or 'founding' quality, as if this were the only possible sense. In contrast she claims that all representations are inadequate (p.29). But if they were all *equally* inadequate there would be no point in

³ See Smith (1992) for further discussion of Deutsche's idealism.

arguing. Some postmodernists recognize that not all representations are equal - for example Dear denies that "anything goes" (Dear, 1988) - but the failure to replace the old concept of absolute truth with anything which acknowledged that there are constraints on what we can successfully believe leaves a vacuum which cannot resist the 'anything goes' charge. This is a common silence in postmodernist writing. We can agree on what's wrong with the notion of absolute or ultimate truth, but *something* has also to be said about truth in the non-absolute sense of practical adequacy if we are to understand why anything does not go, and why Marx and Engels' new revolutionary philosopher was so ridiculous.

(iv) No difference between 'fact' and 'fiction'?

In some circles, to distinguish fact from fiction is to prompt knowing smirks of ridicule. Don't we realise that the words 'fact' and 'fiction' come from the same root and that fiction can tell us a lot about the world? Don't we know that both fiction and faction are, as their etymology suggests, *made* by people?

If we recall our competing claims about the Gulf war (see above), both are indeed statements *made* by people, via a language which is not a transparent medium, etc. Moreover, as always, it is vital to distinguish between statements and their referents; facts-as-states-of affairs and factual statements made about them are utterly different things. Empiricism forgets this by collapsing factual statements into their referents in its appeal to 'the facts'. Idealism reverses this by collapsing objects into their concepts. (Critical) realism distinguishes facts as states-of-affairs and as statements and hence is able to make sense of how the latter might actually be mistaken. (Remember, mistakes can be registered through theory-laden observation: their recognition does not presuppose that we can assume an Archimedean standpoint.) Without this distinction, neither empiricism or idealism (including in its postmodernist or post-structuralist guise) can make any sense of 'mistakes'.

We can also accept that fictions *may* be 'true' in some qualified sense or have some practical adequacy - perhaps by highlighting or exaggerating something which is normally buried; literary/artistic fiction is often of this kind. But that does not mean that *all* fictions - such as 'no-one died in the Gulf War' - can be granted this status. Nor should the common etymology of 'fact' and 'fiction' impress us too much. Lots of different words have the same roots, but it does not automatically follow that the original meaning should take precedence over the present ones. Both our statements about the Gulf War are fallible and both might be reconceptualised in some way. But this does not make them necessarily equal. Provided we don't elide discourse and its referents, we can still distinguish (fallibly) between fact and fiction. Indeed we have to, as a matter of survival (Bhaskar, 1991, 113) It is socially-irresponsible to pretend that male violence is not fact. It is ecologically-irresponsible to pretend that the destruction

of the ozone layer is merely discursively-constituted.

In this section I have argued that instead of flipping from naive objectivism to idealism, realism offers a third way between them.

However, there are also some postmodernists who want to avoid the two extremes, and who refuse to choose between them (e.g. Hutcheon, 1988; Pile and Rose, 1992). Such authors not only lack any alternative but attempt to make a virtue out of this by arguing that answers cannot be expected, and that all one can do is persist with sceptical questioning. As long as they see truth as an all-or-nothing matter and equate fallibility with falsity, as long they confuse knowledge with its objects, and as long as they ignore practice, they are indeed unlikely to find answers, even where they are possible.

Yet in arguing that realism can provide some answers and a third way, two important qualifications must be made.

Firstly, like any philosophy, realism does not provide answers to substantive questions. It does not tell us *which* are the more adequate theories or accounts, and it acknowledges that in some cases the practical adequacy of rival accounts may seem equal, so that we cannot choose between them.

Secondly, I certainly don't want to claim that realism removes all uncertainties about knowledge (!) Nevertheless, I think the main area of uncertainty in social science and human geography concerns not so much the status of propositional (descriptive/explanatory) knowledge, but the status of the evaluative, critical and normative content of that literature. It is much easier to apply the concept of practical adequacy to discourses about material objects and processes, be they natural or social, than to matters which involve moral or political evaluation. Thus, while it is possible to assess the practical adequacy of different accounts of divisions of labour the criterion seems inapplicable to arguments about what is good or bad about it. For at least two hundred years, social theorists have argued about the positive and negative aspects of the development of an advanced division of labour, with its fragmentation of community, its shifts from *gemeinschaft* to *gesellschaft* social relations, and its liberation or alienation of individuals. The conclusions of authors were frequently radically opposed; compare the evaluations of Marx, Mill, Simmel, Weber and liberals on individuation (Holton and Turner, 1989; Smith, 1980). Recent authors continue to offer contrasting evaluations; compare, for example the views of community of Seabrook (1990) and Young (1989). These are not simply explanations of social phenomena but evaluations of them, and by implication evaluations what is good or bad for people.

However this does not sever normative discourse from descriptive and explanatory discourse, for what we decide is good or bad for people depends on what we take them to be. It is on this thread connecting descriptive and normative discourse that critical

social theorists hang in trying to derive, in principle, arguments about values from explanations (Taylor, 1967; Bhaskar, 1989, ch6, Sayer, 1981). The problem is that even if one is persuaded by such arguments in principle, it is desperately difficult to see how they could be applied to such a tangled and contradictory mess as the dilemmas of modernity noted above, where not only are the positive and negative aspects of modern life seen as inseparable but there is little consensus about which aspects are positive or negative.

Recognizing these limits to the application of the criterion practical adequacy need not make us abandon it. Even the most convinced postmodernist can't avoid assessments of practical adequacy in choosing which accounts to guide his or her practice. As the case of the evaluation of the practical adequacy of the reserve army of labour thesis showed there are still large areas where we can progress with this criterion. And since descriptive and explanatory knowledge is value-relevant (our judgements of what should be done about the insecurity of employment are likely to be influenced by how much insecurity there is), the continuation of this kind of social science can help us develop normative value positions. Consequently, while a consideration of the normative character of literature on society outreaches the scope of realist philosophy, it still depends on it.

3. 'Pomo flip' 2: grand narratives and local knowledges

One of the hallmarks of postmodernism is its distrust of metanarratives and totalising discourses, whether major philosophical systems or grand theories such as marxism (Lyotard, 1984). In their place, it is argued that we need more limited local knowledges which do not claim universal applicability.

Metanarratives are seen as distinctive of modernism and 'the Enlightenment project', in which the construction of a grand, systematic, overarching system would allow humankind to rid itself of illusion and domination, control its destiny and progress. The Enlightenment project is obviously up against it, though it's far from abandoned. Critics of the project face the contradiction that in attacking it as an illusion or false goal they are themselves presupposing the possibility of a reduction of illusion and the possibility of a better life (Wellmer, 1972, Doel, 1992, Hutcheon, 1988). Moreover, whatever their criticisms of grand narratives, postmodernist's own narrative outstretches them all, categorizing and levelling differences with breathtaking disregard for complexity.

Totalising discourses try to impose order on the world by constructing a 'centre' around which social life revolves (Gregory, 1989b). In the case of marxism the centre is production and its social relations. Other structures and phenomena may be admitted but they are seen in terms of their relations to this centre. Even though marxism's totalising ambitions have given way to a more pluralist attitude, signalled by notions of relative autonomy, contingency, and multiple determination (McLennan, 1989), there are still

major aspects of social life - the nature of masculinity and femininity, for example - on which even a more open marxism has little to offer and which are consequently marginalized by it.

In contrast, the kind of social ontology favoured by some post-structuralists, is of a centreless web of heterogeneous relationships, none of which hold universally, and in which each location is unique. A web at least suggests connections and interdependence, but as we shall see, in some cases the reaction against the ontology of grand theories has put fragmentation before interdependence (e.g. Deutsche, 1991, p.13). Interesting though the centreless web ontology is, it seems dogmatic and perverse to deny that there are not some structures which are extensive or widely replicated, such as those of patriarchy and capitalism. As Fraser and Nicholson comment on Lyotard's view of metanarratives "There is no place...for critique of pervasive axes of stratification, for critique of broad-based relations of dominance and subordination along lines like gender, race and class." (1989, p.23). Neither ontology seems satisfactory and as Gregory observes: "...we are presently strung out between notions of totality which are plainly discreditable and a 'politics of the fragment or conjuncture' which is largely ineffectual" (Gregory, 1989b, 91-2).

If a link can be made, as Gregory implies (1989b), between the search for order and totalising discourses, realism cannot be implicated in this. Realism prioritizes the search for necessity rather than for order and it conceptualizes necessity as plural rather than singular, as residing in the causal powers and liabilities of objects, which may in many cases be contingently related to one another. While its ontology includes structures there need be no single or central structure (Cf. Harding, 1989)). It is also receptive towards difference, though it does not see this is antithetical to explanation, as some fear (e.g. Harvey and Scott, 1989). Realism therefore provides a theory of determinations rather than (pre-)determinism (Bhaskar, 1975). Moreover it stresses that in open systems, which are universal in social science, the activation of these causal powers is unlikely to produce stable regularities or order. Such an ontology fits well with the more open kind of marxism or post-marxism that has emerged in the last twenty years.

Both the moderation of the centred ontology of totalising discourses such as marxism and the postmodernist alternative of a centreless web can be seen as reactions to the failure of approaches which expected to find regularities at the level of events and which effectively assumed a 'flat ontology'. But the postmodernist reaction fails to break with this assumption because it interprets the absence of those regularities as evidence of the lack of such structures. Thus, for example, if you can't read off an individual's standard of living from a marxist concept of their class position, it's assumed that there is therefore no class structure (Sayer and Walker, 1992, chapter 1). But on a realist ontology which is stratified, structures may have powers emergent from and irreducible

to those of their constituents, and different structures can come into a variety of contingent relationships with one another to codetermine the occurrence of events, thus breaking the one-to-one relationship between structures and events found in the closed systems of scientific experiments.

Totalizing discourses are characteristically reductionist or essentialist, for they treat events and processes as direct, unmediated expressions of the central underlying structures, and hence misattribute causality. In some cases - extraordinarily - postmodernists have responded to this problem by trying to dispense with causation altogether and to argue that to say that some causes are more important than others is itself a kind of essentialism (e.g. Graham, 1990). On this view our hair colour would have to be deemed just as vital for our survival as the functioning of our hearts. If all causes are equal it's not clear how we could explain anything, or how one could ever hope to achieve anything (cause something to happen) by acting, for if no cause is more important than any other, then doing nothing is as (in)effective as doing something.⁴ To say that A was caused by B, not C, is not to claim some kind of 'ultimate' truth; like any other such claim it is open to revision, but that doesn't mean that we can remain agnostic about causal priority. Our survival depends on identifying it - not 'ultimately', but well enough to be able to meet our needs.

Realism, as a philosophy, does not provide any warrant for putting class and production at the centre of social explanation, for that is a substantive, not a philosophical question. But it does support the view that some structures (mechanisms, objects or whatever we care to call them) are more important than others in shaping *particular* outcomes. This doesn't justify assuming a *single* centre: rather it simply supports the unexceptional idea that what is central or most important depends on what objects we're dealing with and what we're trying to explain. What is central to a child's conception of space is not central to the determination of trade balances, and vice versa. Such a view fits with a cautiously pluralist reinterpretation of major theories, but it doesn't licence a prohibition on references to causal priority. Realism therefore resists the temptations of this second kind of postmodernist 'flip'.

But there are also epistemological objections to grand narratives. It might be argued, for example, that they squeeze out rival discourses and claim a privileged access to truth. In other words they are foundationalist. What is needed, on this view, is an acceptance of 'local knowledges' whose truth is relative to particular contexts and groups. But there are several problems with such an argument. Firstly, *grand narratives don't have to be*

⁴ Graham does indeed argue that the role of theory should be to provide us with the means to intervene in social processes. This is fine but it compounds her dilemma for to be an effective actor one has to be able to assess causal priorities (Graham, 1990).

foundationalist: there can be more than one grand narrative for a particular domain (e.g. liberalism, socialism and feminism for political philosophy); their proponents may be perfectly aware that foundationalism is untenable, and yet not unreasonably continue to regard their grand narrative as the best available or the least bad. As long as each one does not dogmatically refuse any claims of rival theories but tries to engage with them, then this objection to grand narratives does not stand. (However, it is of course possible that theorists could pay lip service to fallibilism and continue to be dogmatic in their evaluation of alternative substantive discourses.) Equally the contrast with local knowledges does not hold. *If all knowledge is fallible, then the critique of foundationalism is as relevant to local knowledges as it is to grand narratives.* Neither epistemology nor anti-epistemology can help us evaluate the relative qualities of grand theory and local knowledges: it is an a posteriori matter.

A further line of criticism concerns the alleged universality of grand narratives. The supposedly grand totalising visions of liberalism and marxism have been exposed as partial, particular, situated views of the world masquerading as a general, universal view. Just as liberalism was attacked by Marx for representing the special interests of the bourgeoisie as the general social interest, so marxism has in turn been criticised for representing class as the universal and over-riding structuring principle of society, while both liberalism and marxism have been accused of embodying unacknowledged androcentric views of society (Pateman, 1983; Phillips, 1987; 1991; Soper, 1990). Equivalent critiques have been made in geography by feminists of Harvey's marxist grand narrative of postmodernity (Deutsche, 1991; Massey, 1991). These critiques have developed within feminism too, as liberal feminists have been accused of speaking only for affluent white women, and others have been criticised for the 'levelling of differences' among women (Nicholson, 1989; McDowell, 1991; Soper, 1990).

I think these critiques are successful in showing how theories which have been presented as speaking for everyone in fact only speak for the author's social group - most notoriously, white, middle class men. However, contrary to Deutsche, I don't see that Harvey's disregard of his own social positioning and his attempt at an aerial view mean that he is trying to assume an Archimedean standpoint, outside discourse (Smith, 1992). The metaphors of the aerial view and an attempted Archimedean view may be similar in their imagery but there is a big difference between the two. Stepping back from details and choosing to concentrate on common and large features does not entail imagining one could step outside discourse to see how it compares to reality. Surely a marxist would argue the opposite: you need to stay *within* this marxist discourse if you want to understand the big picture! (Personally, I would prefer a broader, more open discourse.)

Nor do I see these critiques as fatal for grand narratives and as a vindication of local knowledges. If there are big global structures or systems, the view from one local part of

them is likely to be very different from that at another part: the Indian tea picker and the British tea drinker are part of the same system (though they also belong to different systems too), but their viewpoints are radically different. This doesn't mean to say that they can have nothing useful to say, but that what they do say would be better if their standpoint was acknowledged. Nor does it mean that their views are in fact purely local. Rather they are local views of something bigger. And precisely because the tea picker and the tea drinker act - at least in part of their lives - within the same system, the idea that we should forget grand views of that system and develop local knowledges, discrete and self-referential, is disastrous. The tensions between the views of those in different but interdependent positions have to be confronted and negotiated. There are invariably local views within, and of, large, grand structures, but we need to discover what links up those local views, not eagerly fragment them into separate, non-communicating discourses or local knowledges.

Ironically, a contributory influence in the distrust of grandnarratives has been the increasing 'hybridization' of culture - ironic because it has much to do with the global extension of capitalism. Thanks to division of labour, to gender, class and race, individuals have for a long time had multiple identities or different identities in different spheres. While this fragmentation need not be seen as pathological, it can be recognised without obliterating similarity and interconnection (See Soper (1991); Phillips (1987; 1991) and McDowell (1991) on this issue in relation to equality, difference and gender.) Gayle Rubin's plea for the recognition of the oppression of women both in its "endless variety and monotonous similarity" is salutary; the same goes for other major social relations too (Rubin, quoted in Fraser and Nicholson, 1989, p.28). A recognition of an earlier neglect of difference need not prompt a 'flip' in which similarity, interdependence, structure and persistence are forgotten. As many feminist writers on postmodernism note, an obsession with difference and a picture of society as an unstable mosaic can be corrosive of solidarity and political identity, of politics as 'making common cause' (Soper, 1990; McDowell, 1991; Fraser and Nicholson, 1989).

In summary, grand views are as needed as ever, but the challenge is to develop them in a way which synthesizes - though neither undemocratically nor uncritically - the standpoints of the many rather than speaking only for a privileged minority.

4. Pomo flip 3: cultural relativism writ small

Several decades ago, anthropology reacted against its ethnocentric beginnings by adopting cultural relativism, according to which the knowledge of other cultures was to be treated as beyond the scope of external criticism. In Gellner's phrase, a position of 'contextual charity' was adopted; it was assumed that whatever looked irrational to the outsider could be shown to be perfectly rational once placed in the appropriate context and seen in the local culture's own terms (Gellner, 1970).

Totalising discourses or grand narratives are reminiscent of ethnocentrism since they marginalize and disqualify other voices to those of their authors. Although postmodernist thought has been effective in exposing this imperialism/ethnocentrism/androcentrism, it is again in danger of flipping over into an equally untenable position of a cultural relativism, this time applied not only to other cultures but to particular groups within any culture. In place of a paternalistic and imperialist presumption to speak for others, we have an extreme deference towards others, a reluctance to speak for them, even where doing so might help, thereby making us 'reluctant utopians' (Soper, 1990).

If we have two people, A and B, belonging to different cultures, social groups, or of different gender or ethnicity, A's interpretations and criticisms of B *may* indeed be ethnocentric or otherwise misguided; that of course is always a significant and often dangerous risk. For example Evelyn Stokes warns that Maori geography is not that of outsiders, and that the qualifications of a non-Maori geographer may be more of a hindrance than a help in understanding it (Stokes, cited in Cloke et al, 1991, p.xi). Such warnings should make non-Maoris more careful about how they interpret Maori culture, but they should not make them grant Maori understandings some ultimate privilege or foundation which non-Maoris would not claim for themselves. If our own knowledge cannot be given any privilege - even about our own situation - and hence must be attentive to criticism, so must the knowledge of others, even if they belong to a different culture. To suppose otherwise is thoroughly inconsistent: as Gellner puts it, it leads to the contradiction of being a liberal at home and a conservative abroad (Gellner, 1970) - or an anti-foundationalist at home and a foundationalist abroad. It is one thing to grant the knowledge of others respect, but quite another to grant them immunity from external criticism.

It has been said that the powerful have most to fear from relativism. Insofar as they claim to monopolise the truth the point seems convincing, but relativism can also serve the interests of the powerful admirably, for they can use it as an excuse to ignore the criticism of those they oppress, on the grounds that its 'truth' is purely relative to a different discourse from their own. Such a privileging of supposedly local knowledges therefore cuts both ways, for at the same time as it protects particular sets of ideas, it denies them any influence on others. Postmodernists fail to see that relativism is the flip side of foundationalism, so it is no surprise that it can produce similar effects. In other words, fragmentation plus relativism equals ghettoization. Relativism is no friend of feminism, anti-racism or any other kind of critical social theory.

Gellner also pointed out a further absurd consequence of the contradictions of relativism, regarding cases where the understandings of others change radically (Gellner, 1970). Over 20 years later, the proponents of local knowledges are in danger of repeating the same error. Suppose that we, belonging to culture A, are told by members

of culture B that they now reject their former beliefs as false. For example, a former Communist Party member in Russia may quite sincerely reject his or her previous political beliefs as false. If we take the relativist line, then we are confronted with a crushing dilemma, for it behoves us to accept their beliefs, and yet to accept their current beliefs is to deny their former beliefs, and vice versa! We obviously cannot say that the past political beliefs were correct when they were held and wrong when they were disavowed. Such are the absurdities of a theory of truth as wholly conventional and socially or culturally relative. We have to judge, even if we are outsiders.

Note how *il*liberal and insulting it is for members of A to assert that members of B who have come to prefer certain beliefs of A as superior to B's must be mistaken; they are dupes, fodder for suasive rhetoric, victims of a stronger will-to-power. Challenging this does not require us to deny that some changes in B are indeed a result of mere power rather than rational persuasion and unforced acceptance. But it would actually be more liberal for members of A to allow the possibility that their own knowledge is sometimes superior, for ironically to refuse this may be to imply that B is inferior or misguided in cases where B comes to favour A. Moreover, unless we assume such a possibility, there is no point in arguing for anything, even relativism, though as already noted to argue for relativism is to encourage anti-relativism too. Once again, the contradictions of relativism bite back at every turn.

It might salve left-liberal consciences to assume that the knowledges of A and B or any array of language/cultural/social communities or groups have equal cognitive status, that they have equal explanatory powers, such that they are equally successful in informing, guiding and interpreting successful practice. Indeed, even to query such an assumption might be taken to as shocking, as evidence of ethnocentrism, cultural imperialism and dogmatism, etc. But the reverse is the case, for such a cognitive equality principal would run into the usual relativist dilemmas. Thus the consistent proponent of the equality thesis would have to grant equal status to racist and fascist beliefs. By contrast, as a non-relativist, a realist need have no qualms in rejecting racism and fascism, partly for moral reasons and partly because they can be shown to have inferior cognitive status - they are based on misleading and accounts and explanations of human society, ones which are inferior to non-racist theories.

Finally, while this kind of A versus B model is useful heuristically for sorting out the dilemmas of relativism, it is only a starting point, one that needs to be immediately qualified. For it obscures the fact that A and B usually overlap and are themselves divided internally and 'decentred'. Local knowledges have been increasingly intermingled and are set within global systems. Fascism and racism are not neatly restricted to particular societies. As the discussions of equality and difference in feminism illustrates, particular groups invariably tend to be cross-cut and differentiated

by others. We therefore need to avoid projecting the absurd fiction of autonomous academic discourses onto social reality. Differentiation and interdependence, yes: fragmentation no.

5. The alleged death of philosophy.

Postmodernist thought sees itself as challenging philosophy (Dear, 1988, Gregory, 1989a), though of course its arguments against philosophy have a decidedly philosophical character. Postmodernists argue that philosophy has assumed a god-like role, supposing to direct and sit in authoritative judgement upon scientific and everyday knowledge, when in fact it is on the same level as any other kind of knowledge (Rorty, 1980). However, popularizers of postmodernism have often mistakenly reduced philosophy to epistemology and epistemology to foundationalism. This obscures the fact that philosophy has been a rather modest enterprise in recent decades (Baynes et al, 1987). Epistemology defined as the search for ultimate foundations of knowledge has been dead for some time; scepticism is as old as philosophy and epistemology defined more broadly but more modestly as the study of knowledge shows no sign of giving up.⁵ Critical realism is a philosophy but its main focus is on ontology, not epistemology (Outhwaite, 1987); and it is anti-foundationalist. It is explicitly more modest in its goals than postmodernists would like to believe, aiming primarily to 'underlabour' for social science, and acknowledging its dependence on the materials/knowledge available to it in society (Bhaskar, 1979). This, however, does not prevent it from providing *immanent critiques*, taking on areas of controversy and difficulty by starting from areas of agreement and success, or from inquiring into the preconditions of successful practices. It is self-defeating for sceptics to try to reject this strategy by refusing to acknowledge any points of agreement and success because a) this leaves them no grounds from which to doubt anything, and b) because they have to suspend such doubt in order to live. For example, it is patently self-contradictory to *argue* that communication and argument is impossible.

But there is a deeper level at which postmodernist (particularly poststructuralist) thought challenges philosophy by bringing the protocols of reason into question. It disputes the assumption that the pursuit of reason and truth drive and legitimize the development of knowledge, claiming in some versions - particularly associated with Foucault - that discourses become used not because they are true or practically-adequate, but because they are backed by the strongest rhetoric, imagery and sanctions. Since knowledge provides a way of ordering things, it is a form of power. In addition, all discursive

⁵ See Grimshaw for a critique of further misleading stereotypes of philosophy (Grimshaw, 1986). Note also a tendency evident over the last 20 years to try to elevate inter-theoretical disputes to the more grandiose level of epistemological disputes.

knowledge, including that of science, is inescapably metaphorical and rhetorical. Those kinds of science or philosophy which have tried to escape from reliance on metaphor and rhetoric into pure reason or logic have been shown to be incapable of doing so. Even to speak of 'logical rigour' is to employ a metaphor, beyond which we cannot proceed. Moreover, language is opaque. We can never make it a completely transparent medium of representation however much we try, and reason, logic, rigour and concepts of truth can't be given any absolute grounding.

Such arguments against the protocols of reason and truth/practical adequacy contain an obvious paradox, if not a contradiction, for what are we to make of a discourse that renounces reason? Actually, Foucault cannot achieve a decisive break with these protocols: "every sentence of Foucault's writing betrays an opposite compulsion" (Norris, 1990, p.69). Foucault's writing is interesting precisely insofar as he has to contradict his own power/knowledge thesis, insofar as he helps us understand social reality. If we don't follow the protocols of reason and practical adequacy, how should anyone understand us, and why should they believe us? The paradox of *cogent arguments* illustrating the limits to reason is therefore simultaneously unsettling and reassuring. Also reassuring is the fact that in most of social life, these limits to reason do not prevent successful communication and action.⁶

Nor should the unavoidability of metaphor be seen as a problem for science. Realist philosophers have for some time acknowledged the metaphorical character of scientific knowledge (Harre, 1963; Hesse, 1974). Scientific progress is very much about improving the metaphors we use so that our interventions in the world are more successful. Moreover, to point out the irreducibly metaphorical and rhetorical character of knowledge does not mean that logic, protocols of reason just disappear. They remain, indispensable as ever: no flip from reason to rhetoric is needed.

Although we can't draw a firm line between rhetoric and reason it doesn't follow that there is no difference between them, just as my difficulty in drawing a clear line between the back of someone's head and the front doesn't prevent me from recognizing the difference. The fuzziness of the distinctions doesn't mean that I can collapse reason wholly into rhetoric, like saying someone's head is all back. To acknowledge that all argument has a suasive rhetorical character (note the pleas for 'clear' and 'rigorous' argument by those who fear rhetoric) is not to say that argument is nothing but seduction or force, that it cannot also have logic, proof or refutation.⁷

⁶ Although the 'linguistic turn' is associated with a concern with the pragmatics rather than the formal properties of language, i.e. how language is actually used in practical situations, the practical side rarely gets more than lip service: hence the exaggerated views of the instability of meaning.

⁷ Norris argues that some of the leading figures associated with deconstructionism

Realists have been slower in acknowledging the significance of textuality and rhetoric, but again, this is something they should be able to accept happily (Sayer, 1992). A concern with rhetoric and writing is often assumed to have anti-realist implications, perhaps because of its emphasis on the way in which language substantially mediates knowledge. But critical realists acknowledge that science is a social practice and that the world always has to be described in some language and conceptual system. By paying attention to rhetoric and textuality we can gain a better understanding of that mediation. And what is the point of worrying about rhetoric and textuality if not to develop a more realistic understanding of how they operate? (Maki, 1989).

While postmodernist critiques of philosophy do have some point, it should be noted that in their critiques of substantive accounts in social science, postmodernists are not slow to deploy philosophical arguments when it suits them. Charges of 'totalizing discourses' or logocentrism sound rather impressive, if not intimidating, and it is especially important to go into the arguments behind them rather than merely parroting these terms. Otherwise academic debates may become debased to the point where, instead of engaging with the substantive accounts of others, one simply disqualifies them by accusing them of assuming some 'privileged vantage point' or foundationalism, etc. Even if anyone did claim such a privilege, simply pointing out the philosophical error allows them the fallback position that their account, even if fallible, was at least the best available account. To counter such a claim, one would have to move to a critique of the substantive content of the account. Since anti-foundationalism is virtually universally accepted, it doesn't have much use as a critical weapon. One can hardly criticise a theory or an account for not being infallible, for not being the 'ultimate' truth, if it could not be otherwise.

6. Conclusions

I have argued that the (anti-)philosophical bases of postmodernist thought are seriously flawed and that it makes several unwarranted and unsatisfactory 'flips' - from naive objectivism to relativism and idealism, from totalities to fragments, and from ethnocentricisms to new forms of self-contradictory cultural relativism. A realist approach shows us that we can escape from these alternatives. The Modernist project - and more specifically, critical social science - don't need foundationalism or notions of absolute truth. They can be not only better understood but furthered through a critical realist interpretation. The new kinds of idealism and relativism that have infected postmodernist thought offer no support to critical social science, to anti-racism and feminism.

defend this distinction and are themselves highly rigorous, Norris, 1985; 1990). Note that some authors use 'rhetoric' to refer just to suasive rhetoric, some to this plus logic and reason. It's therefore important to know how the term is being used.

Let us update Hume's taunts against idealism: we will see how idealists - all those who bracket out reality, who imagine that knowledge is purely a matter of rhetoric and power, those who want to throw out reference and representation along with *any* concept of truth - fare when the meeting is ended. Truth being apparently purely a matter of convention or power and purely internal to theory and nothing to do with representation of some external 'reality', it will of course be easy for the anti-realists to change the conventions and leave through (the so-called) solid walls rather through the doors of realist orthodoxy. And to add a dash of Bachelard, we shall see the difference between the 'nocturnal philosophies' of the idealists and their 'diurnal' realism, when at the end of the meeting, they sheepishly leave by the door.

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