CHAPTER 14

Post-Theories

Michel Foucault (1926–1984)

Jean Baudrillard (1929–)

But what if empirical knowledge . . . obeyed, at a given moment, the laws of a certain code of knowledge? . . . The fundamental codes of a culture . . . establish for every man, from the very first, the empirical orders with which he will be dealing and within which he will be at home.

(Foucault, 1966/1994b, pp. ix, xx)

The systems of reference for production, signification, the affect, substance and history, all this equivalence to a “real” content, loading the sign with the burden of “utility,” with gravity—its form of representative equivalence—all this is over with.

(Baudrillard, 1976/1993b, p. 6)

These two quotes illustrate a shift that has occurred in the social disciplines. Sociology and the social disciplines in general have experienced what has been called a “linguistic turn.” A good deal of this sea change toward language can be credited generally to the work of poststructuralism and postmodernism. Language itself wasn’t part of classic theory, at least for most of sociology. However, classic sociologists did talk about culture. Harriet Martineau saw culture as a way to both measure a society’s progress and encourage its progress through education. Herbert Spencer talked about categoric groups; Marx actually saw culture as a problem in
the form of ideology; Durkheim’s theory of the collective consciousness is utterly cultural; W. E. B. Du Bois gave significant place to cultural representation; Weber was concerned with cultural meaning; and a good deal of Georg Simmel’s theory is based around the distinctions between subjective and objective culture. The place where language begins to come into sociology is through the work of George Herbert Mead. He exploited the reflexive properties of language in his theory of the mind and self.

But it wasn’t until the 1960s that language became important for sociology as a whole. There are perhaps a number of reasons for this shift in the United States. For example, American sociology was just coming out of its functionalist phase and seeing the resurgence of Marxian theory. Structural functionalism’s emphasis on culture and Marx’s negative view of culture left a space in the intellectual field. American sociology was also opening up to more European intellectual influences. At the time, French sociology was reeling under what seemed like an abrupt shift from linguistic structuralism to poststructuralism. Besides the conceptual issues, the shift itself meant that signs and language were part of an energetic debate, which splashed over into the States. American sociology in the sixties also saw the rise of phenomenological theory within its own borders, which brought increasing emphasis on language through ethnomethodology and the social constructivism of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s *The Social Construction of Reality*.

In the theories of Michel Foucault and Jean Baudrillard, we see strong statements of this linguistic turn, in the form of poststructuralism with Foucault and postmodernism with Baudrillard. Both of these men approach the issues of signs and language differently, but what I want to point out here is that their work heralds a fundamental shift in the way social theorists think about culture. Rather than understanding culture and language within a social context, such as in symbolic interactions or symbolic markets, texts are understood on their own terms, as social factors in and of themselves. In this perspective, culture and cultural readings become fundamentally important. The radical postmodern thread in this linguistic turn is that readings of texts are themselves seen as texts, which means that since humans are defined through meaning, all we have are texts. Foucault’s poststructuralism, on the other hand, sees texts as ways through which power is exercised over individual subjects.

**Michel Foucault: Defining the Possible and Impossible**

Foucault is a complex thinker and writer. As a result, trying to summarize Foucault’s theory can be a frustrating experience. In writing this chapter, I had a continuing sense of incompletion. The more I wrote, the more I felt that I was leaving out. I mention this because I know that what I’m presenting in this book is a pared down version of Foucault. Yet I believe that in focusing on a select few of Foucault’s major points, I can convey some sense of what he was trying to accomplish.
Stated succinctly, Foucault is interested in how power is exercised through knowledge or “truth,” and how truth is formed through practice (note that with Foucault, we can use knowledge and truth interchangeably). His interest in truth isn’t abstract or philosophical. Rather, Foucault is interested in analyzing what he calls *truth games*. His use of “games” isn’t meant to imply that what passes as truth in any historical time is somehow false or simply a construction of language. Foucault feels that these kinds of questions can only be answered, let alone asked, after historically specific assumptions are made. In other words, something can only be “false” once a specific truth is assumed, and Foucault is involved in uncovering how truth is assumed. Specifically, Foucault’s interest in truth concerns the game of truth: the rules, resources, and practices that go into making something true for humans.

The idea of *practice* is fairly broad and includes such things as institutional and organizational practices as well as those of academic disciplines—in these practices, truth is formed. The idea also refers to specific practices of the body and self—these are where power is exercised. Most of us use the word “practice” to talk about the behaviors we engage in to prepare for an event, such as band practice for a show. But practice has another meaning as well. This meaning is clear when we talk about a medical practice. When you go to your physician, you see someone who is “practicing” medicine. In this sense, practice refers to choreographed acts that interact with bodies—sets of behaviors that together define a way of doing something. This is the kind of practice in which Foucault is interested.

*Photo: © Bettmann/Corbis.*
The Essential Foucault

Biography

We should begin this brief biography by noting that Michel Foucault would balk at the idea that we need to know anything about the author in order to understand his or her work. Further, Foucault would say that any history of the author is something that we use in order to validate a particular reading or interpretation. Having said that, Foucault was born on October 15, 1926, in Poitiers, France. Foucault studied at the École Normale Supérieure and the Institut de Psychologie in Paris. In 1960, returning to France from teaching posts in Sweden, Warsaw, and Hamburg, Foucault published *Madness and Civilization*, for which he received France’s highest academic degree, doctorat d’État. In 1966, Foucault published *The Order of Things*, which became a best-selling book in France. In 1970, Foucault received a permanent appointment at the Collège de France (France’s most prestigious school) as chair of History of Systems of Thought. In 1975, Foucault published *Discipline and Punishment* and took his first trip to California, which came to hold an important place in Foucault’s life, especially San Francisco. In 1976, Foucault published the first volume of his last major work, *The History of Sexuality*. The two other volumes of this history, *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*, were published shortly before Foucault’s death in 1984.

Passionate Curiosity

In Foucault’s (1984/1990b) own words,

As for what motivated me...it was curiosity—the only kind of curiosity, in any case, that is worth acting upon with a degree of obstinacy: not the curiosity that seeks to assimilate what it is proper for one to know, but that which enables one to get free of oneself. After all, what would be the value of the passion for knowledge if it resulted only in a certain amount of knowledgeableness and not, in one way or another and to the extent possible, in the knower’s straying afield of himself? (p. 8)
Foucault uncovers truth games by constructing what he calls counter-histories. When most of us think of history, we think of a factual telling of events from the past. We are aware, of course, that sometimes that telling can be politicized, which is one reason we have “Black History Month” here in the United States—we are trying to make up for having left people of color out of our telling of history. But most of us also think that the memory model is still intact; it’s just getting a few tweaks. Foucault wants us to free history from the model of memory. He really doesn’t say anything directly about whether any particular history is more or less true; that’s not an issue for him. History in all its forms is both part of and generated by discourse. Thus, Foucault’s concern is how the idea of true history is used. What Foucault wants to produce for us is a counter-history—a history told from a different point of view from the progressive, linear, memory model.

The important questions then become, why is one path taken rather than another? Why is the present filled with one kind of discourse rather than others? And what has been the cost of taking this path rather than all the other potentialities? Thus, a counter-history identifies the accidents, the minute deviations—or conversely, the complete reversals—the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us; it is to discover that truth or being does not lie at the root of what we know and what we are, but the exteriority of accidents. (Foucault, 1984a, p. 81)

Foucault uses two terms to talk about his counter-history: archaeology and genealogy. Though the distinctions are sometimes unclear, archaeology seems to be oriented toward uncovering the relationships among social institutions, practices, and knowledge that come to produce a particular kind of discourse or structure of thought. Genealogy may be better suited to describe Foucault’s (1984a) work that is
concerned with the actual inscription of discourse and power on the mind and body: “Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history’s destruction of the body” (p. 83). We could say that archaeology is to text what genealogy is to the body. In both cases, there is an analogy to digging, searching, and uncovering the hidden history of order, thought, madness, sexuality, and so on. The hidden history isn't necessarily more accurate—it's simply a counter-story that is constructed more in an archaeological mode than an historical one.

Part of what Foucault wants to do with counter-histories is expose the contingencies of what we consider reality, but to what end? Many critical perspectives are based on assumptions of what would make a better society. In other words, there must be something to which the current situation is compared to demonstrate what it is lacking. But Foucault sees it otherwise. For him, the critical perspective in itself is sufficient because it opens up possibilities. In fact, Foucault would argue that a utopian scheme only attempts to replace one system of impoverishment with another. The point is to keep possibilities always open, to keep people critically examining their life and knowledge system so that they can perpetually be open to the possibility of something else.

According to Foucault's scheme, an important part of what creates knowledge, order, and discourse is the presence of “blank spaces." Foucault (1966/1994b) pictures knowledge as a kind of grid. The boxes in the grid are the actual linguistic categories, such as mammal, flora, mineral, human, black, white, male, and female. We are familiar with those sections; they form part of our everyday language. However, there is actually a more important part of the grid, the one that creates the order—the blank spaces between the categories. "It is only in the blank spaces of this grid that order manifests itself in depth as though already there, waiting in silence for the moment of its expression" (p. xx). The true power of a discourse or knowledge system is in the spaces between the categories. As Eviatar Zerubavel (1991) notes, separating one island of meaning from another entails the introduction of some mental void between them. . . . It is our perception of the void among these islands of meaning that makes them separate in our mind, and its magnitude reflects the degree of separateness we perceive among them. (pp. 21–22)

These spaces are revealed most clearly in transgression. As an illustration, let's think about a little boy of about 3 or 4 years of age. He is a playful boy, playing with the toys he's been given and emulating the role models he sees on TV and among the neighborhood children. But one day his father comes home and finds him playing with a doll. His father grabs the toy away and tells his son firmly that boys do not play with dolls. In this instance, the category of gender was almost invisible until the young boy unwittingly attempted to cross over the boundary or space between the categories. The meaning and power of gender waited "in silence for the moment of its expression."
This idea of space is provocative. A more Durkheimian way of thinking about categories would conceptualize the space between them as a boundary or wall. Using the idea of boundary to think about the division between categories is fruitful: walls separate and prevent passing. The young boy in our example certainly came up against a wall, and many of us have felt the walls of gender, race, or sexism. But the idea of walls makes the use of categories and knowledge seem objective, as if they somehow exist apart from us, and this is not what Foucault has in mind.

Notice that the boy in our example was unaware of the “wall” until his father showed it to him. From Foucault’s position, the wall of gender was erected in the father’s gendered practices. Foucault’s idea of space helps us think about the practices of power. Space, in this sense, is empty until it is filled—seeing space between categories rather than a wall makes us wait to see what will go there and how it goes there. Space is undetermined. Something can be built in space, but the space itself calls our attention to potential. Foucault’s research, his critical archaeology, fills in that potential—he tells us how that space became historically constructed in one way rather than any of the other potential ways.

Foucault’s counter-history actually creates a space of its own. On one side, Foucault’s archaeology of modernity uncovers the fundamental codes of thought that establish for all of us the order that we will use in our world. On the other side, Foucault sets the sciences and philosophical interpretations that explain why such an order exists. Between these two domains is a space of possibilities, a space wherein a critical culture can develop that sufficiently frees itself “to discover that these orders are perhaps not the only possible ones or the best ones” (Foucault, 1966/1994b, p. xx).

In other words, through the archaeology of knowledge, Foucault wants to not only expose the codes of knowledge that undergird everything we do, feel, and think, he also wants to set loose the idea that things might not be as they are. He wants to free the possibility of thinking something different. That possibility of thought exists in the critical space between—but in this case the space isn’t specified, as it is in already existing orders. Foucault doesn’t necessarily have a place he is taking us; he doesn’t really have a utopian vision of what knowledge and practice ought to be. His critique is aimed at freeing knowledge and creating possibility; it’s aimed at creating an empty space that is undetermined.

**Defining Poststructuralism**

Foucault is generally considered a poststructuralist, though some prefer to classify him as a postmodernist. As you’ll see when we get to Baudrillard’s postmodernism, the two perspectives are similar and at least complementary. Both are concerned with culture generally and language particularly, and both argue that culture and language function without any physical or objective reality in back of them. There are, I think, two main differences between them. First, they each locate the reasons for the lack of reality in different places. Poststructuralism
generally considers the intrinsic characteristics of language itself, while social postmodernism usually looks to such factors as capitalism and mass media as the culprits.

Second, they each focus on different effects of the state of culture. For instance, Foucault argues that rather than referring to any physical reality, language contains political discourses that function to exercise power over the person. Baudrillard, on the other hand, sees culture as absolutely void of any significance at all, political or otherwise. Any meaning or power in culture has been stripped away by incessant commodification, advertising, and the trivializing effects of mass media. In a nutshell, Foucault says the individual subject is the product of historically specific discourses, and Baudrillard claims that the subject is dead.

Another quality that poststructuralism and postmodernism share is that they are hard to define. Poststructuralism doesn’t refer to a clear body of knowledge that is universally accepted by everyone claiming to use the perspective. It is, rather, a loose amalgamation of ideas that in general define an approach. Overall, poststructuralism is defined in opposition to structuralism, an attempt to discover and explain the unobserved foundations for empirical phenomena. Implicit within such goals is the belief that a metalanguage (like science or mathematics) can be created that will adequately and objectively express the characteristics of such a structure. As the linguistic structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963) put it, “Structural linguistics will certainly play the same renovating role with respect to the social sciences that nuclear physics, for example, has played for the physical sciences” (p. 33). It is the criticism of this belief and hope that forms the core of poststructuralism.

Poststructuralism assumes that all languages are based on values, most of which are political in nature. Thus, a “pure science” of any social structure is impossible. Rather than language being able to represent an independent reality, language is inherently self-referential, creating a world of oppressive power relations. In addition, poststructuralism is characterized by several denials:

- Poststructuralism rejects the belief in essentializing ideas that conceptualize the social world or a portion of it as a universal totality—rather, the social world is fragmented and historically specific (general theories are thus impossible and oppressive).

- Poststructuralism denies the possibility of knowing an independent or objective reality—rather, the human world and knowledge are utterly textual.

- Poststructuralism discards the idea that texts or language have any true meaning—rather, texts are built around difference and carry a surplus of meaning (humanity is thus left with nothing but interpretation and interpretations of interpretation).

- Poststructuralism rejects the idea of universal human nature developed out of the Enlightenment—rather, the meaning of the human subject is historically specific and is an effect of discourse, with the discourses of an age producing the possible bodies and subjectivities of the person.
According to Foucault, power isn’t something that a person possesses; rather, it is something that is part of every relationship. Foucault tells us that there are three types of domains or practices within relationships: communicative, objective, and power. Communication is directed toward producing meaning; objective practices are directed toward controlling and transforming things—science and economy are two good examples; and practices of power, which Foucault (1982) defines as “a set of actions upon other actions” (p. 220), are directed toward controlling the actions and subjectivities of people. Notice where Foucault locates power—it’s within the actions themselves, not within the powerful person or the social structure. Foucault uses the double meaning of “conduct” to get at this insight: conduct is a way of leading others (to conduct an orchestra, for example) and also a way of behaving (as in “Tommy conducted himself in a manner worthy of his position.”). Thus, we conduct others through our conduct.

However, Foucault’s intent is not to reduce power to the mundane, the simple organization of human behavior across time and place. Rather, Foucault’s point is that power is exercised in a variety of ways, many of which we are unaware. Power, then, becomes insidious. Power acts in the normalcy of everyday life. It acts by imperceptible degrees, exerting gradual and hidden effects. In this way, the exercise of power entices us into a snare that feels of our own doing. But how is power exercised? Where does it exist and how are we enticed? Foucault argues that power is exercised through the epistemes (underlying order) and discourses found in what passes as knowledge. The potential and practice of power exists in these epistemes and discourses that set the limits of what is possible and impossible, which in turn are felt and expressed through a person’s relationship with her- or himself, in subjectivities—the way we feel about and relate to our inner self—and the disposition of the body.

Epistemes and Order

Order is an interesting idea. We order our days and lives; we order our homes and offices; we order our files and our bank accounts; we order our yards and shopping centers; we order land and sea—in short, humans order everything. How do we order things? One of the ways is linguistically: “Indeed, things become meaningful only when placed in some category” (Zerubavel, 1991, p. 5). But a deeper and more fundamental question can be asked: how do we order the order of things? In other words, what scheme or system underlies and creates our categorical schemes? We may use categories to order the world around us, but where do the categories get their order?

To introduce us to this question, Foucault (1966/1994b) tells a delightful story of reading a book containing a Chinese categorical system that divides animals into those “(a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification,”
(i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camel hair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies” (p. xv). The thing that struck Foucault about this system of categories was the limitation of his own thinking—“the stark impossibility of thinking that” (p. xv, emphasis original). In response, Foucault asks an important set of questions: What sets the boundaries of what is possible and impossible to think? Where do these boundaries originate? What is the price of these impossibilities—what is gained and what is lost?

Foucault argues that there is a fundamental code to culture, a code that orders language, perception, values, practices, and all that gives order to the world around us. He calls these fundamental codes epistemological fields, or the episteme of knowledge in any age. Episteme refers to the mode of thought’s existence, or the way in which thought organizes itself in any historical moment. An episteme is the necessary precondition of thought. It is what exists before thought and that which makes thought possible. This foundation of thought is not held consciously. It is undoubtedly this preconscious character of the episteme that makes thought believable and ideas seem true.

Moreover, rather than seeing thought and knowledge as results of historical, linear processes, Foucault argues that discontinuity marks changes in knowledge. Most of us think that the knowledge we hold accumulated over time, that we have thrown out the false knowledge and replaced it with true knowledge as we have progressively learned how things work. This evolutionary view of knowledge actually comes from the culture of science. It is the way we want to see our knowledge, not necessarily the way it is. Foucault argues that knowledge doesn’t progress linearly. Rather, what we know and how we know it is linked to historically specific patterns of behavior, institutional arrangements, and economic and social practices that set the rules and conditions of discourse and the limits of our possibilities. And that historical path is marked by rupture: discontinuities and sudden, radical changes.

Think about this: what is Foucault saying that hasn’t been said before? Others have said that knowledge is socially constructed. But Foucault is saying that this idea of rupture implies that knowledge and truth are purely functions of institutional arrangements and practices and not the result of any real quest for truth. Thus, what counts as truth in any age—our own included—comes about through historically unique practices and institutional configurations. This implies not only that knowledge is socially constructed, but also, and more importantly, that knowledge is nothing more and nothing less than the exercise of power. This pure power is put into effect through discourse and the taken-for-granted ordering of human life.

**Discourse**

Discourse refers to languages and behaviors that are specific to a social issue, such as the discourse of race. In simple terms, a discourse is a way of talking about things. If you want to discuss music with a group of musicians, for instance, there is an acceptable discourse or language that you would use. It would include such words as key, modes, transposing, and so on. This discourse would be different
from the one you would use to talk about baseball. You wouldn’t normally tell your
baseball team to hit the field and “tune up,” nor would you tell a violinist to “bunt.”

Foucault’s interest in the idea of discourse is a bit more significant. First, he wants
us to see beneath the surface of the word choice between “bunt” and “tune up.”
Foucault is interested in the rules and practices that underlie the words and ideas that
we use. Discourse sets the possibilities of thought and existence. There is an obvious
link between language and thought: we think in language. So, a discourse, with its
underlying rules and practices, gives us a language with which to think and talk.
That’s a commonsensical statement, and we might be tempted just to accept it at face
value. But using discourse as the basis of thought sets the boundaries of what is pos-
sible and impossible for us to think, so it is more profound than it might first appear.

The second thing that discourse does is to determine the position a person or
object must occupy in order to become the subject of a statement. “I’m a man” is such
a statement. For me to be a man, I must meet the conditions of existence that are
set down in the discourse of gender. I not only have to meet those conditions for
you; I must meet them for me as well, because the discourse sets out the conditions
of subjectivity—how we think and feel about our self. Subjects, and the accompa-
nying inner thoughts and feelings, are specific conditions within the discourse. As
we locate ourselves within a discourse, we become subject to the discourse and thus
subjectively answer ourselves through the discourse.

This work of positioning that discourse accomplishes is one of its most power-
ful acts. Think about it this way: it is extremely difficult to talk to someone about
anything without positioning yourself within a discourse. There are discourses sur-
rounding sports, family, gender, race, class, self-improvement, medicine, mass
media, cars, trucks, and on and on. Once you begin to converse using a discourse,
you automatically occupy a position within it that tells you how to think, feel, and
act. For example, the modern discourse of gender tells me what I can and can’t feel
as a man. Here’s a more provocative example: if you feel “sick,” you have already
positioned yourself within the modern medical discourse (compare this feeling to
magical or religious discourses that define such things as spiritual possessions).

The third thing that Foucault wants us to see about discourse is that it is used
instead of coercive force to impose order on a social group. Critically speaking,
social order is always a problem for the elite in any society. One way to subjugate a
population is through physical coercion. However, the use of force is costly and
produces contrary effects. Discourse is used instead of force and is thus character-
ized by a will to truth and a will to power. In other words, there is political inten-
tion behind truth and power. What passes as truth and how truth is validated is
dependent upon the discourse. And discourse intrinsically contains a will to power.

Let me give you a dramatic example. The attacks of September 11, 2001, were
perpetrated by men who are considered either “terrorists” or “freedom fighters,”
depending on the discourse that is used. Within these discourses are legitimations
and methods of reasoning that create these two different social meanings. Further,
the discourses create the subjective experience of all the different peoples involved.
The substance of one discourse is captured by the title of the report generated
by the United States government: “The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks
Upon the United States.”
Clearly, the discourse in the United States defines the perpetrators as *terrorists* and the subjective experience of those in the United States as being innocently *attacked*. The substance of the other discourse is revealed in the title and opening lines of a document confiscated by the police in Manchester, England, during a search of an Al Qaeda member's home. The title of the document is “Declaration of Jihad,” and the opening lines are addressed to “those champions who avowed the truth day and night” (*Al Qaeda Training Manual*, n.d.). One discourse creates the meaning of attack and terrorist; the other creates the meaning of holy war and champion.

There’s something vitally important that I want you to notice here. Obviously, what we are talking about in this example is the creation of meaning. As we saw with symbolic interaction in Chapter 9, we experience events meaningfully. But notice that Foucault takes us further than symbolic interactionism's point about meaning and definition. Symbolic interaction, you will remember, says that meaning is negotiated through the back-and-forth interplays of conversation. Foucault’s point is that this negotiation of meaning through interaction takes place within a framework that is set by the currently available episteme and discourses. These issues of why, what, and how we know things are exercises of social power, because they are all grounded in the epistememes and discourses of any particular society, which are themselves controlled by the elite. *How we know* something, or the basis upon which knowledge is created, is particularly insidious because it seems as if it is a simple function of the brain and our senses. Yet this is exactly what Marx had in mind with false consciousness and what Dorothy E. Smith (Chapter 13) intends when she talks about the new materialism, text, and the relations of ruling.

**From Subject to Object**

For Foucault, then, power is not so much a quality of social structures as it is the practices or techniques that become power as individuals are turned into subjects through discourse. Foucault intends us to see both meanings of the noun "subject": as someone to control, and as one’s self-knowledge. Here Foucault’s unique interest is quite clear—perhaps the most insidious form of power is that which is exercised by our self over how we think and feel; it is the power we exercise in the name of others over our self.

In an interesting analysis, Foucault uses the state to illustrate both meanings of subject. State rule is usually understood in terms of power over the masses. While this is a true characteristic of the state, Foucault argues that the modern state also exercises individualization techniques that exercise power over the subjectivity of the person. Foucault talks about this form of ruling as *governmentality*: “the government of the self by the self in its articulation with relations to others” (*Foucault*, 1989, as quoted in Davidson, 1994, p. 119). Governmentality was needed because of the shift from the power of the monarch to the power of the state.

Under a monarchy, the power of the queen or king was absolute and she or he required absolute obedience, but the scope of that control was fairly narrow. The nation-state “freed” people from the coercive control of the monarchy but at the
same time broadened its scope of control. The nation-state is far more interested in controlling our behaviors today than monarchies were 300 years ago. In governmentality, the individual is enlisted by the state to exercise control over him- or herself. This is partly achieved through expert, professional knowledge that comes from medicine and the social and behavior sciences. The state supports such scientific research, and the findings are employed to extend control, particularly as the individual uses and consults medicine, psychology, and other sciences.

A fundamental part of Foucault’s argument about the practices of power is the historical shift to objectification. Obviously, if power is intrinsic to human affairs of all kinds, then people have always exercised power. However, the practice of power became something different and more insidious due to historical changes that objectified the subject of power—the individual person. We can get a picture of this shift in how power is exercised over the person by comparing the roots, primary meanings, and transitive verb forms of object and subject.

I’ve listed the differences between them in Table 14.1, for easy comparison. All the references come from Merriam-Webster (2002). Notice the attitudes that the Latin roots imply: objects are things that can be thrown away, whereas subjects are things that are placed or thrown under. With this root meaning, subjects are controlled, but there is still a relationship between the subject and the one in charge—subjects are under, controlled but still present. Objects, on the other hand, are thrown away; there is no continuing relationship with whoever is doing the throwing. Notice also the first meaning of each word. Even though the definition of object is talking about something we perceive, like seeing a tree in the distance, the object is regarded as in the way. The first meaning of subject still carries with it the notion of connected but controlled.

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<tr>
<th>Latin Root</th>
<th>Object</th>
<th>Subject</th>
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<tr>
<td>objectus</td>
<td>objectus meaning “to throw away”</td>
<td>subjectus meaning “to bring under, throw under”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Meaning</td>
<td>“something that is put or may be regarded as put in the way of some of the senses”</td>
<td>“one that is placed under the authority, dominion, control, or influence of someone or something”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitive Verb</td>
<td>“a: to cause to become or to assume the character of an object b: to render objective; specifically: to give the status of external or independent reality to”</td>
<td>“to identify with a subject or interpret in terms of subjective experience”</td>
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</table>
We are all probably familiar with the transitive verb “to objectify.” It means to make something an object that isn’t an object, and it also means to exist apart from any internal relationship. Interestingly, most of us are probably not familiar with the transitive verb “to subjectify.” As a case in point, my word processor just highlighted “subjectify” as a misspelled word, yet it is a real word that appears in exhaustive dictionaries. We just rarely use it, nor do we think about things becoming subjectified—we assume that we subjectively relate to everything about ourselves on our own, without any outside influence. But, according to Foucault, that is not the case, especially in modernity. Today, we relate to our self, our body, and our sexuality as objects.

Foucault’s work is found in a series of books that provide a counter-history to some of the objectifying power practices in Western societies. These books detail madness and rationality, abnormality and normality, medicine and the clinic, penal discipline and punishment, psychiatry and criminal justice, and the history of sexuality. In general, these works document how you and I exercise power over our bodies and subjectivities. While I don’t have the luxury of introducing you to all of Foucault’s archaeology and genealogy, it is important for us to talk about a few of his concepts so that you can get a sense of how his theoretical ideas get played out. We’ll first be looking at how power is exercised over our body and then over our inner, subjective life.

Concepts and Theory: Power Over the Body

Foucault’s intent in his book *Discipline and Punish* is to map a major shift in the way in which Western society handles crime and criminals. The shift is from punishment and torture to discipline. Foucault paints a graphic comparative picture in the first seven pages of this book. The first part of the picture is an account of the public torture and killing of a man named Damiens on March 2, 1757. Damiens had been convicted of murder and sentenced to having his flesh torn from his body with red-hot pincers, followed by various molten elements (such as lead, wax, and oil) poured into the open wounds. The hand that held the knife with which he had committed the murder was burnt with sulfur. Finally, he was drawn and quartered by four horses and his body burnt to ashes and the ashes scattered to the winds.

The second image in Foucault’s picture is a set of 12 rules for the daily activities of prisoners in Paris. The rules covered the prisoners’ entire day and included such things as prayer, bible reading, education, bathing, recreation, and work. These rules were in use a mere 80 years after the public torture of Damiens. The shortness of the time period indicates that the change isn’t due to gradual adjustment and progress, but rather to abrupt shifts in knowledge, perception, and power.

Foucault uses this graphic comparison to point out a fundamental change that occurred in Europe and the United States. Most of us would look at these differences and attribute the change to a dawning of compassion and a desire to treat people more humanely. Foucault, on the other hand, looks deeper and more holistically at the shift. This change not only affected the penal system; it was a fundamental social change as well. During this period of time, from the eighteenth to nineteenth
centuries (also known as the Enlightenment), science gained its foothold in society. Society as a whole began to embrace what we call scientism—the adaptation of the methods, mental attitudes, and modes of expression typical of scientists. Scientism values control, and control is achieved by objectifying the world and reducing it to its constituent parts. The gaze of the scientist is thus penetrating, particularizing, and objectifying. This kind of gaze results in universal technologies that allow humans to regularize and routinize their control of the world.

The shift, then, was not due to society becoming more compassionate and humane; the shift from punishment to discipline was a function of scientism and the desire to more uniformly control the social environment. As Foucault (1975/1995) says, the primary objective of this shift was

to make of the punishment and repression of illegalities a regular function, coextensive with society; not to punish less, but to punish better; to punish with an attenuated severity perhaps, but in order to punish with more universality and necessity; to insert the power to punish more deeply into the social body. (p. 82, emphasis added)

This new way of discipline and control is best characterized by Jeremy Bentham’s concept of a panopticon. The word panopticon is a combination of two Greek words. The first part, “pan,” comes from the word pantos meaning “all.” The second part comes from the word optikos meaning “to see.” Together, panopticon literally means “all seeing.” There is actually an optical instrument called the panopticon that combines features of both the microscope and telescope, allowing the viewer to see things both up close and far away, thus seeing all.

Jeremy Bentham developed a different kind of panopticon—a building design for prisons. Bentham’s panopticon was a round building with an observation tower or core that optimized surveillance. The building was divided into individual prison cells that extended from the inner core to the outer wall. Each cell had inner and outer windows; thus, each prisoner was backlit by the outer window, allowing for easy viewing. “They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible” (Foucault, 1975/1995, p. 200). The tower itself was fitted with Venetian blinds, zigzag hallways, and partitioned intersections among the observation rooms in the tower. These made the tower guards invisible to the prisoners who were being observed. The purpose of the panopticon was to allow seeing without being seen. Here “inspection functions ceaselessly. The gaze is alert everywhere” (Foucault, 1975/1995, p. 195).

Foucault isn’t really interested in the panopticon as such. Rather, he sees the idea of the panopticon as illustrative of a shift in the fundamental way people thought and the way in which power is practiced. In terms of crime and punishment, it involved a shift from the spectacle of torture (which fit well with monarchical power) to regulation in prison (which fits well with the nation-state); from seeing crime as an act against authority to viewing it as an act against society; from being focused on guilt (did he [or she] do it?) to looking at cause (what social or psychological factors influenced the person?); and, most importantly, from punishment to
discipline—more specifically, to the self-discipline imposed by the ever-present but unseen surveillance of the panopticon.

Foucault (1975/1995) refers to this kind of control as the microphysics of power and sees this as the explicit link between knowledge and power: “There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (p. 27). The microphysics of power is exercised or practiced as knowledge is produced, appropriated by groups for use, distributed to the population through education and mass media (such as books, magazines, and the Internet), and then retained internally by those that others want to control.

Obviously, all of society was not put into a physical panopticon, but society was placed within a symbolic or institutional system of surveillance. In another wordplay, Foucault argues that the discipline associated with panopticon surveillance of the entire population comes from the “disciplines,” in particular the human sciences. The modern episteme created the possibility of the human sciences, such as psychiatry, psychology, and sociology. The human has been the subject of thought and modes of control for quite some time, but in every case the human was seen holistically or as part of the universal scheme of things. In the modern episteme, however, mankind becomes the object of study—not as part of an aesthetic whole, but as a thing in its own right.

This discourse of science serves to objectify and control the individual. Psychiatry and psychology used the mechanical model of the universe to gaze inside the psyche of the person; sociology and political science looked at the external circumstances of humanity. Thus, the internal motivations and reasons behind action as well as the external factors became the objects of science in order to fulfill the chief goal of science, which is control. Statistics are used to quantify and categorize; psychotherapy and psychological testing are used to probe and catalog; all of the disciplines and their methodologies are brought into “discipline” in order to fulfill the primary goal of science: to control.

Foucault (1982) finds the human sciences particularly interesting because they are “modes of inquiry which try to give themselves the status of sciences” (p. 208). The human sciences are thus not true science; they only take on the guise of science. The human sciences did not grow out of scientific questions; they grew out of the modern episteme. Simply put, during the time that people began to talk about society and psychology, the kind of knowledge that was seen as real and valuable was science. So, in order to be accepted, the social and behavioral disciplines had to take on the guise of science.

More specifically, Foucault argues that there are three areas of knowledge in the modern episteme: mathematical and physical sciences, life and economic sciences, and philosophy. The human sciences grew out of the space created by these three knowledge systems. Asking scientific questions about things like biology and physics, which have some basis in the objective world, set the stage for those same questions to be asked about the questioner. Further, each of these sciences pursues knowledge in a distinctive manner, each with its own logic. The human sciences, on the other hand, must borrow from each of these because it has no unique domain or methodology. The human sciences stand in
relation to all the other forms of knowledge . . . at one level or another, [they use] mathematical formalization; they proceed in accordance with models or concepts borrowed from biology, economics, and the sciences of language; and they address themselves to that mode of being of man which philosophy is attempting to conceive. (Foucault, 1966/1994b, p. 347)

Therefore, the precariousness or uncertainty of the human sciences isn’t due to, “as is often stated, the extreme density of their object” (Foucault, 1966/1994b, p. 348); rather, their uncertainty of knowledge is due to the fact that they have no true method of their own—everything is borrowed. The validity of knowledge is in some way always related to methodology. What we know is an effect of how we know. Because the human sciences don’t have their own methodology, the knowledge generated is without any basis—in the end, it is purely an expression of power that can be explicitly used by the state to control populations but is more generally part of the control people exercise over themselves in modernity.

As such, we generally see and understand ourselves in Western cultures from the human science model. We listen endlessly to public opinion polls and voting predictions, and they become constant topics of conversation for us. We understand the family in terms of such psychosocial models as the “functional family,” and we raise our children according to the latest findings. Almost everything that we think, feel, and do is scrutinized by a human science, and we are provided with that knowledge so that we too can understand our own life and its circumstances.

But the human sciences are not alone in their objectification of humanity; they are aided by a culture produced by the medical gaze. The modern medical gaze is different from that of the eighteenth century. At that time, disease was organized into hierarchical categories such as families, genera, and species. The doctor’s gaze was directed not so much at the patient as at the disease—the patient was in some ways superfluous. Diseases transferred to the body when their makeup combined with certain qualities of the patient, such as his or her temperament. Symptoms existed within the disease itself, not the patient. This way of seeing where symptoms live implies that the patient’s body could actually get in the way of the doctor seeing the symptoms. For example, if the patient was old, then the symptoms associated with being elderly could obscure the doctor’s view of the symptoms associated with the disease. The medical gaze, then, was directed at the disease, not the body.

However, by the nineteenth century, the modern medical gaze had come to locate disease within the patient. Disease was no longer seen to exist within its own world apart from the body; from this new clinical point of view, the patient can’t get in the way of the symptoms because the symptoms and disease are the same and exist within the body. This shift in discourse created the clinical gaze, an objectifying way of seeing that looks within and dissects the patient. With the clinical gaze, “Western man could constitute himself in his own eyes as an object of science” (Foucault, 1963/1994a, p. 197).

Modern medicine is thus created through a gaze that makes the body an object, a thing to be dissected, either symbolically or actually, in order to find the disease within it. The culture of the clinical gaze helped to create a general disposition in
Western society to see the person as an object. This disposition, along with the human sciences, made the practices of power much more effective and treacherous—objects that can be thrown away are much easier to control than subjects that demand continuing emotional and psychic connections.

Concepts and Theory: Power Over the Subject

Thus, bodily regimens of exercise and diet, self-understanding, and regulation of feelings and behaviors all stem from medicine and the human sciences, which Foucault tells us make up the panopticon of modernity. But Foucault is interested in something deeper than the control of the body—he wants to document how we as individuals exercise social power over the way we relate to our own selves. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in Foucault’s counter-history of sexuality. In order to understand Foucault’s intent, we will now briefly review Greek and modern ideas of sexuality.

Greek Sexuality

Ancient Greece was the birthplace of democracy and Western philosophy. There was, in fact, a connection between the two. In Athens, in response to an upheaval by the masses against their tyrannical leader, Isagoras, a politician named Cleisthenes introduced a completely new organization of political institutions called democracy (the rule of common people). Through democratic elections, the elite incrementally lost their advantage in the assemblies and the common people ruled. Unfortunately, the masses were susceptible to impassioned speech and ended up making several decisions that conflicted with one another or entailed high costs. In response, philosophers and the politically deposed elite began to search for absolute truth. To them, truth obviously couldn’t be found simply through rhetoric; they believed there had to be some absolutes upon which decisions could be based.

Along with other factors, this impetus helped produce the Greek notion of the soul. For the Greek, the idea of the soul captured all that is meant by the inner person: the individual’s mind, emotions, ethics, beliefs, and so on. But in reading Plato, it’s also clear that the soul was seen to be hierarchically constructed. Within the soul, the mind is preeminent and alone is immortal. The emotions and appetites, though part of the soul, are of lesser import and are mortal. Thus, reason is godlike and education, especially philosophy, is essential for proper discipline.

It is important that we see the emphasis here. The mind, emotions, and bodily appetites are viewed hierarchically, but they are all seen as part of the soul. In order to get a sense of the relationships within the soul, let’s take a look at a conversation that Plato (1993) sets up between Socrates and a group of students. These conversations are part of what are more generally referred to as the Socratic dialogues, a literary genre that emerged sometime around the turn of the fourth century BCE. Socrates speaks first:
“Do you think that it’s a philosopher’s business to concern himself with what people call pleasures—food and drink, for instance?”
“Certainly not, Socrates,” said Simmias.
“What about those of sex?”
“Not in the least.” . . .
“Then it is your opinion in general that a man of this kind is not preoccupied with the body, but keeps his attention directed as much as he can away from it and towards the soul?”
“Yes, it is.” . . .
“Then when is it that the soul attains to truth? When it tries to investigate anything with the help of the body, it is obviously liable to be led astray.”
“Quite so.”
“Is it not in the course of reasoning, if at all, that the soul gets a clear view of reality?”
“Yes.” (pp. 117–118)

Notice how Socrates views sex: it isn’t something set aside and special. It is simply seen as a bodily appetite, on a par with eating and drinking. And these aren’t a direct concern for the philosopher. If the bodily appetites get in the way of the search for reality or truth, only then are they of concern. The point is to keep the mind free. A person shouldn’t be preoccupied with the body, because too much attention on the body and its appetites will take his or her attention away from the quest for truth. This bit of dialogue sets us up well for the way Foucault talks about sex in Greek society.

In Greek society, sexuality existed as *aphrodisia*. This Greek word is obviously where we get our term “aphrodisiac,” but it had a much broader meaning for the Greeks. Foucault notes that neither the Greeks nor the Romans had an idea of “sexuality” or “the flesh” as distinct objects. When we think of sex, sexuality, or the flesh, we usually have in mind a single set of behaviors or desires. The Greeks, while they had words for different kinds of sexual acts and relations, didn’t have a single word or concept under which they could all fit. The closest to that kind of umbrella term is *aphrodisia*, which might be translated as “sensual pleasures” or “pleasures of love,” and more accurately the works and acts of Aphrodite, the goddess of love.

These works of Aphrodite, perhaps like the works of any god or goddess, cannot be fully categorized. To do so would limit the god. This lack of a catalog or objective specification of sexuality is exactly Foucault’s point. In modern, Western society, particularly as expressed through Christianity, there is a definite way to index those things that are sexual, or the “works of the flesh.” This identifiability is extremely important for the Western mind because sex is a moral issue; it, above all other things, defines immoral practices. So, what counts and doesn’t count as sexual is imperative for us, but it wasn’t for the Greeks.
The Greeks also employed the idea of *chrēsis aphrodisiōn* to sexuality: the phrase means “the use of pleasures.” The Greeks’ use of pleasure was guided by three strategies: need, timeliness, and status. The strategy of need once again highlights Socrates’s approach to sexual practices. As we’ve seen, in Ancient Greece, the relationship to one’s body was to be characterized by moderation, but every person’s appetites and abilities to cope are different. Thus, the Greek strategy was for the individual to first know his need—to understand what the body wants, what its limits are, and how strong the mind is.

The second strategy is timeliness and simply refers to the idea that there are better and worse times to have sexual pleasures. There was a particularly good time in one’s life, neither too young nor too old; a good time of the year; and good times during the day, usually connected with dietary habits. The issue of time “was one of the most important objectives, and one of the most delicate, in the art of making use of the pleasures” (Foucault, 1984/1990b, p. 57). The last strategy in the use of pleasures was status. The art of pleasure was adapted to the status of the person. The general rule was that the more an individual was in the public eye, the more he should “freely and deliberately” adapt rigorous standards regarding his use of pleasures.

Rather than seeing sexuality as moral, the Greeks saw it in terms of ascetics. *Ascetics* refers to one’s attitude or relationship toward one’s self, and for the Greek this was to be characterized through strength. The word comes from the Greek *aske–tikos*, which literally translated means exercise. The idea here is not simply something we do, as in exercising control; it also carries with it a picture of active training. Here we see the Greek link between masculinity and virility. The virile man in Greek society was someone who moderated his own appetites. He was the man who voluntarily wrestled with the needs of his body in order to discipline his mind. The picture we see is that of an athlete in training. For example, the athlete knows that eating chocolate or ice cream can be very pleasurable. But while in training, the athlete willingly forgoes those pleasures for what she or he sees as a higher good. The result of this training is *enkrateia*, the mastery of one’s self. It’s a position of internal strength rather than weakness.

Training is always associated with a goal; there is an end to be achieved or a contest to be won. In this case, the aim of the Greek attitude toward sexuality is a state of being, something that becomes true of the individual in the person’s daily life. This is the *teleology* or ultimate goal of sexuality, the fourth structuring factor that defines a person’s relationship to sex. The goal for the Greek was freedom. We can again see this idea in the conversation with Socrates. Truth and reality were things to be sought after. Too much emphasis on sex, just like eating and drinking, can get in the way of this search. As Socrates (Plato, 1993) said, “surely the soul can reason best when it is free of all distractions such as hearing or sight or pain or pleasure of any kind” (p. 118).

**Modern Western Sexuality**

The Western, modern view of sex is quite different from the Greek. It is, in fact, quite different from that which developed in the East. Where Eastern philosophy
and religion developed a set of practices intended to guide sexual behavior to its highest and most spiritual expression and enjoyment (for instance, Kama Sutra), the West developed systems of external control and prohibitions. Of course, a great deal of the impetus toward this view of sex was provided by the Christian church.

Part of this movement came from Protestantism with its emphasis on individual righteousness and redemption. Rather than being worthy of God because of church membership and sacraments, Protestantism singled the individual out and made her or his moral conduct an expression of salvation and faith. But an important part was also played by the Counter-Reformation, a reform movement in the Catholic Church.

Confession and penance are sacraments in the Catholic Church. They are one of the ways through which salvation is imparted to Christians. The Counter-Reformation increased the frequency of confession and guided it to specific kinds of self-examination, designed to root out the sins of the flesh down to the minutest detail:

sex...[in all] its aspects, its correlations, and its effects must be pursued down to their slenderest ramification: a shadow in a daydream, an image too slowly dispelled, a badly exorcised complicity between the body's mechanics and the mind's complacency: everything had to be told. (Foucault, 1976/1990a, p. 19)

This was the beginning of the Western idea that sex is a deeply embedded power, one that is intrinsic to the "flesh" (the vehicle of sin par excellence, as compared to the Greek idea of bodily appetites), and one that must be eradicated through inward searching using an external moral code and through outward confession.

While these Christian doctrines would have influenced the general culture, they would have remained connected to the fate of Christianity alone had it not been for other secular changes and institutions beginning in the eighteenth century, most particularly in politics, economics, and medicine. With the rise of the nation-state and science, population became an economic and political issue. Previous societies had always been aware of the people gathered together in society's name, but conceiving of the people as the population is a significant change. The idea of population transforms the people into an object that can be analyzed and controlled.

In this transformation, science provided the tools and the nation-state the motivation and control mechanisms (taxation, standing armies, and so on). The population could be numbered and analyzed statistically, and those statistics became important for governance and economic pursuit. The population represented the labor force, one that needed to be trained and, more fundamentally, born. At the center of these economic and political issues was sexuality:

it was necessary to analyze the birthrate, the age of marriage, the legitimate and illegitimate births, the precocity and frequency of sexual relations, the ways of making them fertile or sterile, the effects of unmarried life or of the prohibitions, the impact of contraceptive practices [and so on]. (Foucault, 1976/1990a, pp. 25–26)
In the latter half of the nineteenth century, medicine and psychiatry took up
the sex banner as well. Psychiatry, especially through the work of Freud, set out
to discover the makeup of the human mind and emotion, and it began to cata-
log mental illnesses, especially those connected with sex. It conceptualized
masturbation as a perversion at the core of many psychological and physical
problems, homosexuality as a mental illness, and the maturation of a child in
terms of successive sexual issues that the child must resolve on the way to healthy
adulthood. In short, psychiatry “annexed the whole of the sexual perversions as
its own province” (Foucault, 1976/1990a, p. 30). Law and criminal justice also
bolstered the cause, as society sought to regulate individual and bedroom behav-
iors. Social controls popped up everywhere that “screened the sexuality of cou-
pies, parents and children, dangerous and endangered adolescents—undertaking
to protect, separate, and forewarn, signaling perils everywhere, awakening
people’s attention, calling for diagnoses, piling up reports, organizing therapies.
These sites radiated discourses aimed at sex” (pp. 30–31).

All of these factors worked to change the discourse of Western sexuality in the
twentieth century. Sex went from the Greek model of a natural bodily appetite
that could be satisfied in any number of ways, to the modern model of sex as the
insidious power within. At the heart of this change is the confession, propagated
by Catholicism and Protestantism and picked up by psychiatrists, medical doc-
tors, educators, and other experts. Confessional rhetoric is found everywhere in
a modern society that uses Victorian prudishness as its backdrop for incessant
talk about sex in magazines, journals, books, movies, and reality television
shows. Notice what Foucault is saying: repression is used as a source of dis-
course, and sex has become the topic of conversation—a central feature in
Western discourse, and the defining feature of the human animal. Sex is sus-
pected of “harboring a fundamental secret” concerning the truth of mankind
(Foucault, 1976/1990a, p. 69).

In the modern discourse of sex, sexuality has become above all an object—a
truth to discover and a thing to control. In this, sex has followed the use and
development of science in general and the human sciences in particular: “the
project of a science of the subject has gravitated, in ever narrowing circles,
around the question of sex” (Foucault, 1976/1990a, p. 70). This form of objec-
tive control (“bio-control”) over the intimacy of humanity came through
science and is linked with the development of the nation-state and capitalism.
While capitalism and the nation-state seem to be firmly established and the need
for such control not as great, what we are left with is a way of constructing our
self as the moral subject of our sexual behavior. We have inherited a certain kind
of subjectivity from this discourse, a particular way of relating to our self and
sexuality. This legacy of the modern discourse of sexuality sees sex as a central
truth of the self, as an object that must be studied and understood. Further, the
modern discourse of sexuality tells us that this part of us is intrinsically danger-
ous. It is at best an amoral creature and at worst a defiling beast that treads upon
sacred and moral ground.
Foucault Summary

- Foucault takes the position that knowledge and power are wrapped up with one another; each produces and reinforces the other. Power as exercised and expressed through discourse creates the way in which we feel, act, think, and relate to our self. Likewise, the knowledge of any epoch defines what is mentally, emotionally, and physically possible. Foucault sees the practices involved in power and knowledge as games of truth—the use of specific rules and resources through which something is seen as truth in any given age. The games of truth that Foucault is particularly interested in are the ones that involve the practices through which we participate in the domination of our subjectivity.

- Much of Foucault’s work is in the form of counter-history. The generally accepted model is that of history as memory: history is our collective memory of events. We also usually think of history as slowly progressing in a linear fashion. Foucault argues that history is far from a memory of linear events—it is power in use. It’s a myth that is constructed according to specific values. Foucault proposes a counter-history, one that focuses on abrupt episodes of change and the way in which knowledge changes in response to various power regimes. Foucault uses an archaeological approach to uncover the practices that are associated with discourse and ways of thinking; and he uses a genealogical approach to uncover how discourse and power are inscribed on the body and mind.

- Foucault argues that the knowledge people hold is based upon historical epistememes, or underlying orders. Foucault uses the term “episteme” to refer to the way thought organizes itself in any historical period of time. Discourses are produced within historical epistememes. A discourse is a way of talking about something that is guided by specific rules and practices, that sets the conditions for our subjective awareness, and that subjugates through a will to truth and power.

- While power is found in all human practice, Foucault is particularly interested in the unique power of modernity. This expression of power is associated with changes in government, medicine, the institution of the human sciences, changes in the Western discourse of sexuality, and changes in the penal system. The change from rule by monarchy to rule by the nation-state demanded a new form of governmentality, one in which the individual watches over his or her own behaviors, and one that increases control while preserving the illusion of freedom. This governmentality was aided by the human sciences through the idea of population, an essentializing and mechanistic model of the person, and the value of expert knowledge. Governmentality was also produced through a new medical “gaze,” which located symptoms and disease within the body; panoptical practices in controlling criminality; and changes in sexuality promoted by the Catholic confessional and Protestant individualism. Together, these created a discourse of governmentality that objectifies and controls the individual through her or his own practices.
Jean Baudrillard: The End of Everything

Seeing Further: Cultural Postmodernism
  Defining Postmodernism
  Postmodernity in Modernity
Concepts and Theory: Mediating the World
  Pre-Capitalist Society and Symbolic Exchange
  The Dawn of Capitalism and the Death of Meaning
Concepts and Theory: Losing the World
  Entropy and Advertising
  Simulacrum and Hyperreality
  Sign Implosion
Concepts and Theory: The Postmodern Person
  Fragmented Identities
  Play, Spectacle, and Passivity
Baudrillard Summary

Seeing Further: Cultural Postmodernism

Baudrillard is both fun and frustrating, and usually at the same time. He, more than any other postmodern writer I know, exemplifies what he is writing about. "Baudrillard’s writings are a kind of intellectual Disneyland, neither true nor false" (Danto, 1990, p. 48). In other words, Baudrillard is more than a postmodern theorist; he is part of the postmodern landscape. Just reading Baudrillard is an experience in postmodernity and cultural implosion. Yet at the same time, he tells us something about the society and people living in postmodernity, something very few say with as much insight or art. Baudrillard’s writings are thus part play and part purpose.

The Essential Baudrillard

Biography

Jean Baudrillard was born in Reims, France, on July 29, 1929. Baudrillard studied German at the Sorbonne University, Paris, and was professor of German for eight years. During that time, he also worked as a translator and began his studies in sociology and philosophy. He completed his dissertation in sociology under Henri Lefebvre, a noted Marxist-humanist. Baudrillard began teaching sociology in 1966, eventually moving to the Université Paris-X Nanterre as professor of sociology. From 1986 to 1990, Baudrillard served as the director of science for the Institut de Recherche et d’Information Socio-Économique at the Université Paris-IX Dauphine. Since 2001, Baudrillard has been professor of the philosophy of culture and media criticism at the European Graduate School in Saas-Fee, Switzerland. He is the author of several international best-sellers, the most controversial of which is probably The Gulf War Did Not Take Place (1995).

Passionate Curiosity

Baudrillard is essentially concerned with the relationship between reality and appearance, an issue that has plagued philosophers and theorists for eons. Baudrillard’s unique contributions concern the effects of mass media and advertising. He is deeply curious about the effects of mass media on culture and the problem of representation: Has capitalist-driven mass media pushed appearance to the front stage in such a way as to destroy reality? Is there a difference between image and reality in postmodernity?

Keys to Knowing

Postmodernism, symbolic exchange, excess, sign-value, fetish, four sign stages, consumer society, information entropy, sign-value and sign-vehicles, mass media, advertising, labor of consumption, simulacrum, hyperreality, free-floating signifiers, sign implosion, death of the subject, neo-tribes, play and spectacle
Defining Postmodernism

“Postmodernism is...” and with that statement we have already run into trouble. One of the problems that postmodernism wants to point out is that of reference. The problem of reference has been around since people began to think about the nature and structure of language. We can phrase it like this: Does or can language represent the physical world? For example, does the word “tree” represent the physical object, or does it represent our idea of tree? In the first case, the word references the physical object, and in the other, it references our culture. One of the implications of this question concerns reality: Is human reality founded upon the physical world or is reality simply cultural?

For postmodernists, the problem of reference is much deeper. Previously, even if someone said that language only represents culture, culture was seen as a firm and cohesive base. For example, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (the philosopher that Karl Marx drew on to theorize) basically argued that language references culture, but he added that true ideas come from God. For Hegel, then, language has an even firmer base than physicality. For postmodernists, however, while language references culture, culture in postmodernity is fragmented and free-floating and thus has no reference at all. This state of affairs generally leaves authors such as me in a pickle: how can we say anything about something that denies its ability to say anything?

That state of affairs is part of both the frustration and fun that one can have with the idea of postmodernism. If we accept that words don’t have any specific cohesive references, then we either become dark in our writings and thoughts or we can be playful, intentionally using words and references that have multiple and perhaps contradictory meanings. A good illustration of the latter is Italian writer Umberto Eco. His novels contain words and ideas that are possibly contradictory and certainly require the reader to intellectually and emotionally engage the text; his books are thus intended to be open to interpretations rather than limited by clear, linear plots and text. However, for the most part, I’m going to proceed with our discussion in a fairly straightforward manner, which I admit up front is doomed to fail. Thus, we’re going to say something definite and hopefully meaningful about Baudrillard and postmodernism in this chapter. We’re going to focus on the purposeful part of his writings—but keep in mind the playful part too (think about it: I’m proposing to say something meaningful about meaninglessness!).

Postmodernity in Modernity

The word “postmodernism” was first used in Hispanic literary criticism in the 1930s, it gained currency in the visual arts and architecture by the 1960s and early 1970s, and it made its way into social theory with the French publication of Jean-François Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* in 1979 (see Anderson, 1998). As I said, postmodernism is a word that denies its ability to function as a word. There does, however, seem to be one organizing feature: no matter what field we’re talking about, postmodernism is always understood in contrast to modernism.
Modernity and postmodernity are terms that are used in a number of disciplines. In each the meaning is somewhat different, but it is also generally the same: modernity is characterized by unity, and postmodernity is distinguished by disunity. In modern literature, for example, the unity of narrative is important. Novels move along according to their plot, and while there might be twists and turns, most readers are fairly confident in how time is moving and where the story is going. Postmodern literature, on the other hand, doesn’t move in predictable patterns of plot and character. Stories will typically jump around and are filled with indirect and reflexive references to past styles or stories. The purpose of a modern novel is to convey a sense of continuity in story; the purpose of a postmodern work is to create a feeling of disorientation and ironic humor.

In the social world, modernity is associated with the Enlightenment and defined by progress; by grand narratives and beliefs; and through the structures of capitalism, science, technology, and the nation-state. To state the obvious, postmodernism is the opposite or critique of all that. According to most postmodern thought, things have changed. Society is no longer marked by a sense of hope in progress. People seem more discouraged than encouraged—more filled with a blasé attitude than optimism.

In a late capitalist society, rather than providing a basis of meaning, “culture has necessarily expanded to the point where it has become virtually coextensive with the economy itself . . . as every material object and immaterial service becomes [an] inseparably tractable sign and vendible commodity” (Anderson, 1998, p. 55). Thus, capitalism has colonized culture and turned meaning into goods that are bought and sold. At the same time, these processes make culture less real. As we saw in the quote from Baudrillard at the beginning of this chapter, signs in advanced capitalism don’t represent anything; they have no utility or reality. They are commodified images that serve little more function than to seduce us into consumerism.

The same is true for self and identity: “as an older industrial order is churned up, traditional class formations have weakened, while segmented identities and localized groups, typically based on ethnic or sexual differences, multiply” (Anderson, 1998, p. 62). However, these segmented relationships “pull us in a myriad directions, inviting us to play such a variety of roles that the very concept of an ‘authentic self’ with knowable characteristics recedes from view. The fully saturated self becomes no self at all” (Gergen, 1991, p. 7).

Taken together, then, we can define social postmodernism as a critical form of theorizing that is concerned with the unique problems associated with culture and the subject in advanced capitalistic societies.

Concepts and Theory: Mediating the World

Pre-Capitalist Society and Symbolic Exchange

Baudrillard’s (1981/1994) theory is based on a fundamental assumption: “Representation stems from the principle of the equivalence of the sign and of the
real” (p. 6). What Baudrillard means is that it is possible for signs to represent reality, especially social reality. Think about it this way: what is the purpose of culture? In traditional social groups, culture was created and used in the same social context. For the sake of conversation, let’s call this “grounded culture,” the kind of culture that symbolic exchange is based on. In a society such as the United States, however, much of our culture is created or modified by capitalists, advertising agencies, and mass media. We’ll call this “commodified culture.”

Members in traditional social groups were surrounded by grounded culture; members in postmodern social groups are surrounded by commodified culture. There are vast differences in the reasons why grounded versus commodified culture is created. Grounded culture emerges out of face-to-face interaction and is intended to create meaning, moral boundaries, norms, values, beliefs, and so forth. Commodified culture is produced according to capitalist and mass media considerations and is intended to seduce the viewer to buy products. With grounded culture, people are moral actors; with commodified culture, people are consumers. Postmodernists argue that there are some pretty dramatic consequences, such as cultural fragmentation and unstable identities (for a concise statement, see Allan & Turner, 2000).

Beginning with this idea of grounded or representational culture, Baudrillard posits four phases of the sign. The first stage occurred in premodern societies. The important factor here is that language in premodern societies was not mediated. There were little or no written texts and all communication took place in real social situations in face-to-face encounters. In this first phase, the sign represented reality in a profound way. There was a strong correlation or relationship between the sign and the reality it signified, and the contexts wherein specific signs could be used were clear. In this stage, all communicative acts—including speech, gift giving, rituals, exchanges, and so on—were directly related to and expressive of social reality, in something that Baudrillard calls symbolic exchange.

Baudrillard understands symbolic exchange as the exchange of gifts, actions, signs, and so on for their symbolic rather than material value. In contrast to Marx, Baudrillard is making the same kind of argument about human nature that Durkheim did: humans are symbolic creatures oriented toward meaning rather than production. A good example of the value of symbolism in traditional societies is the prevalence of transition rituals, as in the transition from boyhood to manhood. In the ritual of attaining manhood, the actual behaviors themselves are immaterial, whether it is wrapping a sack of fire ants around the hands or mutilating the penis. Any object or set of behaviors can have symbolic value. What matters is what the ritualized actions symbolize for the group. Symbolic exchange formed part of daily life in pre-capitalist societies: the exchange of food, jewelry, titles, clothing, and so on were all involved in a symbolic “cycle of gifts and countergifts” (Baudrillard, 1973/1975, p. 83). Symbolic exchange thus established a community of symbolic meanings and reciprocal relations among a group of people.

Baudrillard also claims that human nature is wrapped up in excess. Like Marx, he sees humanity as capable of creating its own needs. That is, the needs of other animals are set, but the potential needs of humans are without limit. For example,
today I “need” an iPod and an HDTV plasma screen, but a few years ago I didn’t. And I can’t even begin to imagine what I will need five years from now. However, unlike Marx, Baudrillard sees excess as an indicator of human boundlessness. Wrapped up in this excess is a sense of transcendence: the ability to reach above the mundane, which is in itself a symbolic move.

Thus, in place of Marx’s species-being, Baudrillard proposes excess: rather than being bound up with survival, production, and materialism, human nature is found in excess and exuberance. Douglas Kellner (2003) summarizes Baudrillard’s point of view nicely: “humans ‘by nature’ gain pleasure from such things as expenditure, waste, festivities, sacrifices and so on, in which they are sovereign and free to expend the excesses of their energy (and thus follow their ‘real nature’)” (p. 317). Baudrillard argues that these human characteristics were given license and support in pre-capitalist societies. However, the modernist demands of rationality and restraint in the beginning years of capitalism are the antithesis of symbolic exchange and excess.

The second phase of the sign marked a movement away from these direct kinds of symbolic relationships. This stage gained dominance, roughly speaking, during the time between the European Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution. While media such as written language began previous to the Renaissance, it was during this period that a specific way of understanding, relating to, and representing the world became organized. Direct representation was still present, but certain human ideals began to make inroads. Art, for example, was based on observation of the visible world and yet contained the values of mathematical balance and perspective. Nowhere is this desire for mathematical balance seen more clearly than in Leonardo Da Vinci’s painting, Proportions of the Human Figure. Thinking of some of Da Vinci’s other works, such as the Mona Lisa and the The Last Supper, we can also see that symbols were used to convey mystery and intrigue.

The Dawn of Capitalism and the Death of Meaning

The third phase of the sign began with the Industrial Revolution. This is the period of time generally thought of as modernity. The Industrial Age brought with it a proliferation of consumer goods never before seen in the history of humanity. It also increased leisure time and produced significant amounts of discretionary funds for more people than ever before. These kinds of changes dramatically altered the way produced goods were seen. Here is where we begin to see the widespread use of goods as symbols of status and power. Thorstein Veblen (1899) termed this phenomenon conspicuous consumption.

Baudrillard (1970/1998) characterizes this era as the beginning of the consumer society. The consumer society is distinctly different from the kind of capitalism that Marx saw himself critiquing. One of Marx’s main criticisms was exploitation, and exploitation, you will remember, is based on use-value and exchange-value. Use-value refers to the actual function that a product contains, or its material makeup, while exchange-value refers to the rate of exchange one commodity bears when compared to other commodities. The interesting thing for Marx is that when
reduced to monetary value, exchange-value is much higher than use-value. In other words, you get paid less to produce a product than it sells for, which is exploitation.

Baudrillard counters by arguing that Marx is ironically buying into the basic assumptions of capitalism. Use-value is completely bound up with the idea of products, oriented to a materialist world alone. It is filled with practical use that is used up in consumption and has no value or meaning other than material. Moreover, like species-being, the idea of use-value validates the basic tenets of capitalism—the truth of human life is rooted in economic production and consumption. Exchange-value is materialist as well, because exchange-value is based on human, economic production. The idea of exchange-value also legitimates and substantiates instrumental rationality, the utilitarian calculations of costs and benefits. Rather than critiquing capitalism, Baudrillard sees Marx as legitimating it.

The Marxist seeks a good use of economy. Marxism is therefore only a limited petit bourgeois critique, one more step in the banalization of life toward the “good use” of the social! . . . Marxism is only the disenchanted horizon of capital—all that precedes or follows it is more radical than it is. (Baudrillard, 1987, p. 60, emphasis original)

In place of use- and exchange-values, Baudrillard proposes the idea of sign-value. Commodities are no longer purchased for their use-value, and exchange-value is no longer simply a reflection of human labor. Each of these capitalist, Marxist values has been trumped by signification. In postmodern societies, commodities are now purchased and used more for their sign-value than for anything else.

Baudrillard links sign-value with fetish, another idea from Marx. As you may recall, Marx was very critical of the process of commodification. A commodity is simply something that is sold in order to make a profit. Commodification as a process refers to the way more and more objects and experiences in the human world are turned into products for profit. Increasing commodification leads to commodity fetish. Marx used the term fetish in its pre-Freudian sense of idol worship. The idea here is that the worshipper’s eyes are blinded to the falsity of the idol. Marx’s provocative term has two implications that are related to one another. First, in commodity fetish people misrecognize what is truly present within a commodity. By this Marx meant that commodities and commodification are based on the exploitation of human labor, but most of us fail to see it.

Second, in commodity fetish there is a substitution. For Marx, the basic relationship between humans is that of production. But in commodity fetish, the market relations of commodity exchange are substituted for the productive or material relations of persons. The result is that, rather than being linked in a community of producers, human relationships are seen through commodities, either as buyers and sellers or as a group of like consumers. Commodification and its fetish are one of the primary bases of alienation, which, according to Marx, separates people from their own human nature as creative producers and from one another as social beings.
Again, Baudrillard argues that Marx’s concern was misplaced and actually motivated by the capitalist economy. Marx’s entire notion of the fetish is locked up with species-being and material production. With commodity fetish, we don’t recognize the suppressive labor relations that underlie the product and its value, and we substitute an alienated commodity for what should be a product based in our own species-being. In focusing exclusively on materialism, “Marxism eliminates any real chance it has of analyzing the actual process of ideological labor” (Baudrillard, 1972/1981, p. 89, emphasis original). According to Baudrillard, ideology isn’t based in or related to material relations of production, as Marx argued. Rather, ideology and fetishism are both based in a “passion for the code” (p. 92, emphasis original).

Human nature is symbolic and oriented toward meaning. In symbolic exchange, real meaning and social relationships are present. However, capitalism and changes in media have pushed aside symbolic exchange and in postmodernity have substituted sign-value. Moreover, sign-value is based on textual references to other signs, nothing else. The fetish, then, is the human infatuation with consuming sign-vehicles that are devoid of all meaning and reality. Thus, ideology “appears as a sort of cultural surf frothing on the beachhead of the economy” (Baudrillard, 1972/1981, p. 144). Signs keep proliferating without producing substance. This simulation of meaning is what constitutes ideology and fetish for Baudrillard. This implies that continuing to use the materialist Marxist ideas of fetish and ideology actually contributes to capitalist ideology, because it displaces analysis from the issues of signification.

Thus, in the consumer society, social relations are read through a system of commodified signs rather than symbolic exchange. Commodities become the sign-vehicles in modernity that carry identity and meaning (or its lack). For example, in modern society the automobile is a portable, personal status symbol. Driving an SUV means something different from driving a Volkswagen Beetle, which conveys something different from driving a hybrid. As this system becomes more important and elaborated, a new kind of labor eventually supplants physical labor, the labor of consumption. This doesn’t mean the work involved in finding the best deal. The labor of consumption is the work a person does to place her- or himself within, or to “read” the signs of an identity that is established and understood in, a matrix of commodified signs.

The dynamics begun in the third stage of the sign are exacerbated in the fourth, which began shortly after WWII and continues through today. This fourth stage occurs in postindustrial societies. As such, there has been a shift away from manufacturing and toward information-based technologies. In addition, and perhaps more importantly for Baudrillard, these societies are marked by continual advances and an increasing presence of communication technologies and mass media. Mediated images and information, coupled with unbridled commodification and advertising, are the key influences in this postmodernity. The cultural logic has shifted from the logic of symbolic exchange in pre-capitalist societies, to the logic of production and consumption in capitalist societies, and finally now to the logic of simulation. For Baudrillard (1976/1993b), postmodernity marks the end of everything:
The end of labor. The end of production. . . . The end of the signifier/signified dialectic which facilitates the accumulation of knowledge and of meaning. . . . And at the same time, the end simultaneously of the exchange value/use value dialectic which is the only thing that makes accumulation and social production possible. . . . The end of the classical era of the sign. (p. 8)

Baudrillard (1981/1994) posits that the postmodern sign has “no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum” (p. 6). These kinds of signs are set free from any constraint of representation and become a “play of signifiers . . . in which the code no longer refers back to any subjective or objective ‘reality,’ but to its own logic” (Baudrillard, 1973/1975, p. 127). Thus, in postmodernity, a fundamental break has occurred between signs and reality. Signs reference nothing other than themselves; they are their own reality and the only reality to which humans refer. These seem like brash and bold claims, but let’s look at Baudrillard’s argument behind them.

Concepts and Theory: Losing the World

Entropy and Advertising

First, Baudrillard argues that there is something intrinsic in transferring information that breaks it down. This is an important point: Anytime we relate or convey information to another, there is a breakdown. So fundamental is this fact that Baudrillard makes it an equation: information = entropy. Baudrillard argues that information destroys its base. The reason for this is twofold. First, information is always about something; it isn’t that thing or experience itself. Information by definition, then, is always something other than the thing itself. Second, anytime we convey information, we must use a medium, and it is impossible to put something through a medium without changing it in some way. Even talking to your friend about an event you experienced changes it. Some of the meaning will be lost because language can’t convey your actual emotions, and some meaning will be added because of the way your friend individually understands the words you are using.

Mass media is the extreme case of both these processes: social information is removed innumerable times from the actual events, and capitalist mass media colors things more than any other form. One of the reasons behind this coloration is that mass media expends itself on the staging of information. Every medium has its own form of expression—for newspapers it’s print and for television it’s images. Every piece of information that is gleaned by the public from any media source has thus been selected and formed by the demands of the media. This is part of what is meant by the phrase “the media is the message.”

Further, mass communication comes prepackaged in a meaning form. What I mean by that is that information is staged and the subject is told what constitutes his or her particular relationship to the information. The reason for this is that media in postmodernity exist to make a profit, not to convey information.
“Information” is presented more for entertainment purposes than for any intellectual ones. The concern in media is to appeal to and capture a specific market segment. That’s why Fox News, CNN, and National Public Radio are so drastically different from one another—the information is secondary; the network’s purpose is to draw an audience that will respond to appeals by capitalists to buy their goods. The presentation of information through the media is a system of self-referencing simulation or fantasy. Thus, “information devours its own content. It devours communication and the social” (Baudrillard, 1981/1994, p. 80).

There is yet another important factor in this decisive break—advertising: “Today what we are experiencing is the absorption of all virtual modes of expression into that of advertising” (Baudrillard, 1981/1994, p. 87). The act of advertising alone reduces objects from their use-value to their sign-value. For Marx, the movement from use-value to exchange-value entails an abstraction of the former; in other words, the exchange-value of a commodity is based on a representation of its possible uses. Baudrillard argues that advertising and mass media push this abstraction further. In advertising, the use-value of a commodity is overshadowed by a sign-value. Advertising does not seek to convey information about a product’s use-value; rather, advertising places a product in a field of unrelated signs in order to enhance its cultural appearance. As a result of advertising, we tend to relate to the fragmented sign context rather than the use-value. Thus, in postmodern society, people purchase commodities more for the image than for the function they perform.

Let’s think about the example of clothing. The actual use-value of clothing is to cover and keep warm. Yet right now I’m looking at an ad for clothing in Rolling Stone and it doesn’t mention anything about protection from the elements or avoiding public nudity. The ad is rather interesting in that it doesn’t even present itself as an advertisement at all. It looks more like a picture of a rock band on tour. We could say, then, that even advertising is advertising itself as something. On the sidebar of the “band” picture, it doesn’t talk about the band. It says things such as “jacket, $599, by Avirex; T-shirt, $69, by Energie,” and so on. Most of us won’t pay $599 for a jacket to keep us warm, but we might pay that for the status image that we think the jacket projects. Baudrillard’s point is that we aren’t connected to the basic human reality of keeping warm and covered; we aren’t even connected to the social reality of being in a rock band (which itself is a projected image of an idealized life). We are simply attracted to the images.

Simulacrum and Hyperreality

Baudrillard further argues that many of the things we do today in advanced capitalist societies are based largely on images from past lives. For example, most people in traditional and early industrial societies worked with their bodies. Today, increasing numbers of people in postindustrial societies don’t work with their bodies; they work out their bodies. The body has thus become a cultural object rather than a means to an end. In postindustrial society, the body no longer serves the purpose of production; rather, it has become the subject of image creation: we work out in order to alter our body to meet some cultural representation.
Clothing too has changed from function to image. In previous eras, there was an explicit link between the real function of the body and the clothing worn—the clothing was serviceable with reference to the work performed or it was indicative of social status. For example, a farmer would wear sturdy clothing because of the labor performed, and his clothing indicated his work (if you saw him away from the field, you would still know what he did by his clothing). However, in the postmodern society, clothing itself has become the creator of image rather than something merely serviceable or directly linked to social status and function.

Let’s review what we know so far: in times past, the body was used to produce and reproduce; clothing was serviceable and was a direct sign of work and social function. In postmodern society, however, bodies have been freed from the primary burden of labor and have instead become a conveyance of cultural image. The body’s “condition” is itself an important symbol, and so is the decorative clothing placed upon the body. Now here is where it gets interesting: in the past, a fit body represented hard work and clothing signed the body’s work, but what do our bodies and clothing symbolize today? Today, we take the body through a workout rather than actually working with the body. We work out so we can meet a cultural image—but what does this cultural image represent?

In times past, if you saw someone with a lean, hard body, it meant the person lived a mean, hard life. There was a real connection between the sign and what it referenced. But what do our spa-conditioned bodies reference? Baudrillard’s point is that there is no real objective or social reference for what we are doing with our bodies today. The only reference to a real life is to that of the past—we used to have fit bodies because we worked. Thus, in terms of real social life, today’s gym-produced bodies represent the past image of working bodies. Further, what does this imply about the clothes we wear? The clothes themselves are an image of an image that doesn’t exist in any kind of reality. Baudrillard calls this simulacrum, an image of an image of a “reality” that never existed and never appears.

Thus, what we buy today aren’t even commodities in the strictest sense. They are what Fredric Jameson calls free-floating signifiers—signs and symbols that have been cut loose from their social and linguistic contexts, and thus their meaning is at best problematic and generally nonexistent. In such a culture, tradition and family can be equated with paper plates (as in a recent television commercial) and infinite justice with military retribution (as in the U.S. president’s initial characterization of the current Iraq conflict).

Rather than representing, as signs did in the first phase, and rather than creating meaningful and social relations, as symbolic exchange did, commodified signs do nothing and mean nothing. They have no referent and their sign-context—the only thing that could possibly impart meaning—is constantly shifting because of mass media and advertising. As they are, these signs cannot provoke an emotional response from us. Emotions, then, develop “a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense . . . [which is] perhaps the supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms” (Jameson, 1984, p. 60).

These free-floating signs and images don’t represent reality; they create hyperreality. Part of the hyperreality is composed of the commodities that we’ve
been talking about. But a more significant part is provided by the extravagance of media entertainment, like Las Vegas and Disneyland. Hyperreality is a way of understanding and talking about the mass of disconnected culture. It comes to substitute for reality. In hyperreality, people are drawn to cultural images and signs for artificial stimulation. In other words, rather than being involved in social reality, people involve themselves with fake stimulations. Examples of such simulacrum include artificial Christmas trees, breast implants, airbrushed Playboy Bunnies, food and drink flavors that don’t exist naturally, and so on.

A clear example of this kind of hyperreality is reality television. Though predated by Candid Camera, the first reality show in the contemporary sense was An American Family, shown on Public Broadcasting Service stations in the United States in 1973. It was a 12-installment show that documented an American family going through the turmoil of divorce. The show was heavily criticized in the press. Today, reality shows are prevalent. Though the numbers are difficult to document, between the year 2000 and 2005 there were some 170 new reality shows presented to the public in the United States and Great Britain, with the vast majority being shown in the United States. The year 2004 saw reality programming come of age, as there were nine reality shows nominated for a total of 23 Emmy awards.

The interesting thing about reality programming is that there is no reality. However, it presents itself as a representation of reality. For example, the show Survivor placed 16 “castaways” on a tropical island for 39 days and asked, “Deprived of basic comforts, exposed to the harsh natural elements, your fate at the mercy of strangers . . . who would you become?” (Survivor Show Concept, n.d.). But the “castaways” were never marooned nor were they in any danger (as real castaways would be). And the game rules and challenges read more like Dungeons and Dragons than a real survivor manual, with game “challenges” and changes in character attributes for winning (like being granted “immunity”). So, what do the images of reality programming represent? Perhaps they are representations of what a fantasy game would look like if human beings could really get in one. The interesting thing about reality programming, and fantasy games for that matter, is the level of involvement people generate around them. This kind of involvement in simulated images of non-reality is hyperreality.

The significance of the idea of hyperreality is that it lets us see that people in postmodernity seek stimulation and nothing more. Hyperreality itself is void of any significance, meaning, or emotion. But, within that hyperreality, people create unreal worlds of spectacle and seduction. Hyperreality is a postmodern condition, a virtual world that provides experiences more involving and spectacular than everyday life and reality.

**Sign Implosion**

Baudrillard characterizes the simulacrum and hyperreality of postmodernity as an implosion. Where in modernity there was an explosion of signs, commodities, and distinctions, postmodernity is an implosion of all that. In modernity, there
were new sciences such as sociology and psychology; in postmodernity, the
divisions between disciplines have collapsed and instead there is an increasing preference for and growth of multidisciplinary studies. In modernity, there were new distinctions of nationality, identity, race, and gender; in postmodernity, these distinctions have imploded and collapsed upon themselves. Postmodernity is fractal and fragmented, with everything seeming political, sexual, or valuable—and if everything is, then nothing is. Baudrillard claims that this implosion of signs, identities, institutions, and all firm boundaries of meaning has led to the end of the social.

What Baudrillard is saying is that the proliferation, appropriation, and circulation of signs by the media and advertising influence the condition of signs, signification, and meaning in general. In the first stage of the sign, signs had very clear and specific meanings. But as societies and economic systems changed, different kinds of media and ideas were added. In the postmodern age, the media used to communicate information becomes utterly disassociated from any kind of idea of representation. Everywhere a person turns today in a postmodern society, there are media. Cell phones, computers, the Internet, television, billboards, “billboard clothing” (clothing hocking brand names), and the like surround us. And every medium is commodified and inundated with advertising. In postmodernity, we are hard pressed to find any space or any object that isn’t communicating or advertising something beyond itself.

All of this has a general, overall effect. Signs are no longer moored to any social or physical reality; all of them are fair game for the media’s manipulation of desire. Any cultural idea, image, sign, or symbol is apt to be pulled out of its social context and used to advertise and to place the individual in the position of consumer. As these signs are lifted out of the social, they lose all possibility of stable reference. They may be used for anything, for any purpose. And the more media that are present, and the faster information is made available (like DSL versus dialup computer connections), the faster signs will circulate and the greater will be the appropriation of indigenous signs for capitalist gain, until there remains no sign that has not been set loose and colonized by capitalism run amok. All that remains is a yawning abyss of meaninglessness—a placeless surface that is incapable of holding personal identity, self, or society.

Let’s take a single example—gender. Gender has been a category of distinction for a good part of modernity. Harriet Martineau, the first person to ever use the word “sociology” in print, saw some 80 years before women won the right to vote that the project of modernity necessarily entailed women’s rights. So close is the relationship between the treatment of women and the project of modernity for Martineau (1838/2003), that to her it becomes one of the earmarks of civilization: “Each civilized society claims for itself the superiority in its treatment of women” (p. 183). When gender first came up as an issue of equality, specifically in terms of a woman’s right to vote, there was little confusion about what gender and gender equality meant. It was common knowledge who women were and what that very distinct group wanted.

But as modernity went on, things changed. In the United States after the 1960s, the single category of gender broke down. Various claims to distinction began to
emerge around gender: the experience of gender is different by race, by class, by sexuality, and so on. The category imploded, with all the implicit understandings that went along with it. Today, when confronted by a person who appears to be a woman, the observing individual may be unsure. Is the “woman” really a woman or a man trapped in a woman’s body? Or, is the “woman” a transsexual, who has physically been altered or symbolically changed (as with someone like RuPaul)? In postmodernity, the given cues of any category or object or experience cannot be taken at face value as indicative of a firm reality. All of the signs are caught up in a whirlwind of hyperreality.

In postmodernity, very few if any things can be accepted at face value. Meaning and reality aren’t necessarily what they appear, because signs have been tossed about by the media without constraint, driven by the need to squeeze every drop of profit out of a populace through the proliferation of new markets with ever-shifting directions, cues, signs, and meanings in order to present something “new.”

I’ve pictured my take of Baudrillard’s argument in Figure 14.1. Let me emphasize that my intention with this diagram is simply to give you a heuristic device; it’s a way to order your thinking about Baudrillard’s theory. One of the best things about postmodern theory is that it is provocative, partly because it isn’t highly specified. In one sense, then, this kind of picture stifles the postmodern; there’s also a way in which something like this is quite modernist: it seeks to reduce complexity by making generalizations. So, I present this figure with some trepidation, but with the intent of giving you a place to “hang your hat.” (In other words, if you’re feeling at all lost and uncomfortable, then you need a modernist moment.)

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**Figure 14.1** Baudrillard’s Sign Stages
As you can see in the figure, I’ve divided Baudrillard’s thought into three main groups: signification, social factors, and social practices. I see Baudrillard as weaving these themes throughout his opus. And I’ve organized these ideas around the notion of sign phases. Generally speaking, the first two phases of the sign were fairly well grounded in the social. People were clearly involved in face-to-face social networks, the principal form of labor was material, commodities basically contained use- and exchange-values, and humanity was deeply entrenched in symbolic exchange.

The third phase of the sign came about as the result of capitalism and the nation-state. The strong social factors in this era were urbanization and industrialization; people began to spend increasing amounts of time doing consumption labor; and the value of commodities shifted from use- to sign-value. As communication and transportation technologies increased, mass media and advertising became the important factors in social change. In a world of pure sign, signs no longer signify; it’s all hyperreality and simulacrum, the fourth stage of the sign.

Concepts and Theory: The Postmodern Person

Fragmented Identities

Baudrillard envisions the “death of the subject.” The subject he has in mind is that of modernity—the individual with strong and clear identities, able to carry on the work of democracy and capitalism. That subject, that person, is dead in postmodern culture. With the increase in mass media and advertising, there has been a corresponding decrease in the strength of all categories and meanings, including identities. What is left is a mediated person, rather than the subject of modernity. As Kenneth Gergen (1991) puts it, “one detects amid the hurly-burly of contemporary life a new constellation of feelings or sensibilities, a new pattern of self-consciousness. This syndrome may be termed multiphrenia, generally referring to the splitting of the individual into a multiplicity of self-investments” (pp. 73–74, emphasis original). This is an important idea, and one that appears in the work of a number of postmodernists. So let’s take a moment to consider it fully.

One of the fundamental ways in which identity and difference are constructed is through exclusion. In psychology, this can by and large be taken for granted: I am by definition excluded from you because I am in my own body. For sociologists, exclusion is a cultural and social practice; it’s something we do, not something we are. This fundamental point may sound elementary to the extreme, but it’s important for us to understand it. In order for me to be me, I can’t be you; in order for me to be male, I can’t be female; in order for me to be white, I can’t be black; in order to be a Christian, I can’t be a Satanist; ad infinitum.

Cultural identity is defined in opposition to, or as it relates to, something else. Identity and self are based on exclusionary practices. The stronger the practices of exclusion, the stronger will be the identity; and the stronger my identities, the stronger will be my sense of self. Further, the greater the exclusionary practices, the more real will be my experience of identities and self. Hence, the early social
movements for equality and democracy had clear practices of exclusion. This gave the people the strength of identity to make the sacrifices necessary to fight.

The twist that postmodernism gives to all this is found in the ideas of cultural fragmentation and de-centered selves and identities. In many ways, the ideas of gender and race are modernist: they collapse individualities into an all-encompassing identity. However, a person isn’t simply female, for example—she also has many identities that crosscut that particular cultural interest and may shift her perceptions of self and other in one direction or another. For us to claim any of these identities—to claim to be female, black, male, or white—is really for us to put ourselves under the umbrella of a grand narrative, stories that deny individualities in favor of some broader social category. Grand narratives by their nature include very strong exclusionary tactics.

More to the point, the construction of centered identities is becoming increasingly difficult in postmodernity. Postmodernists argue that culture in postindustrial societies is fragmented. Since culture and identity are closely related, if the culture is fragmented, then so are identities. The idea of postmodernism, then, makes the issues of gender and race very complex. Clear racial and gender identities may thus be increasingly difficult to maintain. The culture has become more multifaceted, and so have identities. This means that we have greater freedom of choice, which we think we enjoy, but freedom of choice also implies that the distinctions between gender and racial identities aren’t as clear or as real as they once were. Thus, social movements around race and gender become increasingly difficult to produce in postmodernity.

How, then, are postmodern identities constructed? Zygmunt Bauman (1992) argues that, as a result of de-institutionalization, people live in complex, chaotic systems. Complex systems differ from the mechanistic systems in that they are unpredictable and not controlled by statistically significant factors. In other words, the relationships among the parts are not predictable. For example, race, class, and gender in a complex system no longer produce strong or constant effects in the individual’s life or self-concept.

Thus, being a woman, for instance, might be a disability in one social setting and not have any meaning at all in another; likewise, race, class, and gender might come together in a specific setting in unique and random ways. Within these complex systems, groups are formed through unguided self-formation. In other words, we join or leave groups simply because we want to. Moreover, the groups exist not because they reflect a central value system, as a modernist would argue; rather, they exist due to the whim and fancy of their members and the tide of market-driven public sentiment.

The absence of any central value system and firm, objective evaluative guides tends to create a demand for substitutes. These substitutes are symbolically, rather than actually or socially, created. The need for these symbolic group tokens results in what Bauman (1992, pp. 198–199) calls “tribal politics” and defines as self-constructing practices that are collectivized but not socially produced. These neo-tribes function solely as imagined communities and, unlike their premodern namesake, exist only in symbolic form through the commitment of individual “members” to the idea of an identity.
But this neo-tribal world functions without an actual group’s powers of inclusion and exclusion. It is created through the repetitive and generally individual or imaginative performance of symbolic rituals and exists only so long as the rituals are performed. Neo-tribes are thus formed through concepts rather than actual social groups. They exist as imagined communities through a multitude of agent acts of self-identification and exist solely because people use them as vehicles of self-definition: “Neo-tribes are, in other words, the vehicles (and imaginary sediments) of individual self-definition” (Bauman, 1992, p. 137).

Play, Spectacle, and Passivity

All that we just covered is caught up in the social practices of postmodernity. Opposition is impossible because postmodern culture has no boundaries to push against; it is tantamount to pushing against smoke. Further, the acting subject is equally as amorphous. Thus, according to Baudrillard, there’s little place in postmodernity to grab hold of and make a difference. Most things turn out to be innuendo, smoke, spam, mistakes...a smooth surface of meaninglessness and seduction. Baudrillard (1993a) leaves us with a few responses: play, spectacle, and passivity.

What can you do with objects that have no meaning? Well, you can play with them and not take them seriously. “So, all that are left are pieces. All that remains to be done is to play with the pieces. Playing with the pieces—that is postmodern” (Baudrillard 1993a, p. 95). How do we play in postmodernity? What would postmodern play look like? Here’s an example: People in postmodern societies intentionally engage in fleeting contacts. Consider the case of “flash mobs.” According to Wikipedia.com, “A flash mob is a group of people who assemble suddenly in a public place, do something unusual or notable, and then disperse. They are usually organized with the help of the Internet or other digital communications networks” (Flash Mob, n.d.). Sydmob, an Internet group facilitating flash mobs in Sydney, Australia, asks,

Have you ever been walking down a busy city street and noticed the blank look on people’s faces? How about on public transport? That look of total indifference is unmistakable; it’s the face of [a] person feeling more like a worker bee than a human being. Have you ever felt like doing something out of the ordinary to see their reaction? (Sydmob, n.d.)

In this play, spectacle becomes important. Georg Simmel, a classical theorist ahead of his time, gives us the same insight. Simmel (1950) argues that

life is composed more and more of these impersonal contents and offerings that tend to displace the genuine personal colorations and incomparabilities. This results in the individual’s summoning the utmost in uniqueness and particularization, in order to preserve his most personal cores. He has to exaggerate this personal element in order to remain audible even to himself. (p. 422)
Echoing Simmel, Zygmunt Bauman (1992) notes that, “to catch the attention, displays must be ever more bizarre, condensed and (yes!) disturbing; perhaps ever more brutal, gory and threatening” (p. xx).

The remaining postmodern practice is a kind of resistance through passivity—refusing to play. There’s an old American slogan from the Vietnam era that says, “Suppose they gave a war and nobody came?” This is similar to what Baudrillard has in mind with resistance through passivity. Rather than attempting to engage postmodern culture, or responding in frustration, or trying to change things, Baudrillard advocates refusal or passive resistance. And perhaps like the war that no one shows up for, postmodernity will simply cease.

**Baudrillard Summary**

- Baudrillard uses Marx’s notions of use- and exchange-value to argue that commodities are principally understood in postmodernity in terms of their sign-value.

- Baudrillard proposes four stages of the sign. In the first two stages, the sign adequately represented reality, and social communities were held together through the reciprocity of symbolic exchanges. People were also able to practice “excess”—the boundless potential of humanity—through festivals, rituals, sacrifices, and so on.

- Modernity began in the third phase of the sign with the advent of capitalism and industrialization. Baudrillard characterizes modernity as the consumer society. Within such a society, labor shifts to techniques of consumption with an eye toward sign identification. Modernity also brought rationalization and constraint, the antithesis of symbolic exchange and excess.

- In postmodernity, the increasing presence and speed of mass media, along with ever-increasing levels of commodification and advertising, push all vestiges of meaning out of signs. Mass media tends to empty cultural signs because the natural entropy of information is multiplied and because signification is suppressed in favor of media concerns of production. Advertising pushes this process of emptying further: advertising sells by image rather than use, which implies that commodities are placed in unrelated sign-contexts in order to fit a media-produced image. These detached and redefined images are pure simulacrum. Postmodern society is inundated by media technology and thus an immense amount of this kind of signification and culture, most of which references and produces a hyperreality.

- Baudrillard’s postmodern condition is found in simulation, spectacle, play, and passivity. Baudrillard claims that the central subject of modernity—the person as the nexus of national and economic rights and responsibilities—is dead. In the place of the subject stands a media terminal of fragmented images. What remains is play and spectacle. As signs move ever faster through the postmodern media, their ability to hold meaning continues to disintegrate. Thus, in order to make an impression, cultural displays must be more and more spectacular. In such
a climate, the hyperreality of media becomes more enticing, with greater emotional satisfaction than real life—but these media images must continue to spin out to ever more radical displays. Playing with empty signs or intentionally disengaging are the only possible responses.

Building Your Theory Toolbox

Knowing Post-Theories

After reading and understanding this chapter, you should be able to define the following terms theoretically and explain their theoretical importance to Foucault’s and Baudrillard’s theories:

Poststructuralism, practice, power, knowledge, order, truth games, discourse, counter-history, archaeology and genealogy, episteme, historical rupture, subject objectification, panopticon, human disciplines, clinical gaze, governmentality, microphysics of power, sexuality and subjectivity, postmodernism, symbolic exchange, excess, sign-value, fetish, four sign stages, consumer society, information entropy, sign-value and sign-vehicles, mass media, advertising, labor of consumption, simulacrum, hyperreality, free-floating signifiers, sign implosion, death of the subject, neo-tribes, play and spectacle

After reading and understanding this chapter, you should be able to

• Discuss truth games and Foucault’s interest in them
• Explain Foucault’s connection between power and knowledge. How does he conceptualize power? How does knowledge function as power?
• Describe what Foucault means by “the order of things” and explain how his “counter-histories” are used to expose this order
• Explain the differences between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment epistemes and how they order things
• Define discourse and explain how it provides a subjective position for the speaker
• Explain the place of the social sciences (human disciplines) in creating governmentality and the microphysics of power. In other words, what kinds of practices do we have in our daily lives that bring our selves under the dominion of this age?
• Describe how Baudrillard argues that Marx actually affirms and legitimates capitalism. How does Baudrillard invert Marx’s argument?
• Explain how ideology and fetishism are based on a passion for the code
• Discuss the four stages of the sign. Be certain to explain their characteristics and the social factors that helped bring them about.
• Define the consumer society and explain the labor that is specific to the consumer society
• Explain how mass media and advertising empty the sign of all meaning and reference

• Describe how social identities have imploded in postmodernity and analyze the possible ramifications for political change

• Explain why play, spectacle, and passivity make sense in Baudrillard's postmodernity

Learning More: Primary Sources

• Michel Foucault


• Jean Baudrillard


Learning More: Secondary Sources


Theory You Can Use (Seeing Your World Differently)

• Using the index of this book, find the different ways power is defined and used theoretically. Evaluate each of these ways and create a theory of power that you think best explains it. Justify your answer.

• Compare and contrast Foucault's idea of governmentality and Anthony Giddens's notion of the reflexive project of the self. Explain why you think these two ideas are distinct. Together, what do they imply about how we relate to the “self” in modernity?
Concluding Thoughts: Post-Thinking

Formerly, one could tell simply by looking at a person that he wanted to think... that he now wished to become wiser and prepared himself for a thought: he set his face as for prayer and stopped walking; yes, one even stood still for hours in the middle of the road when the thought arrived—on one leg or two legs. That seemed to be required by the dignity of the matter. (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 81)

Well, did you read the quote? If not, please do so. And let what Nietzsche says get inside of you. Have you ever had a thought? Of course, you think quite a bit. But have you ever had a thought in the way Nietzsche is describing it? This kind of thought is an event. It requires or perhaps captures the entire person. It’s demanding and inspiring. Notice that Nietzsche says “formerly.” He’s referring to a time before the seduction of modern busy-ness. When life was slower, it was easier to have a thought, to be captured by an idea when you least expected it. Most of us today are too busy to be taken over by an idea—but we can still quite deliberately have a thought. And that’s what this book is about. Throughout it, I have been
inviting you to have a thought or two with me. It will require time and effort, but once you’ve had a thought, you’ll never be the same again.

In this book, we have moved from classic to contemporary theory. Among the defining features of contemporary theory is modernity and all that it entails—not only the social and technical factors of nation-states, capitalism, urbanization, increasing communication and transportation technologies, mass education, and so on, but more specifically the idea of progress. Perhaps above everything else, modernity is the idea that human beings can, through reason, make their worlds better socially (through freedom and equality) and physically (through technology). Obviously, the idea of progress is intrinsically linked with every other feature of modernity. For example, the modern nation-state was specifically created to protect the inalienable rights of citizens. And capitalism is still seen by many as the great equalizer: the even playing field where neither birth nor social standing determines outcomes and life chances.

This link is part of what has produced the critical stands of contemporary theory. In fact, it is this critical perspective that is characteristic of contemporary theory, not modernity itself. Truly modernist theories are generally built upon the classics (such as Marx, Weber, Spencer, and Durkheim) and are part of the modern project itself. Contemporary theories, on the other hand, are generally critical of the modernist project in one way or another. Even contemporary theories of modernity modify the ideas of freedom and progress. Anthony Giddens’s theory provides a clear example: in late modernity, there has been a shift from emancipatory politics to lifestyle politics and the reflexive project of the self.

The counterbalance to the critique of modernity is an emphasis on differing perspectives. Perspectives are made up of assumptions, values, sentiments, concepts, language, and norms—we see what we see because of the perspective we take. In contemporary theory, there is a growing sense of the power and politics of perspectives, rather than the unreflective acceptance of them. This understanding clearly comes out in the idea of discourse. Every discourse assumes a political world that situates all speakers and hearers with reference to one another.

**Postcolonialism**

Another place this idea of perspective is clearly seen is in *postcolonial theory*. Colonization has always had an interesting relationship to modernity. In a fundamental way, especially with the United States, we can see decolonization as part of what facilitated modernization. As we’ve consistently noted, the nation-state and the accompanying ideas of citizen and individual equality are central to modernity. In fact, it was the Revolutionary War (a “decolonization”) that allowed the United States to become a nation-state. Yet, at the same time, many theories of modernization argue that colonization is a necessary precursor to modernity, helping to establish the needed economic and political infrastructures. These theories thus argue that the colonizing influence the United States has is necessary for the other nations to become “modernized.”
Thus, both colonialism and decolonization have been prevalent in modernity. Up until about 1914, colonization continued to expand: the total geographic space occupied under colonial rule increased from about 55% in 1800 to 85% in 1914 (Said, 1994, p. 8). After WWII, decolonization took hold and continued to increase on through the 1960s. During that time, most of the colonies and protectorates in Asia and Africa won their independence. One of the most notable achievements during this period was the ultimately successful struggle for Indian independence led by Mahatma Gandhi.

Postcolonialism is an effort to understand the effects of colonization and decolonization on political systems, cultures, and individuals. Quite a bit of work in the field comes from literary criticism and is aimed at bringing the perspective of the colonized to the colonizer. In 1978, postcolonialism also became part of social theory with the publication of Edward Said’s book *Orientalism*. Said argues that colonizing nations base much of their economic growth and stability on the markets and resources that the colonized provide. In this, Said echoes W. E. B. Du Bois’ (1920/1996b) work some 60 years prior: “There is a chance for exploitation on an immense scale for inordinate profit, not simply to the very rich, but to the middle class and to the laborers. This chance lies in the exploitation of darker peoples” (pp. 504–505).

Said’s insight is that the structural relationship between the colonized and colonizer is based upon specific kinds of cultures—in this case, “an undeterred and unrelenting Eurocentrism” (Said, 1994, p. 222). One of the things we’ve talked about in this book is that identities are formed through producing and maintaining cultural differences. The more pronounced the differences, the stronger the identity and the more dramatic the effects (the terrorist acts of the early twenty-first century against Western nations like the United States and England are examples).

One of the basic distinctions that has allowed Eurocentric identities to flourish is the East–West divide and the social construction of the “Orient.” In many ways, this is similar to the distinction made in the United States between blacks and whites. That distinction and seeing differences based on “race” are what have allowed slavery, Jim Crow laws, and continued discrimination to exist. Fundamentally, “white,” and all that identity entails, can only exist in reference to “black.”

In the same way, the West became the “West” only in comparison to something intrinsically different and inferior. Only by seeing the Orient as inferior, underdeveloped, and deviant, and the Oriental people as “the Yellow Peril” or the “Mongol hordes,” could the West see itself as superior, developed, humane, rational, and so forth. This superior view of Western civilization allowed and continues to allow European nations and the United States to force their brand of democracy, capitalism, and rationality upon other “uncivilized” nations. As Wallerstein points out, developing nations can only be “developing” in reference to some supposedly superior model, and this politically inspired model is invariably imposed from the outside. An important ramification here is that, while decolonized nations may no longer be directly dominated, they nonetheless continue to be colonized politically, economically, and culturally.
Frantz Fanon takes the idea of continued colonialism and applies it at the level of individual experience. Like Foucault’s use of discourse, Fanon argues that the relationship between developed and developing nations creates a subjective position for the colonized: the colonized person is someone who experiences her or his being or existence through others. Demonstrating this idea of Fanon’s, Robert J. C. Young (2003) asks, “Have you ever felt that the moment you said the word ‘I,’ that ‘I’ was someone else, not you? That in some obscure way, you were not the subject of your own sentence?... That you live in a world of others, a world that exists for others?” (p. 1). Yet colonialism is even more insidious. Fanon (1952/1967) argues that this cultural colonization becomes embodied:

Below the corporeal schema I had sketched a historico-racial schema. The elements that I used had been provided for me not by “residual sensations and perceptions primarily of a tactile, vestibular, kinesthetic, and visual character,” but by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories. (p. 111)

Thus, the struggle for decolonized peoples is not simply political and economic; it is also a struggle for psychological and cultural existence. Just as the white American idea of “manifest destiny” implied the genocide of Native Americans, so this colonization results in the loss of a people’s cultural and psychological existence. Native American genocide didn’t only mean physical death—though it did nearly wipe out the Native American population, from approximately 12 million prior to European contact to 250,000 by 1900—it also meant forced assimilation. If a Native American managed to physically survive the American holocaust, he or she was expected to die culturally and to become white. (See Brown, 2001; Maynard, 1996; Miller, 1996.)

In order to avoid cultural and psychological obliteration, Fanon argues, the colonized must place at risk their ontological existence. We’ve learned that human reality is cultural. This implies that the ontological source of human reality is culture—to exist as human is to exist culturally. Part of what Fanon (1952/1967) is arguing, then, is that human existence is dependent upon cultural recognition:

Man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose his existence on another man in order to be recognized by him. As long as he has not been effectively recognized by the other, that other will remain the theme of his actions. (pp. 216–217)

Thus, the task for the colonized is this: to keep, express, and demand recognition for indigenous cultures, identities, and subjectivities. To do that, the colonized must impose their existence upon a Westernizing world—not to dominate it, as is the intent of the colonizers, but to be recognized as fully and viably human. This move is risky. It risks ontological death, but the alternative is equally perilous: living out the themes and subjectivities determined by the colonizers. These themes originated in the Eurocentric East–West divide; were re-expressed in the vocabulary of first, second, and third worlds; and continue through the distinctions made between modern, developed nations and modernizing, developing nations.
What’s my point in talking about postcolonial theory? First, as thinking democratic citizens and theoretical sociologists, postcolonialism and postcolonial theory are areas of knowledge that we should understand. I recommend you begin with Robert Young’s *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction*. Above all else, it will tell you why you should care. Then Said’s *Orientalism* and Fanon’s *Black Skins, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth* should all be read. I then recommend that you follow up on Young’s suggested further reading. It will remake your mind.

But I have another reason for mentioning postcolonialism. I said I was using it as an example of the idea of perspectives in contemporary theory, and that’s partially true. My intent is a bit more significant, however. Earlier we entertained the idea that our ability to have a significant thought is an interesting theoretical question and not a personal issue. What we think and how we think are clearly influenced by the cultural milieu in which we live. So, for example, thinking in a postmodern society today is a different kind of enterprise from thinking in the traditional society of pre-Christian Jerusalem.

However, there is one thing that strikes me as I read even the most postmodern or poststructuralist of authors: every one of them assumes his or her reader to be capable of logical, critical, and reflexive thought. That our subjective existence is linked to the discourse of the age is beyond doubt, but within that existence, even within the mind-numbing world of postmodernism, we can have a thought. We can become aware and, because we are symbol-using creatures, we can take our thought a step further than its taken-for-granted base.

Thus, in bringing postcolonialism into our discussion, I want to emphasize a central point: to have a thought is to be post. I don’t mean this statement as a catchphrase or truism. If we accept the implications of discourse, then having a thought as compared to being handed a thought always involves moving from a position of taken-for-grantedness. To even be aware of our discourse implies some movement out of it. How far we move depends on the distance between symbolic spaces. Though I admit there are limitations to analytic dichotomies, the basic distinction in symbolic space is between within and without. When we move outside our symbolic space in the West, it is usually in reference to such collective distinctions as gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, religion, and so forth. Postcolonialism, however, asks us to take a larger step—a step from one world into another, from everything most Westerners believe about modernity, progress, technology, democracy, and capitalism to worlds that are defined and experienced in terms of diasporas, periphery, imperialism, dislocation, refugeeism, and terrorism.

What contemporary theory and this book are asking us to do is to move. In this sense, modernism is larger than an historical period or specific social factors—it is a perspective of the mind and an attitude of the heart. To be modern, then, is to uncritically believe in the hope of technology and government; it is to live within the confines of a materialized body, to accept a simplistic and political reduction of space and time, and to keep oneself within the confines of identities of certainty.
This idea of post-thinking that I’m advocating—thinking outside the box, moving away from comfortability and certainty—also implies that it is impossible to move backward or forward. To move backward implies trying to think in terms of cultures past, like trying to imagine what it was like to be a Hopi before the Europeans came. No matter how close we may think we get, whatever symbolic space we create is always and ever a “traditional-Hopi-as-imagined-by-a-twenty-first-century-person.” The same is true about seemingly closer subjectivities, such as the idealized American family of the 1950s. Thus, we can’t truly move backward in our thought and we can’t move forward either. Moving “forward” exists only as the result of an ethical standard, and currently that standard is some form of the modern ideal of progress.

To have a thought, then, is to engage in post-thinking. It isn’t a call to a bygone era, nor is it valued as a step forward; it is simply a step outside. Since today the most significant “inside” is the symbolic space wrapped around the idea of modernity, to have a thought is to be postmodern: to think outside the confines of modernist values and ideas. To have a thought is thus to be liminal—it is be outside but not yet arriving. In this way, Nietzsche misplaced his thinker. Rather than “in the middle of the road,” perhaps we should see a person having a thought as being on a staircase—neither going up nor down but certainly situated between, in a conceptual space that is equally purposeful and unnerving.

Contemporary theory is vibrant and unruly precisely because it is post in this fashion. Theory today is also the most exciting it has been since the time of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, where social theory was a main thread in public discourse and media. The book you hold in your hands invites you into this turbulent sea of ideas. Contemporary theory is an invitation to rethink society and the individual, power and possibilities, cultures and realities, time and space, human bodies and emotions, the earth and the risks we produce, and the ethics of it all. It is an invitation to move from our center and to see through different perspectives. How far are we willing to move, to be unsettled? What kinds of responsibilities are we willing to accept as a result of seeing differently? What will we make of our world? These are the questions of contemporary theory.

My idea in Orientalism is to use humanistic critique to open up the fields of struggle, to introduce a longer sequence of thought and analysis to replace the short bursts of polemical, thought-stopping fury that so imprison us in labels and antagonistic debate whose goal is a belligerent collective identity rather than understanding and intellectual exchange. I have called what I try to do “humanism.” . . . And lastly, most important, humanism is the only, and I would go so far as to say, the final resistance we have against the inhuman practices and injustices that disfigure human history. (Said, 2003, pp. xxii–xxix)