

John W. Murphy

THE RELEVANCE OF POSTMODERNISM FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE

Over the past few years postmodernism has been gaining popularity. Because the works of writers such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Lacan, and Félix Guattari, for example, are now readily available to the English reader, a novel intellectual force is present that must be assessed (Hassan, 1985). Terms such as “*mise en abîme*”, “*libido*”, “schizo-analysis”, “undecidables”, and so forth must be explained and their relevance for social analysis deciphered. Furthermore, a conception of knowledge, a research methodology, and an image of social order that are consistent with these somewhat odd ideas have been introduced, and thus must be evaluated with respect to their sociological importance. At first, due to the strange language that is adopted and the nature of the philosophy offered, postmodernism appears to the uninitiated as an attempt to subvert rational discussion.

Postmodernism has had some impact on theology, science, psychoanalysis, political science, and, most notably, literary criticism. The writings of Foucault, particularly those pertaining to

The Relevance of Postmodernism for Social Science

medicine and criminology, are sometimes cited by sociologists, but only sparingly. Most difficult about postmodernism is its non-dualistic character. In a word, postmodernists undermine the dualism which they contend is ubiquitous to the Western intellectual tradition. This *démarche* causes many problems for traditional sociology, due to the challenge that is posed to some of its most hallowed precepts. Some critics of postmodernism go so far as to charge that this outlook plunges society into chaos, because of its disregard for reason and facticity. As Max Weber might argue, postmodernists jeopardize the legitimacy of order, due to the way in which they discredit metaphysical speculation.

Postmodernists argue that truth and order are conceived typically in a “centered” manner (Luhmann, 1982: 353-355). What they mean by this is that a reference point untrammelled by situational exigencies is sought to provide a safe basis for knowledge and society. While referring to early Greek philosophy, postmodernists write that usually a fundamental *archē* is deemed necessary to preserve order. “The One, the Good and the True”, to quote Paul de Man (1979: 119), are understood to be vital to the survival of culture. Deprived of these absolutes, the assumption is that Hobbes’ vision will be fulfilled and society will erupt into a war of all against all.

Certainly this belief plays a large role in modern sociology (Murphy, 1985). For example, scientific knowledge that could be transformed into “Public Opinion” was thought by Auguste Comte to provide the only reliable basis for order. As is well known, Emile Durkheim echoed this theme when he declared that only a “reality *sui generis*” could insure the stability of moral order in French society. Indeed, Talcott Parsons dedicated his work to solving what he surmised to be the central issue facing sociologists, which he called the “Hobbesian problem”. An “ultimate reality”, he concluded, is required to guarantee harmony among the various components of the social system.

Some readers might dismiss the criticism lodged against sociology by postmodernists, for Comte, Durkheim, and Parsons are not considered by far to be very progressive theorists. After all, phenomenology, critical theory, and symbolic interactionism have been integrated somewhat into the mainstream of sociological thinking. Nonetheless, the charges leveled by postmodernists still

cannot be easily disregarded.

Key spokespersons for sociology contend that because phenomenologists recognize the importance of intentionality, micro-analysis is all that is possible. Phenomenology, in short, is believed to be incapable of providing any significant insight into the nature of group life (Mayrl, 1977). A similar view is conveyed by symbolic interactionists, such as Sheldon Stryker (1980), when they insist on combining language use with social structure. Presumably, without obtrusive structures order is impossible. Even Anthony Giddens (1984), a critical theorist, succumbs to this viewpoint when he refers to the association process as "structuration". In each case, an Archimedean point, one not subject to interpretation, is introduced to condition interpersonal discourse, so as to forestall the onset of barbarism.

Conceived in structural terms, postmodernists argue that order is unduly reified. Usually society is imagined to be an abstract system that serves to differentiate reality from illusion. Systems theory, as Jean-François Lyotard (1984a: 11) asserts, epitomizes this tendency. The point postmodernists are making is that when only structural props are thought to be sufficient for maintaining order, individuals must abandon their freedom if society is to survive. In point of fact, human action is often identified as the source of the irrationality that continuously threatens civilization. Yet advocates of postmodernism demonstrate that this type of dualism is no longer justified, as a result of recent developments in linguistic theory.

POSTMODERNISM: THEORETICAL TENETS

Basically postmodernism is anti-dualistic. Simply put, an absolute point is no longer assumed to be available to legitimize truth and order. De Man (1986) identifies a "resistance to theory" as central to postmodernism. Lyotard (1984a: xxiv) reiterates this theme when he states that postmodernists eschew "metanarratives". What these writers are saying is that human action or history must be self-justifying, for an unquestioned base for reality is no longer considered to be possible. In terms of what the early Greeks meant

The Relevance of Postmodernism for Social Science

by *theoria*, pristine knowledge is treated as fictitious. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1968: 28-29) expresses this idea by declaring that reality always exists in the interrogative mode, even when absolutes are invoked to sustain a particular version of order.

Why is access now blocked to the realm that has been sought throughout the Western tradition? Rather than pure reason, why has flesh or, as Alphonso Lingis (1986) wonders, sexuality become the focus of attention in philosophical circles? Instead of stability, eroticism and carnal curiosity are terms that are reserved to characterize the search for valid knowledge. Moreover, why has the concept of undecidability been substituted for finality when describing truth? Traditionally reality has been portrayed as a tree with deep roots. Yet even this imagery is now *passé*, as Deleuze and Guattari (1983: 10-26) describe existence to be a “rhizome” that extends in a variety of directions, with no apparent center. Truth is not a spectacle, but, in the manner suggested by Heraclitus, likes to hide and embarrass those who pursue enlightenment. Epistemology, in other words, is now an orgasmic activity.

The reason for this shift in thinking stems from the anti-dualistic stance assumed by postmodernists. While relying on the work of Emmanuel Levinas, Lyotard (1984b: 42) announces that postmodernism is a reaction against ontology and speculation, specifically views similar to those advanced by Hegel. Accordingly, the body is the origin of philosophy, along with all other activities (Lyotard, 1984b: 42). With this maneuver the inside/outside distinction that is the cornerstone of Western thinking crumbles. Thus truth can no longer be assumed to condition opinion (*doxa*), because passion cannot be separated neatly from fact. “Truth doesn’t speak, *stricto sensu*; it works” (Lyotard, 1984b: 35).

Bad metaphysics is undercut by postmodernists because of the way in which they envision language to operate. Some postmodern writers are followers of Wittgenstein and understand every type of knowledge, even that associated with positive science, to originate from “language games” (Lyotard, 1984a: 9-11). What Lyotard means by this idea is that linguistic acts specify assumptions that differentiate fact from error. Instead of reality existing *sui generis*, language use places even this exalted principle “in the service of the subject”. The traditional “exteriorization” of facts cannot be

justified, simply because everything that is known is mediated thoroughly by language. "Truth comes from speech, not reality", according to Jacques Lacan. Pursuing this point further, he suggests that facts are neither true nor false, but linguistic.

Language, accordingly, does more than merely "point to", "indicate", or "reflect" something other than itself (Mitchell, 1986: 7-46). Yet when dualistically conceived, language is simply a tool designed to reveal the world. The implication is that speech is an embellishment, or something that simply highlights an already existing reality. Such a view, however, assumes that valid knowledge is uncontaminated by the contingencies indigenous to everyday discourse. Yet if this were the case, truth would have to be divorced from the human condition and remain forever ineffable. For this reason, Jacques Derrida (1973: 57) writes that "speech is the representation of itself". Knowledge is not found outside of language, in some ahistorical sphere, but within the nuances of speech. Rather than transparent, language is sinuous and labyrinthine, and thus provides only an indirect avenue to truth. To paraphrase de Man (1986: 32), knowledge resides between a speaker and reality.

Contrary to the position held by Roland Barthes (1967), implied by this rendition of language is that a "*symbole zéro*" does not exist to reinforce whatever is known. Language, instead, is unstable, always drifting according to the mood of a speaker. Because every utterance is replete with a variety of meanings, speech both over- and undershoots its mark. Language, in other words, is "born out of its own degeneration", thus providing a reserve of realities (Derrida, 1974: 18-19). Pregnant with significance, language must be stabilized, so that a particular modality of interpretation can be recognized to represent reality. By supplementing itself, a specific meaning can be prevented from colliding with other possibilities, at least momentarily. This is what Lyotard has in mind when he states that truth has to work to be recognized.

As a consequence of postmodernism, realism is clearly undermined. The mind cannot be imagined to "copy" reality, for these two components of the knowledge acquisition process cannot be categorically separated. Because language mediates whatever is known, a reply is never simply a response to a stimulus. The environment, for example, is perceived in an inverted form, or in

The Relevance of Postmodernism for Social Science

terms of the linguistic acts that provide it with an identity. Perception is not pure, but riddled with assumptions about how reality ought to be understood. Rather than representation, perception is creation. Walter Benjamin (1978: 319) makes this point when he writes that “God’s creation is completed when things receive their names from man...” In other words, even the most exalted principles are united inextricably with the linguistic body, and thus are fundamentally corporeal. Or, as Merleau-Ponty (1968:131) elaborates, language supplies the “connective tissue” that holds reality together.

CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF POSTMODERNISM

A. Science

As might be expected, postmodernists contend that the claims made by positivists cannot be taken seriously. Physicists have long recognized that value-freedom cannot be sustained, thereby preventing the procurement of context-independent knowledge. Stephen Toulmin (1982) states that subsequent to the gambit made by postmodernists the development of cosmologies is not possible, because scientists are unable to assume the role of “detached observers”. Karl Popper (1982: 34-36) makes a similar point while refuting determinism, when he remarks that theories of causality must always be articulated *within* the domain deployed by experience, thereby precluding the discovery of autonomous causal factors. In view of this evidence, Lyotard does not understand why so many sociologists continue to embrace positivism and strive to model their discipline after a version of the physical science that has long been abandoned. Contrary to the tenets of positivism, he proposes that society is not a “unicity”, or whole, waiting to be discovered by those who are methodologically rigorous (Lyotard, 1984a: 12). Because all systems of knowledge constitute language games, logistical refinements are inadequate to guarantee the discovery of facts. While quoting René Tom, Lyotard (1984a: 59) maintains that, at best, “islands of determinism” exist. That is, all knowledge is “locally determined”, or embedded within a particular interpretive or linguistic framework (Lyotard, 1984a:

61). Knowledge, in other words, originates from a source that is repressed by positive science.

With regard to Thom (1975) and his now well known Catastrophe Theory, the social world should be viewed as an assembly of discrete states or interpretive domains. The probability that certain events will occur depends on the framework within which they are expected to appear. Probability, in other words, can be calculated only in terms of the assumptions about reality that are accepted as valid. To move from one set of assumptions to another can be understood as precipitating a sort of crisis, for the ability of persons to anticipate the behavior of others may be seriously impaired. Because the movement between interpretive or linguistic realms is discontinuous, postmodern social theorists recognize that the meaning of an event may change appreciably upon entering a new domain. Therefore, inter-domain communication is possible only after an attempt has been made to reconcile the reality assumptions that are operating in different social spheres (contexts).

Subsequent to the arrival of phenomenology, existentialism, and critical theory, for example, what Lyotard and other postmodernists have to say about science would be common fair, if they did not address a problem mostly overlooked by critics of positivism. Specifically, they question the ability of computerization to fulfill the promise of positivism, as a result of generating knowledge unaffected by situational limitations. This is thought to be a very important development, because of the role computers play in regulating modern society. According to postmodernists, computerization, or “digitalization”, is able to portray knowledge in a way that may become very problematic, given the importance placed on information dissemination in so-called high-tech societies. As Foucault (1980) notes correctly, nowadays access to knowledge is vital to maintaining power.

Computerization represents what Max Horkheimer (1982) might call the “latest attack on metaphysics”, although he reserved this designation originally for positivism. Through the introduction of computers the illusion has been perpetrated that access to objective knowledge is finally possible, as witnessed by the hopes expressed by both technical experts and citizens. Nonetheless, Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus (1986) document that the claims made about this

The Relevance of Postmodernism for Social Science

technology were based on a particular, and somewhat limited, understanding of symbolism. Because computers operate effectively only when input is neatly classified and easily manipulated, data must be identified as inert objects. In order to insure the success of data processing, symbols were defined as “context-independent, objective features of the real world” (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1986: 53). Information would thus have exact parameters and could be classified without difficulty. Moreover, the conceptual digits used to categorize input were presumed to be structured in terms of absolute space. In fact, J. David Bolter (1984: 83-90) comments that the “address space to which a piece of information is assigned was originally identified as inviolable.

By decontextualizing input, equating reason with formal logic, and assuming knowledge to be strictly empirical, the development of a complete system for information identification, storage, and utilization was underway. The extreme formalization associated with computerization, however, has come to be judged as its greatest weakness. “Logic machines” and “inferential engines” were the names first used to describe computers, for this technology was assumed to operate according to natural laws, deduce the meaning of facts, and adjust automatically to the changing characteristics of reality. Ostensibly all this can occur without human interference. To quote Guttari (1984: 83), computerization results in the production of a “non-signifying expression machine”, in that information is “over encoded” and considered to be beyond scrutiny.

Imagine introducing computers into the therapeutic setting. An asymmetrical relationship could be established easily between therapists and their clients, which even Habermas could not envision. Because of the mystique surrounding mathematics, formal logic, and electronics, how can clients be expected to participate fully in the formulation of their treatment plans? Yet postmodernists have begun to unravel the ideology of computerization. Most important, they show that even mechanized discourse obtains its significance from the linguistic Unconscious, a realm Lacan cites to be the root of history. Different from the ahistorical abyss Freud had in mind, the linguistic nether world relates to the expressive or interpretive side of language.

Implicated in this domain, which is similar to what phenomenologists call the *Lebenswelt* (“life-world”), computer space cannot command its usual seigniorial status. According to Lyotard this theoretical change resurrects the question “Is it true?”, a query that has been buried, for the most part, under the technical concerns that currently dominate education. Therefore, the transmission of data cannot be the center of attention, because the judgments that provide information with meaning cannot be ignored.

Using Marxian terminology, Lyotard (1984a: 10) maintains that knowledge cannot be stripped legitimately of its “use value”, because acts of linguistic signification supply phenomena with meaning by “specifying their properties and the uses to which they can be put”. Computer space, therefore, is not pristine or absolute, but a modality of interpretation. Despite the proposals made by technocrats, Lyotard (1984a: 16) illustrates that cybernetic machines are programmed according to “prescriptive and evaluative statements”. Technical competence is thus not fundamental to computerization. Yet technical issues can easily obscure the political, economic, or moral factors that may either legitimize or discredit a particular knowledge base. Actually, according to Jacques Ellul, technology is designed to minimize the importance of the human element involved in any activity.

B. Valid knowledge

The focus of postmodern epistemology has been literary criticism. Particularly, the works of Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, J. Hillis Miller, and Paul de Man have been most influential. Essential to postmodern literary theory is that “undecidables” determine how a text shall be read. While criticizing structuralism and all other styles of formalism, postmodernists contend that the meaning of a text depends on the manner in which it is interpreted, rather than a uniform and static system of rules. Instead of mimicking reality, reading reveals truth. With this idea in mind, postmodernists also reject the version of hermeneutics proffered by Gadamer, for they charge that he cleaves to the belief that art has a timeless essence. With their criticism of Gadamer, postmodernists exhibit their distaste for phenomenology. These theories, they argue, constrain

The Relevance of Postmodernism for Social Science

persons, rather than unleashing the “nomad thought” Deleuze (1977) cites as vital for fruitful reading.

Typically postmodernists are known to “deconstruct” texts. What does this mean? Is literature destroyed, along with reason, logic, and order, as suggested by opponents of postmodernism? While commenting on Derrida’s work, David Hoy (1985) writes that this portrayal of deconstruction is inaccurate. All deconstruction does is to unsettle a text, so that reading is possible. For if a text were a closed system, devoid of lacunae, reading would never be anything more than redundant. Reading is not simply a surrogate for truth, however, but pivotal for the acquisition of valid knowledge. Nonetheless, any or all readings of a text are not justified, simply because an author is allowed to inhabit a text.

Besides comprehension, at stake during reading is the ability of language to convey an author’s world. Language, in this sense, is not just empirical, but the harbinger of experience. A text and its author exist *inside* of experience, and, like Benjamin’s (1969: 172-174) “*flâneur*”, neither is arrested by structural or semantic necessity. At the heart of a text is a biography that is erotic and always defies classification, but which is captured momentarily in writing. Merleau-Ponty (1973: 11) states that during reading an author must begin to live in the reader’s world, thereby creating a space that was formerly absent. Similarly, Lévinas equates scripture with a gift, rather than a message. A gift confronts a person, alters his or her environment, and demands a response, while a message is dispassionate and may be ignored. Texts are treated during deconstruction as a form of address, which intrudes on readers and requires that they respect the person who is speaking. A text is thus an invitation to dialogue, and not merely a body of propositions to be deciphered.

Postmodernists question the appropriateness of the Cratylan portrayal of the relationship between a sign and what it signifies (de Man, 1986: 9). De Man, in this case, is referring to Plato and the theory that signs and reality are isomorphic. In terms more familiar to sociologists, making the distinction between natural and social symbols is not justified, contrary to the opinion of G.H. Mead. Or, in line with Parsons’ conception of “analytical realism”, language cannot be construed to depict roles and the structural pathways that join them. Likewise, a “deep structure”, such as that studied by Chomsky, is unavailable to supply language with its

raison d'être. Because literary and social space cannot be separated, knowledge and passion are inextricably united. In fact, knowledge is seduced by language, or made to submit to the whims of interlocutors. Methodological rigor, therefore, is insufficient to rescue truth. Instead of adopting Reason, only passionate overture can gain a researcher access to facts.

C. *Style of Analysis*

Critics complain that the systematic generation of knowledge is blocked by postmodernism. Postmodernists do not aid their cause by referring to their methodology as “schizo-analysis” (Guattari, 1984: 73-81; Deleuze and Guattari, 1977: 273-382). Most persons take this terminology to mean that postmodernism promotes methodological anarchy. The common perception is that postmodernists reduce the study of social life to the acquisition of idiosyncratic knowledge, derived from snippets of very personal insights. Therefore, the establishment of public information is presumed to be curtailed.

In order to assess properly schizo-analysis, the position rejected by postmodernists must be clarified. Discussions about this novel mode of analysis have been confined thus far to debates over the nature of mental illness and literary criticism. Félix Guattari, the key spokesperson for schizo-analysis, argues that “institutional analysis” is outmoded, because it is reductionistic and obscures the human element of diagnoses and literature. He claims psychologists and psychiatrists, along with formalist views of texts, stifle desire, as a result of believing that certain assumptions about behavior are *de facto* legitimate (Guattari, 1984: 77). A form of “micro-politics” is thus instituted between a therapist and client, book and reader. Simply put, therapists and texts become agents of normalization, due to their role in constraining fantasy. Jacques Donzelot (1979) pursues this point further and charges that through the medicalization of social problems challenges to the *status quo* are muted, for they are dismissed as irrational. Because a hierarchy of knowledge is erected, opposition to the resulting norms is relegated to the status of “infantilism”. “Collective paranoia” is created, as all questions about the dominant reality

The Relevance of Postmodernism for Social Science

are viewed with suspicion (Guattari, 1984: 86).

Using Pierre Bourdieu's imagery, a "linguistic market" is produced, where exchange takes place in terms of pre-arranged values (Thompson, 1984: 42-72). Discourse does not occur *between* individuals, but, instead, is organized according to *a priori* categories. Furthermore, entrance into this market is prohibited to those who possess insufficient linguistic capital. This disenfranchisement is perpetrated through "symbolic violence", with particular life styles or modalities of existence impugned (Thompson, 1984: 55-58). Reasoning that is not *more geometrico* is simply assumed to have little exchange value. Lyotard (1984a: 17) reinforces this point when he states that institutions are typically given the latitude to dictate which linguistic moves are appropriate. In this sense, imagination is socialized by sequestering language from reality.

Although the work done by postmodernists on the possible ideological character of symbolism is quite unique, specifically its Marxist applications, their real methodological contribution relates to proving schizo-analysis as an alternative to institutional assessment. Nonetheless, as mentioned earlier, this method has been seriously misconstrued. As opposed to dismissing reality as unimportant, schizo-analysts seek to "foster a semiotic poly-centrism" (Guattari, 1984: 77). In the presence of an indomitable reality, however, such a proposal can understandably be considered indicative of madness.

Why do postmodernists illustrate their methodology by utilizing themes borrowed from the study of schizophrenia? Their strategy shows clear the shift that must be made away from traditional methodologies, in order to make what they believe is a necessary distinction between madness and Unreason. Is schizophrenia indicative of deficient reasoning or ambivalence about reality? What does the schizophrenic do that is so disturbing?

Postmodernists contend that schizophrenics make the ultimate *faux pas*. Specifically, these persons defy reality, and as a consequence are labeled as mad. By transforming language into hieroglyphics, as a result of using what are thought to be bizarre symbols, an unfortunate individual is ostracized from the mainstream of life. Because the schizophrenic's language appears to be muddled, reason is assumed to be absent. Keeping with the

idea of a linguistic marketplace, Foucault asks whether madness represents an “absence of production” (Felman, 1985: 14).

Contrary to this view, postmodernists demonstrate that madness is simply a response to a situation which contravenes typical symbolism, or Unreason. A trader, in other words, bargains in an unusual or unexpected manner, thus earning him or her the reputation of being mad. Madness, simply put, may represent nothing more than the refusal to accept repression. In a manner of speaking, those who explode language are destined to be mad. For as postmodernists note, language is able to expand reason in an unlimited number of directions. Those who live in their language, rather than reality, court madness! Madness in one language may be sanity in another.

Postmodernists believe that the reduction of language to specific forms is illegitimate. “Any speech act”, writes de Man (1979: 300), “produces an excess of cognition”, thereby falsifying the promise of pure or final knowing. Schizo-analysis is premised on the idea that knowledge is not exhausted by a few, allegedly fundamental, categories. Opposed to a philosophy of exclusion, which delimits explicitly the parameters of sound evidence, schizo-analysis requires that all linguistic acts be viewed as sensible, although not necessarily rational.

“Singularity” is acknowledged as important, rather than subjugating knowledge to “dominant significations and social laws” (Guattari, 1984: 77). Analysis re-individuates a source of data, because the linguistically constituted assumptions that shape reality are the focus of attention. Sensitivity to the linguistic core of facts is emphasized, thereby allowing researchers to embrace knowledge. Liberated from logic and reason, facts are brought into the open. Accordingly, Guattari compares the schizo-analyst to a revolutionary, who eschews reason but not meaning.

D. Social Order

The epistemology advanced by postmodernists precludes the maneuver made regularly by social scientists to substantiate order. As postmodernists remark, sociologists have often exhibited “realist pretensions” (Lyotard, 1984a: 73-79). That is, the argument

The Relevance of Postmodernism for Social Science

is made that society has its own existence, divorced from the influence of individuals. Through the introduction of factors which represent unquestioned positivity, society is believed to be preserved. When structures, roles, or symbols are given this exalted status, a reality is assumed to be accessible that is recognized as legitimate by all rational persons. The main problem with this *modus operandi* is that order is established outside of language and associated with ideals that have no experiential basis. Order is thus sanctified.

Because, according to Kristeva (1980: 64-91), subjectivity and history are intertwined, order cannot be envisioned to condition language. Subsequently, postmodernists chide Comte, Spencer, and Parsons for their theoretical *naïveté*. As a result of discarding formalistic theories, postmodernists are excoriated for shrouding the formation of order in mystery. The development of society is thought to be left to chance, for, while citing a Hasidic saying, Lyotard (1985: 91) suggests that order is possible without knowing the required rules. All this statement proves, however, is that the postmodern conception of order cannot be appreciated without an adequate understanding of the work of Emmanuel Lévinas and Martin Buber, along with various Hasidic teachings.

The Hasidim reject Plato's rendition of the polity, in addition to all other views that portray society to be an absolute body. Following the advice of Lévinas, postmodernists note that this type of ontologizing discourages doubt, as a result of transforming norms into prescriptions (Lyotard, 1985: 66). Describing order in this manner, however, is thought by postmodernists to foster terrorism. Specifically, the failure to question reality culminates in citizens coming to be dominated by the world which they initially created. Mimesis of this sort compromises freedom, simply because persons cannot be self-directing. Consistent with the position held by the Hasidim, Lyotard (1985: 90) believed that the uncritical adoption of knowledge promotes docility and thus slavery. Enamored of supersensible beings, persons lose both their autonomy and freedom.

In order to discourage founding the polity on commands that impose order, postmodernists declare society to be linguistic, specifically a "flexible network of language games" (Lyotard and Thébaud, 1985: 58; Lyotard, 1984a: 17). Language and society are

coterminous, for order emerges from discourse between persons. According to Lévinas, persons have the ability to jump from one language game to another, while uniting the cognitive dimensions that sustain these games. In point of fact, Kristeva (1980: 55-56) writes that this overlapping of language games produces linguistic “knots”, which temporarily bind persons together. Nonetheless, the resulting order does not represent consensus, simply because this principle in effect authorizes what a person must do to be allowed to say “we” (Lyotard and Thébaud, 1985: 81). Rather than invoke imperious guidelines to enforce order, postmodernists, following Lévinas, recognize that persons can approach one another directly, through the *recognition of differences*. By recognizing others to be different from themselves, instead of making them conform to an all-encompassing ideal, persons can interact on the basis of knowledge that is intersubjectively constituted.

For postmodernists, order embodies a linguistic community. Yet they are careful to distance themselves from theories such as phenomenology, structuralism, and some forms of pragmatism, all of which, they argue, describe language to be implicated in, but not the source of reality. Lyotard (1985: 65) insists that language cannot be deduced from anything else. Thus order depends solely on the ability of interlocutors to tame, but not master, language, so as to create a contingency framework for comprehending reality. Through the generation of linguistic or “hypothetical imperatives”, order is possible without repression (Lyotard and Thébaud, 1985: 57). Buber recognizes this portrayal of order to be consistent with the real meaning of *socialitas*: an association of persons through fellowship.

THE PRESENT CONTROVERSY SURROUNDING POSTMODERNISM

It is obvious that postmodernists do not jettison truth and order, thus thrusting society into the night of relativity. Likewise, the claim is simply false that any interpretation of reality or a particular social arrangement must be treated as acceptable, subsequent to the advent of postmodernism. Postmodernists demonstrate clearly that each language game is sustained by value

The Relevance of Postmodernism for Social Science

that must be respected, if reality is to be correctly evaluated. Accurate knowledge is obtained about persons by apprehending the language game they are playing, rather than by treating them as mute objects. Rules are not absent, yet they are not obtrusive either. In a recent series of articles Habermas illustrates that even he does not appreciate this distinction (Bernstein, 1985). Moreover, institution cannot be imagined to represent the true being or essence of society, as is traditionally the case. Rather, institutions embody a version of linguistic practice that is not regularly questioned.

The problem many writers have with postmodernism stems from their inability to conceptualize society in a non-dualistic manner. Traditionally institutions, for example, are believed to save society from devolving into chaos, because they define and thus restrain experience. The privileged position allotted to institutions according to this theory is now disallowed, for as Lyotard (1985: 43) states “there is no outside”, from which an unencumbered view of norms can be gained. Because no other source is available, order must arise from *within* experience. Of course, many sociologists are uncomfortable with this position, particularly when they covet the status that can be derived from employing structural and systemic metaphors to describe social life. Armed with such apparently objective ideas sociologists are no longer philosophers, but scientists.

Most bothersome is that postmodernists deny legitimacy to the metaphysical baggage introduced by sociologists to perpetuate the façade that they are scientists. Exposed is the sobering thought that value-freedom may pervert data, instead of assuring sociologists access to truth. Accordingly, sociologists may have to transcend the limitations imposed by methodology, before socially meaningful knowledge can be garnered. For only as “gay scientists”, as depicted by Nietzsche (1924), can sociologists appreciate the historical embeddedness of knowledge. Scientists are gay when they recognize that the pursuit of truth is not dispassionate, and that science is predicated on assumptions that are not necessarily scientific. Only through playful thought, untethered to methodology, can human desires be understood. “Life”, and not technique, is the “means to knowledge” (Nietzsche, 1924: 250).

CONCLUSION

The pervasive theme of postmodernism is danger. Researchers cannot remain aloof from those who are studied. Furthermore, only skepticism reveals knowledge, for the security offered by well-worn formulas and techniques may blind investigators to facts. Because interpretation is intimately related to knowledge, science cannot be severed from imagination. Scientists may have to combine factors that were formerly considered to be irreconcilable, in order to find appropriate ways to bring truth out of hiding. Postmodern science operates on the basis of "instabilities", rather than axioms. Instead of merely working with rules, postmodernists are entrepreneurs and invent them. As a result of challenging determinism, postmodernists are treated as mad. Yet it must be remembered, permissiveness toward truth is very risky, particularly when social scientists believe overwhelmingly that model building is the quintessential scientific activity.

John W. Murphy
(Arkansas)

REFERENCES

- BARTHES, ROLAND (1967). *Writing Degree Zero*, New York, Hill and Wang.
- BENJAMIN, WALTER (1978). *Reflections*, New York, Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich.
- BENJAMIN, WALTER (1969). *Illuminations*, New York, Schocken.
- BERNSTEIN, RICHARD J. (Ed.) (1985). *Habermas and Modernity*, Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press.
- BOLTER, J. DAVID (1984). *Turing's Man: Western Culture in the Computer Age*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press.
- DELEUZE, GILLES (1977). "Nomad Thought". pp. 142-149 in *The New Nietzsche*, ed. David B. Allison, New York, Dell Publishing.
- DELEUZE, GILLES and FELIX GUATTARI (1983). *On the Line*, New York, Semiotext(e).
- DELEUZE, GILLES and FELIX GUATTARI (1977). *Anti-Oedipus*, New York, The Viking Press.
- de MAN, PAUL (1986). *The Resistance of Theory*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.
- de MAN, PAUL (1979). *Allegories of Reading*, New Haven, Yale University Press.

The Relevance of Postmodernism for Social Science

- DERRIDA, JACQUES (1974). *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press.
- DERRIDA, JACQUES (1973). *Speech and Phenomena*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press.
- DONZELOT, JACQUES (1979). *The Policing of Families*, New York, Pantheon.
- DREYFUS, HUBERT L. and STUART E. (1986). *Mind over Machine*, New York, Free Press.
- FELMAN, SHOSHANA (1985). *Writing and Madness*, Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press.
- FOUCAULT, MICHEL (1980). *Knowledge/Power*, New York, Pantheon Books.
- GIDDENS, ANTHONY (1984). *The Construction of Society*, Berkeley, University of California Press.
- GUATTARI, FELIX (1984). *Molecular Revolution*, London, Penguin Books.
- HASSAN, IHAB (1985). "The Culture of Postmodernism", *Theory, Culture and Society* 2, 119-130.
- HORKHEIMER, MAX (1982). *Critical Theory*, New York, Continuum.
- HOY, DAVID (1985). "Jacques Derrida", pp. 41-64 in *The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences*, ed. Quentin Skinner, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- KRISTEVA, JULIA (1980). *Desire in Language*, New York, Columbia University Press.
- LACAN, JACQUES (1977). *Ecrits*, New York, Norton.
- LINGIS, ALPHONSO (1986). *Libido*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.
- LUHMANN, NIKLAS (1982). *The Differentiation of Society*, New York, Columbia University Press.
- LYOTARD, JEAN-FRANÇOIS (1984a). *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.
- LYOTARD, JEAN-FRANÇOIS (1984b). *Driftworks*, New York, Semiotext(e).
- LYOTARD, JEAN-FRANÇOIS and THÉBAUD, JEAN-LOUP (1985). *Just Gaming*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.
- MAYRL, WILLIAM W. (1977). "Ethnomethodology: Sociology without Society?" pp. 262-279 in *Understanding Social Inquiry*, ed. F.R. Dallmayr, Notre Dame, Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press.
- MERLEAU-PONTY, MAURICE (1973). *The Prose of the World*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press.
- MERLEAU-PONTY, MAURICE (1968). *The Visible and the Invisible*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press.
- MITCHELL, W.J.T. (1986). *Iconology*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- MURPHY, JOHN W. (1985). "The Centered Society and the Sacrifice of Human Freedom", *et cetera* 42, pp. 109-118.
- NIETZSCHE, FRIEDRICH (1924). *Joyful Wisdom*, New York, Macmillan.
- POPPER, KARL (1982). *The Open Universe*, Totowa, New Jersey, Rowman and Littlefield.
- THOM, RENÉ (1975). *Structural Stability and Morphogenesis*. Reading, MA: Benjamin.
- THOMPSON, JOHN B. (1984). *Studies in the Theory of Ideology*, Berkeley, University of California Press.
- TOULMIN, STEPHEN (1982). *The Return to Cosmology: Postmodern Science and the Theology of Nature*, Berkeley, University of California Press.
- STRYKER, SHELDON (1980). *Symbolic Interactionism: A Social Structural Version*, Menlo Park, Benjamin Cummings.