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 Postmodern Social
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Postmodern Social Science

POSITIVISM

Positivists want to avoid making metaphysical claims when trying to explain behavior.¹ This desire is illustrated clearly in Auguste Comte's Law of Three Stages. In true Enlightenment fashion, only knowledge that is verifiable can be introduced as evidence. Speculation about gods or any other absolute factor that may influence the course of events is to be eschewed. Direct experience, accordingly, should be of paramount importance to anyone who is interested in acquiring valid knowledge. As argued by Bacon, those who are able to purge themselves of their "idols" have a chance of finding truth.

Although positivists claim that experience is the root of knowledge, they retain dualism. The focus of research is nature, rather than the human psyche, cognition, or any other source of interpretation.² The basis of information is assumed to be invariable, or, as they are sometimes called, natural laws. Facts are distinguished from values, and thus knowledge is imagined to be synonymous with physical events. Facts, as Durkheim writes, are "outside [of] the mind."³ Factual knowledge, in other words, has an "independent existence outside of the individual consciousness."⁴

Knowledge is available to those who are able to perceive nature accurately. Because knowledge is believed to be related to physical properties, sense impressions are identified as the cause of perception. For this reason, positivists are frequently cited as advocating a "copy theory" of knowledge.⁵ If the world is to be correctly apprehended, the mind must mimic nature. To use Locke's imagery, the mind must become a "blank slate" on which information can be easily imprinted. With the mind given a passive role in their epistemology, positivists conclude that knowledge is

both objective and obtainable without contamination. "Far from being a product of the will, they [facts] determine it from without."⁸ Facts are autonomous.

The problem, however, is that the human element must be extricated as much as possible from the research process. Even though the mind can only reflect nature, perceptual errors are always possible. While relying on observation as a key methodological principle, positivists contended that after rigorous training, perception can be entrusted to discover truth.⁹ In other words, because everyday or naive perception may be unreliable, persons must be taught a particular way of analyzing events. Trained perception must be engendered. A type of surrogate vision must be systematically cultivated, for otherwise data may be adulterated by values and other non-empirical considerations. Researchers must be shown how to counter the effects of situational exigencies, in order to enhance their prospects for uncovering universal knowledge. The end product of this conditioning might be called a methodologically induced state of immorality.

In order to avoid being guided by unsubstantiated ideas, research must begin with an empirical referent. This point of departure, moreover, must represent the so-called real world, as opposed to a particular standpoint.¹⁰ To begin a study in this auspicious manner, interpretive judgments must be excluded from a research project. Due to this requirement, data collection becomes overly instrumental. In short, logistical refinements are thought to lead naturally to the generation of valid data. Various techniques are mastered to foster standardization, which, in turn, serve to insure that a study is not replete with bias. The key assumption at this juncture is that the manipulation of techniques does not involve interpretation. Therefore, the more technological research becomes, the less likely it is that human error will influence a project's findings.

Positivism implies that methodological techniques are value-free. These "prosthetic aids," as postmodernists refer to them, enable researchers to have access to a reality that would otherwise be out of reach.¹¹ By following certain techniques, interpretation can be overcome and facts revealed. The illusion of objectivity is perpetuated by transforming judgments into methodological rubrics. Strict observation is reinforced, because research proceeds in terms of explicit, step-by-step guidelines. As a result of constricting the value base of research, the laws that underpin nature cannot be obscured by opinion. Minimizing the influence of interpretation, moreover, encourages the formulation of axioms unencumbered by contingencies. The generation of law-like regularities is thus expedited.¹²

Because of their unabashed belief in the efficacy of positive science, early writers such as Comte and Durkheim were able to claim that the impersonal truth vital to the survival of society was discovered.¹³ Accordingly,

Talcott Parsons, particularly during his cybernetic phase, argued that sociologists had the means necessary to explore the "ultimate reality" required to arrest the onset of anarchy.¹⁴ Writers such as George Lundberg and George Homans believed that significant advances could finally be made by sociologists, once rigorous experimental studies were underway.¹⁵ The optimism of these and other positivists reflect the dualism at the heart of positivism, which suggests that technical operations have nothing to do with cognition. No wonder technical devices are so highly touted as research instruments: the only obstacle preventing the unqualified generalization of research findings is the inability of a researcher to master a few technical procedures. More encompassing questions related to the social relevance of data, for instance, are dismissed as disruptive.

Nowadays this desire for an instrumental sociology is manifested in the attempt to formalize completely theory construction and research. Similar to the members of the Vienna Circle, writers such as Hans Zetterberg, and in some ways James Coleman and Hubert Blalock, have tried to transform reason into a system of abstract symbols.¹⁶ Consistent with the Vienna philosophers, these and other like-minded sociologists assume that substituting mathematical signs for language will increase the validity of all propositions. Here again, the idea is that if perception, or in this case language use, can be significantly constrained, factual evidence can be readily procured.

Yet the success of this gambit depends on whether experience can be defined in terms of science, without any serious repercussions. Can humans be studied effectively if their behavior is reduced to its smallest, measurable components? Stated differently, without appreciating the way persons conceptualize reality, can their actions be understood? Postmodernists contend that the denial of the human element is not only unjustified, but that ignoring interpretation jeopardizes the discovery of facts. In *Proust and Signs*, Deleuze writes: "We are wrong to believe in facts; there are only signs. We are wrong to believe in truth: there are only interpretations."¹⁷

Moreover, is the framework adopted by positive science appropriate for delineating the range of experience that is available as evidence? If not, the social importance of information can be easily overlooked. In fact, the claim that certain forms of knowledge are automatically relevant may become ideological, particularly when others are rejected without question. Similar to their general critique of Western philosophy, postmodernists argue that the dualistic foundation of positivism should not be given credence. Accordingly, they raise the question of whether or not positivism can generate socially significant knowledge.

The self-denial that is central to Western philosophy is epitomized in positivism. That is, according to positivists, valid knowledge can be gained

only at the expense of human action. Positivism imposes a set of methodological guidelines—not very different from those that sustained the asceticism practiced by medieval philosophers—that suppress the influence of opinion. Substituting technical procedures for cognitive operations is supposed to facilitate the collection of high quality data, because mental activity is made to conform to the strictures prescribed by research methodology. Merely by complying, in a step-by-step manner, with methodological rubrics, a pathway is supposed to be cleared to truth. Accordingly, the success of positivism depends solely upon whether or not researchers become technically proficient.

As already suggested, however, postmodernists disagree with positivism. Specifically, they contend that facts are not obtrusive, or "things," as Durkheim says, and that more than technical competence is required if accurate insight about social life is to be obtained. Due to the importance they attribute to language use, postmodernists insist that there is no substitute for communicative competence when conducting social research. In other words, the linguistic relevance of behavior must not be concealed by technical requirements. Any methodology that ignores the polyvalence of words should be avoided.

THE POSTMODERN REBELLION

For postmodernists, language is not simply a tool; it provides the only access persons have to the world. Instead of embellishing reality, language pervades everything that is known. To a significant extent, reality is a linguistic habit. Consistent with the Greek verb *symballein*, symbols or language, is understood to "throw together" the meaning of an event.¹⁶ According to Derrida writing is an "originary act," a gesture that establishes the dimensions of sensibility.¹⁷ It is the "play of speech," rather than necessity (*anankē*), that legitimizes reality.

According to Barthes, language that is objectified and treated as a neatly structured classification system has only limited "exchange value."¹⁸ But because speech mediates everything that is known, language is a domain that extends indefinitely. Barthes' point, therefore, is that language does not refer to anything; the implied dichotomy between speech and reality is undermined. "Everything is a message," declares Sartre.¹⁹ The value of language is thus derived from the way persons speak to one another. Postmodern researchers are mostly interested in how language spans the gulf between birth and death, usually referred to as a person's existence. This symbolic plane is where reality arises and declines, and where postmodern research is conducted. Postmodernists operate within the language game of society. For it must be remembered, in the postmodern world nothing

exceeds language. And "the absence of the transcendental signified," writes Derrida, "extends the domain and the interplay of signification *ad infinitum*."²⁰

A. Truth

Clearly, this rendition of language requires that the typical definition of truth be rethought. The correspondence theory of truth that has been prominent since the time of Aristotle is not viewed by postmodernists to be credible. Proponents of this view, however, contend that a truthful statement reflects adequately objective conditions. In this sense, the index of truth is an external referent over which persons do not exert any substantial influence. Accuracy, accordingly, becomes the measure of truth, for reality must be reflected precisely in the mind. Any means that improves precision is also thought to increase the likelihood that truth will be discovered. The query "Is it true?" is thus rhetorical, because the fundamental nature of truth is not questioned. All that is asked is whether a claim is properly attuned to reality. When truth is conceived in this manner, however, Lyotard suggests that knowledge loses its "use value."²¹

Although they adopt Marxist terminology, the point made by both Barthes and Lyotard is clear: divorced from the purpose it has in daily life, truth has no meaning. In fact, subsequent to adopting their view on language, postmodernists undermine the discovery of pristine knowledge. For "truth doesn't speak, *stricto sensu*; it works," writes Lyotard.²² His point is that truth must struggle to emerge from interpretation. With knowledge and interpretation intertwined, truth has a precarious existence. Considering this relationship between language and knowledge, Heidegger refers to truth as *aletheia*, or "unconcealment."²³ Truth is not obtrusive, but resides within a clearing provided momentarily by language. Because language is volatile and always shifting with respect to its meaning, the "rustle" of speech must be quelled long enough for a particular interpretive modality of truth to be known.²⁴ For this reason, Derrida describes truth as a "trace," a "non-origin."²⁵

Truth, stated differently, is originary, but not an origin. J. Hillis Miller, for example, uses the phrase *mise en abyme* to characterize this elusive notion of truth.²⁶ To paraphrase Miller, although meaning springs from truth, this exalted knowledge is deprived of the status for it to be an *arché*, or foundation. Symbols do not simply exist, but are "always becoming."²⁷ Derrida intends by this oblique reference to Nietzsche to convey the idea that knowledge is never settled, due to the presence of human action, or praxis. In practical terms, therefore, checking how closely a story corresponds to reality is insufficient to ascertain whether or not a statement is

true. Instead, the particular language game that is operative must be consulted, so that the linguistic meaning of reality is grasped. A statement is true when it illuminates the rules of speech that sustain a particular linguistic community. The implication, of course, is that truth is local and not universal. As Lyotard remarks, "knowledge has no final legitimacy outside of serving the goals envisioned by the practical subject, the autonomous collectivity."²⁸ Truth is thus meaningful, yet something appreciably different from dogma.

This version of truth is different from that advanced, for example, by Stanley Fish and Karl Popper. These very different writers contend that informed members of a community can distinguish between correct and incorrect language use. Fish is concerned with literary critics and Popper with scientists. In each case, however, the rules adopted by these respective communities are assumed to exist a priori. While the language used by the literati and by scientists is certainly different from that present in everyday discourse, anyone who is educated in a manner similar to these experts is expected to have been introduced to a particular set of axioms related to logic and speech. The rules of language, therefore, are localized but not invented. Postmodernists advance the views of these authors a step further by stating that language games are locally constructed, rather than merely discovered. Communicative competence is not presupposed by language use, as assumed by Fish and Popper, but emerges through discourse.

B. Facts

Because postmodernists have up to now devoted a great deal of their time to literary criticism, this area of study will be used as a starting point to explore the nature of facts. Based on the postmodern rendition of truth, the views championed by Comte, Durkheim, and other positivists are outdated. Simply put, facts are not "things" that exist external to the individual.²⁹ Likewise, using structural metaphors to describe the operation of society is not legitimate. The use of structural props promotes the erroneous belief that social phenomena are autonomous, or unrelated to shifts in conscious experience. In general, a mechanistic image of social life is an anachronism, because facts cannot be separated neatly from judgments. Consequently, behavioral laws cannot be articulated in simple form A—B.

Barthes warns that literature exists within language.³⁰ With this statement he is attempting to refute those who contend that texts are objects, structured in accordance with rational principles any trained person can eventually recognize. Texts, in other words, cannot be separated from how they are read or written. Contrary to Northrop Frye and supporters of the New Criticism, literature is significantly more than a "piled aggregate of

works."³¹ Although this point may sound quite banal, at issue is whether language merely conveys reality, or organizes it. In this respect, Felix Guattari notes that readers do not simply decipher but "over-encode" a text.³²

A similar point is made by Barthes when he claims that language is infected by Eros, and compares writing to having an ejaculation.³³ What they are saying is that reading is always re-reading, thereby precluding ever reaching a starting point that antedates the intervention of interpretation. According to postmodernists, a text embodies a social space that is shaped by imagination. Therefore, the meaning of a text is revealed in the exchange that occurs between a reader and author.³⁴ Postmodernists agree with Blanchot that the subject (author) and the researcher (reader) may disregard each other, yet this insensitivity must be overcome or the social world (text) will be misunderstood.³⁵

As postmodernists like to state, symbols float in a sea of signification. This is what Jorge Borges means when he states that authentic creations occur "in flight."³⁶ In other words, no anchor is available to a sign other than that provided by language. Only after a reader has entered the world created by an author can a text be assumed to be understood. Accordingly, writes William Gass, "the novelist, if he is any good, will keep us kindly imprisoned in his language—there is literally nothing beyond."³⁷ Language is stabilized by nothing other than something as fleeting as another interpretation. Of utmost importance is that facts are not simply empirical. Similar to a text, the world is not a wasteland of objective indicators, which can best be described as lifeless. Barthes, in this regard, criticizes empiricists for "embalming" life, due to their penchant for reducing social existence to a few, easily measurable indices.³⁸ Following the suggestion of phenomenologists, society should be conceptualized as a living world, a *Lebenswelt*.

At this juncture the distinction made by Husserl between facts and meaning is instructive.³⁹ Meaning is certainly factual, yet facts do not necessarily have meaning. That is, events are factual because they have linguistically inscribed significance, whereas facts that are purely empirical may have no social relevance. The thrust of Husserl's argument is that facts are simply empirical, while meaning relates to the linguistic or interpretive importance of phenomena. Postmodernists contend that truth lurks within meaning and has little to do with facts. Researchers who are concerned with revealing truth, moreover, ought to pay attention to the social meaning of events, rather than categorizing facts. The voice with which facts speak should be the focus of interest. In fact, due to the ubiquitousness of language, values are understood by Barthes to antedate the discovery of facts.⁴⁰

Is technical competence, therefore, sufficient to guarantee the successful procurement of knowledge? Obviously, postmodernists say no. In order to

overcome the limitations imposed by subjectivity, however, positivists regard technical rigor as a defense against the introduction of bias into research. If judgments can be adequately sublimated into technical decisions, then the likelihood of human error is presumed to be reduced. For, as noted earlier, techniques do not think. Instead, technical methods operate like a fishing net, immobilizing whatever is caught. Positivism assumes that methodological procedures are value-free. Clearly, this reliance on technical precision is a ploy by positivists to convince readers that objective facts, untainted by language, can be generated by technically proficient researchers. Yet can socially relevant knowledge be obtained through detached contemplation?

Counterproductive to the discovery of truth, according to postmodernists, is the concealment of values.⁴⁰ Rather than obscuring values with a technological facade, postmodernists contend, researchers should attempt to comprehend the living milieu of persons who are studied. The existential interests that motivate actions hold the key to truth. For, it must be recalled, the assumptions conveyed through language subvert reality. While referring to Foucault, Derrida contends the *epistémè* that brings reality into existence must be consulted.⁴¹ Overhooking this framework can only result in a sterile portrayal of society. Actually, researchers who emphasize procedural refinement in the name of science may systematically distort data, and thus do a lot of damage through the creation of socially insensitive policies based on faulty information. Stated succinctly, because the assumptions that accompany the use of a particular technique are introduced in the guise of science, they may go unchallenged and begin to alter subtly the identity of data. Positive scientists pursue facts, rather than meanings.

The distinction Barthes makes between deciphering and disentangling texts is relevant at this juncture. Positivists decipher material, for they attempt to reduce an event to its material essence. All secondary traits, in other words, are explained by fundamental causes or other empirical factors. Postmodernists, contrary to this *modus operandi*, unravel a text with respect to the linguistic framework presupposed by an author. Passages, for example, are understood to be related because they have a similar destiny within the operative linguistic world. Spatial proximity, accordingly, is unrelated to causality. In terms of the social world, events should be classified similarly only when they have an identical linguistic identity. While referring to Kafka, Barthes, in a poignant manner, states: "[do] not make me believe what you are saying, but even more important, make me believe in your decision to say it."⁴² Hence a postmodernist searches for existential rather than empirical justification for behavior.

POSTMODERN METHODOLOGY

The methodology advocated by postmodernists is known as "schizo-analysis."⁴³ Using this esoteric terminology has not helped to clarify their

position. To critics of postmodernism, this is evidence that a postmodern science is impossible. Nonetheless, the thrust of this methodology is actually quite straightforward. Allegedly like a schizophrenic, postmodern researchers fail to recognize reality. Normally, such a faux pas may lead to a person being labelled as mentally ill. To a postmodern scientist, however, this lack of conceptual acuity can enhance the research process. According to Guattari, the reason why data collection is improved relates to the principle of "semiotic polycentrism" that postmodernism fosters.⁴⁴ Postmodern researchers are not limited by what they believe is rational. Reason does not make them blind to experience.

By using the phrase "semiotic polycentrism," postmodernists are claiming that phenomena may possess a variety of meanings simultaneously. The idea that there must be a "final reading" of a text is rejected as uninformed. Postmodernism also undermines the belief that a society's "dominant significations" are synonymous with reality and lead to truth.⁴⁵ Reality is thus recognized to be multivalent. As opposed to the position maintained by structuralists, facts do not constitute *bricolage*—something that is fully constituted and borrowed from one's predecessors or contemporaries. Liberated from the shackles imposed by logic and reason accepted a priori, reality can be experienced by postmodern researchers, instead of merely analyzed according to criteria that are clear but irrelevant.

A schizo-analyst, therefore, does not seek "to make subjectification fit in with the dominant significations and social laws."⁴⁶ The duty of a researcher, according to Derrida, is to subvert the "aggression of reason" indigenous to technological rationality, so that the fragile linguistic basis of facts is not destroyed.⁴⁷ In other words, even if an interpretation of reality appears to be irrational, the reason that is present must be given serious attention. As Barthes recommends, the "hysteria" of language should be given credence, for reality is not destroyed but inflated by speech.⁴⁸ Postmodern researchers recognize that statements which are "really real" must be distinguished from those which are "just stories," without ever having a complete picture of reality. In this sense, Deleuze writes, "the odor of a flower, when it constitutes a sign, transcends the laws of matter and the categories of the [abstract] mind."⁴⁹ The flower, in short, is an interpretive phenomenon. Accordingly, postmodernists are interested in the significance of an event. Kristeva describes significance as follows: "What we call significance . . . is precisely this unlimited and unbounded generating process, this unceasing operation of the drives toward, in, and through language; toward, in, and through the exchange system and its protagonists—the subject and his institutions."⁵⁰ Significance is the product of creativity.

Suggested by its Greek root *methodos*, methodology is a "way" to acquire knowledge. Hence methodological rigor should not be treated as an

end in itself; standardization should not be extolled as an adequate maxim to guide research. Simply because a data collection strategy is precise and internally consistent, this is no guarantee that the meaning of a phenomenon will be apprehended. In order for meaning to be obtained, the researcher's sensitivity should be paramount. Sensitivity, in this case, does not refer to empathy, but "epistemological participation."²¹ In practice, empathy is unimportant compared to understanding a person's actions. Whether or not one likes the subjects has little relevance to gathering informative data about their behavior. Instead, good research results from researchers participating in the assumptions their subjects make about reality. The reasons why people see values and purposes rather than objects and causes should be the focus of attention.

This sort of sensitivity is not necessarily forthcoming from technical competence. The reason for this is that technology is not reflexive, or self-critical.²² Hence the presuppositions that are built into a methodological technique go unscrutinized. In fact, positivists avoid anything that is not related to procedural issues. In this way, the reality of a subject is not questioned, and is made to conform to mandates that are methodologically imposed. Methodological purity is thus guaranteed. Nonetheless, without raising the question of reality, a subject's "life-world" may never be understood. On the other hand, postmodernists require that researchers be self-critical, and that they work at what Lyotard calls the "horizon" of their methodological, or linguistic, assumptions.²³ As a result, researchers can begin to recognize the limitations of their language game, thereby enabling them to enter the worldview of those who are studied. According to postmodernists, gaining access to someone's linguistic world can occur only through communicative competence. Researchers are communicatively competent when they comprehend the "linguistic pragmatics" of their subjects. Communicative competence is not forthcoming from the state of "double contingency," for example, described by Parsons.²⁴ Because all roles are constructed according to a single style of reason, persons are thought to communicate with one another simply by fulfilling their role requirements. Also, "taking the role of the other," as outlined by G. H. Mead, does not necessarily culminate in competent interaction, for the "other" may be treated as a projection of the self, or, equally insidious, as an abstract alter.²⁵ In each case, Lyotard notes correctly that the other is not approached as someone who is unique, a "norm-giving subject."²⁶ Rather than a "Thou," the other is transformed into an "It," to use the terms made famous by Martin Buber. Postmodernists such as de Man contend that only through "double rapport" is communicative competence achieved.²⁷ While summarizing the thrust of communicative competence, Barthes declares that "we should read as people write."²⁸

This form of dialogue can be fully appreciated only if the postmodern view of the subject is explained. Michel Foucault, for example, caused quite an uproar among literary critics when he pronounced the author, or subject, to be an illusion.²⁹ In a slightly less provocative way, Barthes writes that the "I" is nothing other than the instance of saying I."³⁰ Authors, that is, make themselves through their work. The subject is in doubt because postmodernists believe there is no transcendental ego that can be invoked to verify an author's intentions. According to Lacan, the so-called subject is also a product of language.³¹ A person's identity does not subtend speech, but is established gradually as a result of performing a variety of actions. Rather than an extension of some deeper realm, such as the unconscious, motives are coterminous with linguistic acts. Galo Petrović expresses this sentiment nicely when he writes: "*man is a being of praxis.*"³² The upshot of this view is that the self is "indefinite," or indeterminate, yet intelligible.

As described by Benjamin, a person's actions are purposeful, although they are not necessarily guided by a telos or purpose.³³ The artist is a *fâneur*, a solitary wanderer and not someone who loves a crowd. Kant's position on aesthetics is relevant at this point, specifically his idea that art has a purpose but is not sustained by utilitarian values. Persons, accordingly, are not prompted into action by social or psychological stimuli. In fact, human intentions supply stimuli with meaning. Action precedes stimulation; motivation exists prior to motives.

A researcher, therefore, must not search for a "self" to understand, a persona that is temporarily hidden from view. For a psychological, or sociological, foundation is unavailable to rationalize behavior. Norms are not denotative but linguistic, suggests de Man. Only from within the "socioclet" that constitutes both the self and the context of a person can insight be gained into the motivation for an action.³⁴ In terms of double rapport, the identities of interlocutors are transparent, and thus dialogue does not proceed with respect to preconceived notions about normalcy. Instead, double rapport depends on the willingness of persons to entertain the idea that reality is linguistically manufactured, while recognizing that every language game has rules its players take seriously. Rather than evaluating a patient's illness according to the "sick role," for instance, a researcher must investigate the interpretive significance of illness. In point of fact, recent research suggests that clinical "risk" has little to do with biological, environmental, or other so-called natural factors.³⁵ How a community interprets and responds to a behavior is instrumental in determining the clinical career of a person. Motivation, simply put, is socially constituted.

Some critics claim that the "death of man" has resulted from the postmodern view that humans are translucent.³⁶ In a particular sense, this charge is accurate. Yet contrary to the thesis advanced by structuralists and other anti-humanists, the importance of the self is not diminished because

the perpetuation of reality is not incumbent on human action. Actually, postmodernists discount the relevance of the self because they argue it cannot be found. A social role, therefore, represents a self that is invented, rather than social or natural tendencies. The self is what Barthes refers to as a "linguistic I."⁶⁷ Interpersonal discourse, accordingly, requires that persons treat one another as fickle lovers who are understandable, yet not always predictable.

Postmodern social analysts are uninterested in assessing whether or not behavior is normal. On this point, Derrida writes: "Although it is not a commentary, our reading must be intrinsic and remain within the text."⁶⁸ In order to explain what is written, analysis must not extend beyond the language of the text. Most important, therefore, are the speech acts that delimit the parameters of normalcy. Some interpretations are more powerful than others, because more of a text's meaning is understood. Stated differently, a better attempt is made to enter the linguistic world of the author. Contrary to the claims made by their critics, no postmodernist would agree that all interpretations are equal. Accurate interpretations are socially (linguistically) relevant.

A "schizo-analyst" ignores the traditional standards of reason, in order to envision the linguistic fate of events. Overcoming the limits of reason to reveal what is linguistically rational is the aim of postmodern scientists. Accordingly, the stability of measurements is rejected as leading automatically to truth. The "little narrative," or "minor literature" according to Deleuze and Guattari, is the focus of postmodern research.⁶⁹ For the story that is told about truth in a specific location reveals reality. Benjamin, however, laments the passage of this sort of storytelling, due to the bureaucratization of the modern mind. Nonetheless, due to the ubiquity of language, historical narration holds the key to reality and truth.

Because minor literature is focus of postmodernist research, it is not surprising that positivists and other realists deny legitimacy to postmodern science. Narratives are usually believed to be mythical, and anything but scientific. Yet postmodernists illustrate that positivism is actually another form of narrative. How can one narrative indisputably cancel another? Because there is no *symbole zero*, reality is accessible only through stories. Postmodernists, accordingly, are good listeners and recognize that truth emerges gradually from the passion expressed by a speaker.⁷⁰ Facts, simply put, are expressive and elusive. Postmodernists agree with Nietzsche that a "gay science" is most effective, one that is not mired in objectivity and refuted by methodological demands. How can passion be attracted by the seriousness of measurement? The seriousness of science intimidates interpretation. Postmodern science, therefore, recognizes the story that is told and retold by data. Truth is conjured through a well-told story.

POSTMODERNISM AND THE HERMENEUTIC TRADITION

Postmodernists reject positivism in favor of a more socially sensitive approach to knowledge acquisition. Facts are not assertive, a positive presence, but represent a sort of absence—an ever-changing body of interpretation. Nonetheless, postmodernists have been less than enthusiastic about hermeneutics. This revelation might at first sound odd, for hermeneutics is also usually understood to be anathema to positivism. Yet postmodernists consider hermeneutics insufficiently radical. This conclusion is based on their belief that those often identified with the hermeneutic tradition have not abandoned realism.

Central to the postmodern critique of modern hermeneutics is that an interpretive ideal is retained, against which texts and other cultural phenomena are judged.⁷¹ Admittedly, this sort of conservatism was witnessed in the early interpreters of the Bible, yet this flaw supposedly has been corrected by current writers. Postmodernists, however, contend that this change has not occurred, or, at minimum, is not as far reaching as is usually thought. They claim that the distinction made originally by Plato between reality and appearance, which has been essential to traditional biblical and legal hermeneutics, is still operative. Typically the aim of an interpreter of the Bible, for example, has been to clear away the residue of history, so as to reveal the true or divinely inspired meaning of the text. While modern hermeneutics is not as blatantly dogmatic, postmodernists believe the tendency remains for texts to be examined with respect to criteria that are non-interpretive. The subject-object dichotomy, in other words, is found in hermeneutics.

Lyotard criticizes advocates of modern hermeneutics because of their apparent desire to unlock the secret meanings of texts.⁷² This concern implies that due to procedural difficulties or situational exigencies, the meaning of many texts is able to elude researchers. The interpretation of documents or behavior, therefore, is assumed to be primarily an epistemological exercise. Accordingly, hermeneutics is merely a matter of unlocking the doors that prevent readers from entering into a text. Knowledge is there to be found, if the proper methods are used. In opposition to this inclination, Derrida refers to language use as a "game without security."⁷³ What he means is that even a perfect methodology will not expose an incontestable foundation of knowledge. Nonetheless, the naiveté of realists has infiltrated hermeneutics, thereby encouraging the "normative discourse" that de Man claims influences the way texts are currently studied.⁷⁴ Poetic expression is thus crushed by procedural demands. How the reader enters a text is dictated by methodology. Most problematic, mainstream literary critics and

other social researchers who are influenced by hermeneutics seem to be harboring the hope of encountering pure Being. Of course, this faith rests on the success of modern methodological and technical developments. Improved technical competence, in short, will lead to truth.

This newest form of dualism can be traced to the *Methodenstreit* that took place in Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.⁷⁵ Central to this debate was whether or not the social and physical sciences are basically different. Many writers believed that the methods used by the physical sciences are inappropriate for studying humans. The rationale for this differentiation was that social life is interpreted, while nature is not. Incidentally, however, this bifurcation reaffirmed the distinction previously made between subjectivity and objectivity, in addition to suggesting that social scientists can overcome the limitations attendant on opinion. If only social scientists could be as methodologically rigorous as physicists or biologists; even Dilthey, a pioneer in the effort to establish history as one of several *Geisteswissenschaften*, never abandoned hope that universal psychological laws would be eventually formulated.⁷⁶

Although dualism at this time was much more subtle than it had been in earlier centuries, the belief that unadulterated truth exists still persisted. Max Weber, for example, vacillated on the issue of value-freedom, while advocating the use of "ideal types" as methodological tools.⁷⁷ These so-called pure examples were retained to allow cross-cultural comparisons to be made, because these concepts are static and ahistorical. Therefore, Weber's rejection of natural or explanatory science is not thought to have been complete. Certainly Karl Mannheim was not a supporter of positivism, yet he was often inconsistent and, like Weber, he seemed to exempt natural science from social determination.⁷⁸ Postmodernists are also troubled by Gadamer's hermeneutics, for they believe that he was searching for the primordial conditions of all understanding. For example, they believe that he retained the standard definition of "objectivity."⁷⁹ Furthermore, because he distinguished between false and true prejudices, he apparently acknowledged the possibility of gaining unbiased knowledge. And similar to Habermas' critique of Gadamer, postmodernists believe that Gadamer did not subject culture to serious review, but instead treated it as universal. Gadamer, accordingly, is assumed to have been searching for an ahistorical standard to sustain judgments, something he referred to as the "right horizon of enquiry," which leads to a "higher universality."⁸⁰

The postmodern critique of hermeneutics is similar to Derrida's assault on Husserl's work and on phenomenology. Derrida argues that the onset of phenomenology does not represent a break with Western metaphysics, despite the protestations to the contrary made by Husserl and Sartre. The usual search for external essences has not ended, Derrida claims, but has intensified. Phenomenology allegedly proposes a methodology that "brackets" everyday

life—the "natural attitude"—so that pure vision is attained. Husserl's use of ancient terminology supplied a surfeit of ammunition for Derrida. Accordingly, Heidegger's attempt to resurrect Being, even in the disguise of *Das Sein*, does not earn kudos from Derrida. The focus of the charges levelled by postmodernists is that Dilthey, Mannheim, Weber, and Gadamer, along with phenomenologists, are enamored of the prospect of discovering knowledge unadulterated by the excesses of language use. Terms and concepts are adopted that suggest the pursuit of ideal knowledge has not abated.

In sum, these contributors to modern hermeneutics are chided by postmodernists for trying to resurrect "timeless Reason" as a measure of interpretation.⁸¹ Postmodernists suggest that criteria can be provided to insure the best possible reading of a text—although these rules should not be uncritically accepted. Their fear is that the aim of hermeneutics is merely to improve the accuracy of interpretation, rather than to raise questions related to the existential character of a text or any other phenomenon. Postmodernists are concerned that such an obsession with accuracy or economy—the essence of the outmoded "performativity principle"—unduly truncates the range of possible discourse.⁸² Accuracy results from eliminating "noise" or unwanted elements from an interpretation. But postmodernists insist that accuracy cannot be improved without paying attention to the linguistic texture of a manuscript. Because the optimization of the ratio of input to output is the thrust of economic analysis, technical skills rather than reflexivity become most important when analyzing an event. Yet, to continue the economic theme, there is no "idle capacity" in language, but, instead, "persistent inflation." Almost by definition, therefore, critical inquiry is unrelated to technical or procedural considerations. In fact, reflexivity destroys the closed system required for an economic assessment of a linguistic performance. And when interpretation is unsubstantiated by the broad philosophical questions posed by postmodernists, hermeneutics becomes simply a technical enterprise.

CONCLUSION: RESEARCH AND THE PUBLIC INTEREST

Postmodern research is conducted in the public interest.⁸³ The terms interest and public are very important and need to be clarified. Interest relates to the Latin *interesse*. Suggested by this etymology is that human involvement extends to the core of reality ("*inter-esse*"). Researchers should be concerned not only with the political or economic agenda of a community, for example, but with the interpretive fabric of order. Although many researchers recognize that a community may exhibit a particular political

disposition, they regularly ignore the knowledge base that holds persons together. Accordingly, the public cannot be envisioned as a uniform mass, or something that constrains persons.⁵⁴ A community is not organized around structural or logical imperatives, simply because these factors cannot be sustained theoretically any longer.

The position on knowledge and science advanced by postmodernists suggests that the usual version of order should not be utilized. For if knowledge originates from language use, laws, facts, and related social phenomena cannot be derived from order. The reason for this is quite simple: order is not divorced from human action, and thus autonomous. Because society is mediated by language, postmodernists refer to order as embodied. Rather than a "collective consciousness," society must be approached as if it constitutes "collective praxis."⁵⁵ Order is something more than an idealized form. Hence society is not studied, but rather the modalities of discourse that allow order to prevail. Because order emerges from between persons, research must be directed to a realm many social scientists erroneously believe to be intangible.⁵⁶

While discourse is not necessarily obtrusive, access to language games is not impossible. Yet contrary to traditional wisdom, every research instrument that is adopted must be viewed as a means to engage subjects in dialogue. Clearly, this postmodern approach to research is more difficult than emphasizing methodological or procedural refinement. If discourse is central to the maintenance of order, then only communicative competence on the part of researchers will generate facts. But the aim of methodological discourse is not consensus, but understanding. Therefore, rather than value-freedom, the recognition of values should be encouraged through research. Researchers must begin to appreciate how scientific values may distort the reality constructed by their subjects. Through the recognition of value differences valid knowledge can be acquired, according to postmodernists.⁵⁷

Gathering knowledge is thus an intersubjective process. Postmodernists, nonetheless, are careful to distance themselves from the standard empirical rendition of intersubjectivity. For them, intersubjectivity is not determined by facts, but grows out of praxis. Additionally, as opposed to Gadamer, understanding does not reflect a "fusion" of interpretive horizons.⁵⁸ This portrayal of how knowledge is transmitted is simply too static and simplistic for postmodernists. Interpersonal discourse, the heart of the research act, occurs when people confirm each other's definition of reality; when, as suggested by de Man, rules that cannot claim the status of reality become real for both researchers and their subjects.⁵⁹ According to postmodernism, research consists of reaffirming the public's reality. Most important, attempting to formalize this sort of dialogue will undoubtedly result in

frustration on the part of researchers. Real dialogue occurs despite fluctuations in language, and not because interpretation is artificially removed from speech. Moreover, postmodern research depends on a commitment to protect the fragile, evanescent character of the public's linguistically inscribed identity.

In this regard, reflexivity is imperative. Because language is not structural, speech is malleable and susceptible to self-interrogation. A key consequence of this process is that talk about language is possible. Institutionalizing this spirit of self-criticism as part of research is difficult, but necessary if the linguistic identity of data is to be protected. Traditionally, learning specific techniques has been considered the cornerstone of research. Mimicry and questioning, however, are polar opposites. In order for research to be valuable, self-interrogation must be built into the planning of a research project. Both theoretical and procedural assumptions can thus be examined, so that the social meaning of data is not distorted. Rather than being anti-methodological, postmodernists place research in a context that transforms techniques into media for communication. Techniques do not dictate discourse, because they are adjusted to the patterns of interaction that constitute a society. Surely this is the aim of research: to be responsive to reality. What postmodernists revise is the nature of reality and how it should be studied.

NOTES

1. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 17.
2. Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 2-35.
3. Ernie Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method* (New York: The Free Press, 1965), p. xiii.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
5. Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), pp. 30-36.
6. Durkheim, *Rules of Sociological Method*, p. 20.
7. Hans Albert, "The Myth of Total Reason: Dialectical Claims in the Light of Undialectical Criticism," in *Positivism and Sociology*, ed. Anthony Giddens (London: Heineman, 1978), pp. 157-194.
8. Félix Guattari, *Molecular Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), pp. 86-87.
9. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 44.
10. John W. Murphy, "Phenomenological Social Science: Research in the Public Interest," *Social Science Journal* 23.3 (1986), pp. 327-343.
11. *Aspects of Sociology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), pp. 1-15.
12. Parsons, *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative*, p. 29.
13. Albrecht Wellmer, *Critical Theory of Society* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), pp. 9-30.