

CRITICAL THEORY IN THE POSTMODERN AGE:
The Promise of Epistemology

Elvi Whittaker
University of British Columbia

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the epistemological possibilities suggested by postmodernism. The emergence of postmodern discourse in Anthropology is examined in terms of a contest for theoretical legitimacy. Arguing that the current anthropological fad is curiously apolitical, the author claims that philosophical questions have moral and political value. Specifically, it is suggested that a deconstruction of the binarisms that have characterized ethnographic realism can provide a means to liberate ourselves from the oppressive concepts of a previous era.

RÉSUMÉ

L'auteur examine les possibilités épistémologiques suggérées par le post-modernisme. La formation d'un discours post-moderne est présenté en tant qu'un concours de légitimation théorique. Notant que l'Anthropologie contemporaine est curieusement apolitique, l'auteur essaie de démontrer que les questions philosophiques ont néanmoins des valeurs morales et politiques. L'auteur suggère qu'une déconstruction des binarismes qui ont caractérisé le réalisme ethnographique pourrait contribuer à nous libérer des concepts oppressifs d'une ère passée.

INTRODUCTION

When many of us came to anthropology we were taught that culture was not the ability to discuss the poetry of Gottfried Benn or the genius of Diaghilev. Indeed it quickly became evident that culture had nothing to do with accomplishments and refinement, but was positioned around one, invisible and encompassing. No sooner

was this notion acceptable than culture moved from 'out there' into the head of the beholder and could only be known if this beholder chose to speak it. When this, in its turn, became sensible and self-evident, culture shifted to reside in the pen and on the written pages of the anthropologists. There it remained as interpreted, waiting to be re-interpreted. Now in the post-modern age it seems to be shifting yet another time. But this time the anthropological construction of culture may disappear completely.

A new discourse has entered the conceptual arena of the discipline. The air is alive with a whole new vocabulary -- pastiche, bricolage, collage, montage, dialogic, heteroglossia, polyphony, polyvocality, supertextuality, indeterminacy, displacement, schizophrenia, allegory, parody, *différance*, fragmentation, juxtastructure, canonization, alterity, representation, authority, PMC. And yet more. Along with this new conceptualization comes a fresh set of characters standing in the wings. Clifford, Ricoeur, Said and Habermas may be replaced by Frederic Jameson, Mikhail Bakhtin, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard and Julia Kristeva. Again we are reminded that there has been a Kuhnian paradigm shift, or a Foucauldian change in episteme. The visions and experiences of postmodernism are everywhere.

We can hardly treat postmodernism as received knowledge, for most of us were present at its emergence. It comes, as all new theories or discourses inevitably do, into territory already claimed. Therefore it must contend with the anxieties that it occasions. The howls of orthodoxy that it causes range from reasserting the virtues of some favorite theorist, to refusing to rethink or relinquish old concepts, or simply protesting the sheer energy needed to master yet another view. Quite expectedly, such politics of property resurrect a comfortable Marx or a familiar Schutz and shrug off Derrida or Lacan as immature affectations. At the same time other colleagues are all too eager to pass on rumours that our newest discoveries are already about to pass into history. Daily, almost gleefully, they inform us that poststructuralism is *passé*, that narrativity and representation have had their day, that no one who is anyone does post-phenomenology any more, that those elusive masters of the new wave, the French, now yawn at Derrida, that semiotics has died on the vine, that positivism is about to return and that postmodernism is a fleeting titillation merely put there to make sure one is awake. Somewhere between these opposing arguments there seems to be an opening.

Given the epistemological liberality in the air it is perhaps time to reevaluate theoretical views to make sure that the construction

of anthropological knowledge remains true to our moral, aesthetic and political preferences. Even as some of the leaders of modern anthropology pass unchallenged into oblivion before our very eyes, we recognize how difficult it is to renounce old commitments. We are united here, for example, under the banner of critical theory. Undoubtedly it will soon be pointed out, if it has not been so already, that critical theory is one of those grand scale universalistic theories, attributed to modernism, 'a meta-narrative' so called, and hence soon to be overturned in the continuing onrush of postmodernism. It might also be pointed out that asserting that all knowledge is essentially political and ideological is outdated, positioned back in those days of romance and rebellion, the late sixties and early seventies.

Yet for some of us, Gramsci's suggestion that everything is political remains an unquestionable truism, a good we may refuse to relinquish. Consequently, the postmodernist writings of James Clifford and the Writing Culture company are a partial disappointment, one that is shared by the likes of Bob Scholte and Roger Keesing among others¹ -- for the new discourse seems curiously apolitical. The feminists have already declared it impoverished in its ability to address feminist concerns (Gordon 1988). For those who advocate a 'critical consciousness', and the activating spirit of critical theory, the question then becomes, "How can I locate myself in the new discourse and yet retain the theoretical imperative to question the ideological practices on the Canadian scene?" For me the answer to this question lies in the epistemological possibilities suggested by postmodernism.

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT OF POSTMODERNISM

It is perhaps important at this stage to turn to the postmodernist argument: firstly, to position it in a political and economic context and, secondly, to uncover the nature of its demands on the discipline. Anthropologists have traditionally recognized that all theoretical discourses originate in living social arenas. 'Culture' itself seems to be a concept fashioned to account for the anthropologist's awareness of the boundless diversity of humanity. So culture encompassing and embedding the individual, the idea with which I began this paper, seems to emerge from a colonial mentality and colonialist concerns. The structural-functional analysis that went along with it seems peculiarly suited to deal with the ways in which various elements of a system function, which institutions and

other social structures need to be considered, alternately upheld or destroyed. The mentalist version of culture, or 'culture in the head of the individual', finds its impetus in existentialism, phenomenology and Marxist notions of consciousness. It appears, appropriately enough, in a world fast becoming post-colonial with a strong belief in choice, free will and a Marxist sense of struggle against oppression. The opportunity for such free will, for concerted efforts to bring about political change, fit well into the post-war ethos and into the demands for political freedom that characterize the magical sixties. This period now becomes 'modern' by definition. The textual, interpretational and hermeneutical discourses span this period and stretch into the postmodern one.

Some writers often viewed as postmodernists, like Fredric Jameson, fight to retain parts of the earlier Marxist message, unwilling to let it become a nostalgic reminder of a simpler past. He points out that the sixties, with the Green Revolution, neo-colonialism and the emergence of a computer identity, were clearly transitional to the postmodern age. The latter becomes possible because it is a replication and reinforcement of consumer capitalism, a global and multinational capitalism, and that it is "the internal and super-structural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world" (1984:57). Given these views, it does not come as a surprise to learn that Jameson is influenced by the Frankfurt School of critical theory.

Furthermore, computer knowledge and computer aids dominate. More and more is withdrawn from the control of the individual and entrusted to the computer, and an increased white collar work force has increasing control and access to this impersonally held and impersonally produced knowledge (Sarup 1989:119). It is unquestionably a Western product. It depends, some argue, on the existence of what has been called the PMC, the professional managerial class. Indeed one might choose to describe it as a yuppie discourse. It is inconceivable that it could have been produced in an economic milieu other than that of the contemporary West.

So, what does the postmodernist argue? It is clear that the theoretical concerns of yesterday have become questionable. Postmodernists are suspicious of all universal philosophies and theories, which they term 'meta-narratives'. Any "science that legitimates itself with references to a meta-discourse ... making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of the Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject or the creation of wealth", Lyotard

suggests is a modernist discourse (1984:xxiii). Marxism, structuralism and all large theoretical systems are rejected by the postmodernists, and placed in the past like the political eras that fostered them. Universality becomes, for them, an oppressive totalizing concept. Class struggle and class structure are creakingly outmoded. Essentialism, authenticity, signification, deep and surface structures are rejected. Emancipation and liberation become antiquated assertions. Rationality and totalization have lost their power to convince. Theoretical consensus is a dead issue, and 'actuality' something to be relegated to the past.

There has also been a "death of the subject", or the end of individualism (Jameson 1988:16). Ironically this comes at a time when anthropologists seem to have discovered and reified the self (Whittaker 1989). Jameson points out that the notion of individuality was possible in earlier days, before global capitalism, when the nuclear family was held in high esteem and a bourgeois hegemony prevailed. It was a kind of contrived mystification which sought to persuade people that they 'had' individuality, subjectivity and a unique identity (1988:17).²

Finally, realism, that central raison d'être of the ethnographic enterprise, has become mere romantic fiction. As Baudrillard makes clear -- there is no reality, the real is no longer real, there is only illusion (1983:25). Anything that might resemble the notion of 'reality' is subsumed under the problems of representation and ethnographic authority. In a previous age phenomenology had strengthened a reified concept of reality -- as a truth in the head of the subject -- and now reality remains only as a form, through the presentation of which anthropology claimed its truths. Further, instead of finding truth, or even truths, there are textual strategies. We are warned that "we do not want to return to the error of insisting upon fixed points of enunciation, labelled 'truth'" (Kaplan 1988:43).

EPISTEMOLOGICAL POSSIBILITIES

I turn now to a consideration of epistemology. In particular I would like to consider what it might offer to the ideological battles in which a critical theorist could be engaged. I want to argue that the epistemology of postmodernism promises to provide critical insights.

The first consideration is that of reification. Real life in the post-modern discourse becomes mythic existence, declared 'real' by

such as the anthropologist. Through the postmodern discourse many anthropological notions are opened to question. For most anthropologists, who have lived a good part of their career in a positivist world, the traditional search for reality is fully appropriate and unquestionable. For them it differentiates good from bad work; it is an ultimate evaluator. In the light of the new deconstructive gaze³, however, gender, class, exotic people, the primitive, are all demystified and condemned to the past, or to what Clifford calls "the local fictions of a collective life" (1988a:10). The 'idealized vanishing Indian', for example, is relegated to the fictive productions of a previous age. Until now, anthropologists have not concerned themselves with the responsibilities of reification. The notion of reality magically took care of that. Now, however, all essentializing discourse is under scrutiny. 'The real' becomes merely a mirage of images and icons. Even human evolution has become 'merely' a narrative, a piece of fiction (Landau 1984). Real people become fictionalized people, frozen in the narrative of the particular fiction that produced them. The promised liberation, therefore, comes about through "the reified monuments one has to destroy to do anything new" (Jameson 1988:14). By extension, therefore, reification anywhere can potentially be robbed of its powers, made ineffectual by the simple recognition that it is a reification. One cannot entertain any Neanderthal notions about the actuality or the God-giveness of any construction. In short, that powerful evaluative measurement, reality, can no longer be appealed to in order to declare any analysis as proper or improper. The work of the anthropologist then is not as the guardian of accurate depictions of reality, but as the manager of fictions or narratives. This suggests that a powerful critique, gaining impetus from this postmodern epistemology, can be foisted on any discourse -- even those that seem to have 'brute reality' or 'brute fact' status like ethnic, age, or gender discourse. After all, they are now not only ideological, but mere conventions of rhetoric and, hence, the suggestion seems to be, not to be taken seriously as 'natural truths,' which, of course, have ceased to exist.

This leads, quite obviously, to a consideration of binary oppositions, previously unquestioned. Binary opposites are part of traditional realism, a discourse which, after all, has a lengthy and distinguished history. Much of the discourse of anthropology as we know it has relied on the absolute and unquestionable nature of 'reality'. Binarisms such as male and female, old and young, seemed beyond criticism. They now have a future as metaphors and icons. Consider the proposed absence of self/other, mind/body,

tribal/civilization, local/global, public/private, fictional/real, macro/micro from the anthropological discourse. Perhaps most relevantly for the critical theorist, the binarism suggested by gender, age or ethnicity provide material for the strongest critique.

At first glance such canonical concepts as gender, age and ethnicity seem better left untouched as solid biological facts. Yet, liberated by the suggestion that everything, including science, is essentially a discourse, these binary opposites so righteously produced as indisputable become a kind of folk structuralism. For example, consider the impersonalities of computer technology and the fact that the procreation of children, the most solid of biological facts after all, is challenged by the new practices of in-vitro fertilization. The 'natural' opposites of male/female become questionable.

It is now clear that children can be produced by anonymous sperm and anonymous eggs in the uterus of an equally anonymous woman. Very soon even the uterus could be technologically replaced and the degendered, fertilized egg could be further degendered in a genderless artificial womb. These are the possible ideological -- rather than the biological -- practices of the future.⁴ They make the binary oppositions of male and female rather empty ones, retained from the past to do ideological and often oppressive work. The nature of ethnicity, by comparison, is a much less difficult natural phenomenon to challenge (Whittaker 1986). The discourses that could be produced in the postmodern world where everything is a discourse, will undoubtedly be post-biology, post-gender, post-age and post-genetic.

Edward Said has already expended eloquent efforts in showing us that the Orient is a discourse (1978). Thereby he has fulfilled Foucault's prediction that: "True Discourses function as 'regimes' of truth" (1980:131; also Whittaker 1986). It is clear that all anthropological writing must come under this rubric. That can hardly be discounted. More importantly for the critical theorist, however, much of everyday 'reality' and the ideological preferences these realities suggest, must come under a similarly critical purview. Perhaps anthropologists may consider creating a discourse to initiate this, perhaps a discourse which proposes "difference without opposition" as Craig Owens suggests (1983; Kaplan 1988:43), or at the very least they could dismantle the oppositions now operative.

Of course, as James Clifford points out -- and what paper on postmodernism does not need to quote Clifford -- some binarisms like the we/they distinction can be as useful as they can be harmful (1988b:261). They do, after all, permit conflictive forces like anti-

imperialism and national liberation movements, which surely no critical theorist can fault. One can pursue one further direction apparent in postmodern epistemology, namely that of heterogeneity, heteroglossia, fragmentation and anti-totalization. This relief from the oppressions of enforced homogeneity and consistency suggests that discourses can be evoked, almost at will, to support appropriate empowerment. They are released from many of the demands of authenticating themselves by reference to past discourse and the demands of consistency. No doubt such freedom brings its own problems.

Postmodernism, in rejecting homogeneity, totalization and universalism, calls for many voices in anthropological productions. The notion of a dialogue, now coming into vogue in anthropology, is seemingly no longer enough. Instead, conversation is suggested. It no longer suffices to see discourse, or knowledge, as produced dialogically. There are other silent and hidden voices -- the discourses from which the protagonists come, the varied nature of the future and present audience, and so on. A dialogue simply conceived can certainly reveal, but it can also hide and distort. It is simply having "a utopia of plural authorship that accords collaborators, not merely the status of independent enunciations, but that of writers" (Clifford 1983:140). It suggests that not only anthropology, but all those attendant to, and involved in, the work of anthropology, their many audiences and instigators, are a kind of corporate body for dealing with 'the other'. Only by recognizing this, can the richness and complexity of the whole discourse be retained.

The voices of postmodernism thrust yet another consideration at anthropology and at critical theorists. Natural categories are stripped of their authority. Geographical or cultural areas, so inherently a part of all things anthropological, could be re-evaluated so that the discipline could relegate such divisions to the colonial past and instead turn to 'areas' like Christianity, capitalism, colonialism and feminism. Anthropologists will be forced to investigate such traditional certainties as well as many others.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the critical theorist has the possibility of a strong agenda to add to the Marxist one of a "collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity" (Sarup 1989:132). There is, perhaps, a critical utopia to write -- rethinking old

canons, introducing critical insights, being unabashedly and straightforwardly political. The writing of a new Reinventing Anthropology might well involve proposing that the main anthropological task is not only the creation of a viable discourse, but also the management of discourses and the equally important orchestration of credibility. As it has been for critical theorists in the past, the story will always be a moral one. The restless, and even the timorous, must surely give way to some of the underlying fascinations of postmodernism and become unselfconsciously epistemological, engaged in the ongoing work of epistemological construction. The critical theorist must distance the new discourse from one of the great myths of the West, and of anthropology, namely that there is a sacred reality to the world. Perhaps we can be seen as languishing in a mythic world, doing mythic narratives about as 'it once was' or 'really is' or 'in truth' exists. But with critical theory there are also narratives about 'as it ought to be'.

NOTES

1. This point has also been raised by Pat Caplan (1980 in her Audry Richard's Lecture at Oxford, by Roger Keesing (1987) and by the late Bob Scholte (1987) in a review of Writing Culture.
2. Jameson writes that with modernism there was the invention of a personal, private style as unmistakable as a fingerprint (1988:17).
3. This use of 'deconstructive' is controversial. Those committed to the work of Derrida find such use, now widespread in anthropology and criticism, offensive. They argue that Derrida had specific understandings for the concept which are ignored in its popular use. I am indebted here to Joanne Richardson for her defence of Derrida. On the other hand the word has been liberated now into popular usage. A sociology of knowledge notion like 'unpacking' would probably be congruent with my aims.
4. I am indebted here to the work of Patricia Lee on technology and biomedical ethics (1989).

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