The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge

Jean-François Lyotard

Translation from the French by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi Foreword by Fredric Jameson

Theory and History of Literature, Volume 10

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Foreword Fredric Jameson

This seemingly neutral review of a vast body of material on contemporary science and problems of knowledge or information proves on closer inspection to be a kind of crossroads in which a number of different themes-a number of different books-intersect and problematize each other. For Jean-François Lyotard's discussion of the consequences of the new views of scientific research and its paradigms, opened up by theorists like Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend, is also a thinly yeiled polemic against Jürgen Habermas's concept of a "legitimation crisis" and vision of a "noisefree," transparent, fully communicational society. Meanwhile the title of the book, with its fashionable theme of postmodernism provocatively in evidence, opens up this subject matter, at least by implication, in the directions of aesthetics and economics, since postmodernism as it is generally understood involves a radical break, both with a dominant culture and aesthetic, and with a rather different moment of socioeconomic organization against which its structural novelties and innovations are measured: a new social and economic moment (or even system), which has variously been called media society, the "society of the spectacle" (Guy Debord), consumer society (or the "société de consommation"), the "bureaucratic society of controlled consumption" (Henri Lefebvre), or "postindustrial society" (Daniel Bell). It may also be assumed that this ostensibly technical and

impersonal handbook is also a significant move in the development of Lyotard's own philosophical views, whose combative and prophetic voice, familiar to the readers of his other works, will surprise by its relative silence here. Finally, and closely related to this last, *The Postmodern Condition* presents us with significant methodological operations, which, although they draw on a whole very rich contemporary tradition of narrative analysis nonetheless strike a relatively isolated and unusual note in the whole range of contemporary philosophical research.

Lyotard's official subject matter—the status of science and technology, of technocracy and the control of knowledge and information today—is perhaps the most familiar material for the American reader, yet it opens immediately and instructively onto all the other themes I have just enumerated. "Doing science," for instance, involves its own kind of legitimation (why is it that our students do not do laboratory work in alchemy? why is Immanuel Velikovsky considered to be an eccentric?) and may therefore be investigated as a subset of the vaster political problem of the legitimation of a whole social order (a theme, which, formulated in that particular code or terminology, is associated with the work of Habermas). Doing "normal" science and participating in lawful and orderly social reproduction are then two phenomena—better still, two mysteries—that ought to be able to illuminate one another.

But as the term crisis in Habermas's title, as well as the prefix post in that of Lyotard, reminds us, legitimation becomes visible as a problem and an object of study only at the point in which it is called into question. As far as science is concerned, this crisis may be taken to be that of which the historical theories of Kuhn or Feyerabend stand as crucial symptoms: it would seem rather less important to decide whether those theories imply that we are now in a position to think or conceptualize scientific research in a very different way from the Newtonian period, or on the contrary that we now actually do science in a different way. At any rate, this "break" now links up with the other thematics of Lyotard's essay by way of an event generally taken primarily to be an aesthetic one, although it has relatively immediate philosophical and ideological analogues: I am referring to the so-called crisis of representation, in which an essentially realistic epistemology, which conceives of representation as the reproduction, for subjectivity, of an objectivity that lies outside itprojects a mirror theory of knowledge and art, whose fundamental evaluative categories are those of adequacy, accuracy, and Truth itself. It is in terms of this crisis that the transition, in the history of

form, from a novelistic "realism" of the Lukácsean variety to the various now classical "high" modernisms, has been described: the cognitive vocation of science would however seem even more disastrously impaired by the analogous shift from a representational to a nonrepresentational practice. Lyotard here ingeniously "saves" the coherence of scientific research and experiment by recasting its now seemingly non- or postreferential "epistemology" in terms of linguistics, and in particular of theories of the performative (J. L. Austin), for which the justification of scientific work is not to produce an adequate model or replication of some outside reality, but rather simply to produce more work, to generate new and fresh scientific honcés or statements, to make you have "new ideas" (P. B. Medawar), or, best of all (and returning to the more familiar aesthetics of high modernism), again and again to "make it new": "Au fond de l'Inconnu pour trouver du nouveau!"

However this novel way of relegitimizing contemporary science is understood or evaluated—and it has many family resemblances elsewhere in contemporary thought¹—it then retrospectively allows Lyotard to sketch a narrative analysis of the older forms of scientific legitimation, whose collapse in our own time imposes such desperate

solutions, such remarkable last-minute salvage operations.

The two great legitimizing "myths" or narrative archetypes (récits) are also something of a complication, in that they reproduce the denotative argument of the book in a connotative or autoreferent spiral. For the two great myths disengaged by Lyotard and identified as the alternate justifications for institutional scientific research up to our own period-that of the liberation of humanity and that of the speculative unity of all knowledge (qua philosophical system)are also national myths and reproduce the very polemic in which Lyotard's own book wishes to intervene. The first -political, militant, activist-is of course the tradition of the French eighteenth century and the French Revolution, a tradition for which philosophy is already politics and in which Lyotard must himself clearly be ranged. The second is of course the Germanic and Hegelian tradition -a contemplative one, organized around the value of totality rather than that of commitment, and a tradition to which Lyotard's philosophical adversary, Habermas, still-however distantly-remains affiliated. The conflict can be dramatized and magnified if for these names we substitute even more prestigious ones whose philosophical differences are even more sharply articulated: compare, for example, Gilles Deleuze's influential celebration of schizophrenia (in books like the Anti-Oedipus) with T. W. Adorno's no less influential and

characteristic denunciations of cultural reification and fetishization. The opposition can also be rotated in a psychoanalytical direction, in which case a characteristically French affirmation of the "decentered subject" or the illusion of the coherent self or ego is set off against more traditional Frankfurt School defenses of psychic "autonomy."

Still, these traditions are not altogether so continuous or symmetrical as I have just suggested. Lyotard is, after all, writing in the wake of a certain French "post-Marxism," that is, an enormous reaction on all levels against various Marxist and Communist traditions in France, whose prime target on the philosophical level is the Hegel/Lukács concept of "totality" (often overhastily assimilated to Stalinism or even to the Leninist party on the political level). Lyotard's own philosophical break with Marxism (he was a member of the important Socialisme ou barbarie group in the 1950s and early 1960s)2 largely antedates this more recent, rather McCarthyist moment in France (itself since overtaken by the unexpected Socialist landslide of 1981); but it clearly makes for a situation in which Habermas can still stand in for the totalizing and dialectical German tradition, while Lyotard's own philosophical relationship to the politicized French one has become far more problematic and complex. Indeed, I want to show a little later on that one significant "libidinal" subtext of the present volume consists of a symbolic effort to clarify this tangled plot as well. At any rate, Habermas's vision of an evolutionary social leap into a new type of rational society, defined in communicational terms as "the communication community of those affected, who as participants in a practical discourse test the validity claims of norms and, to the extent that they accept them with reasons, arrive at the conviction that in the given circumstances the proposed norms are 'right,' "3 is here explicitly rejected by Lyotard as the unacceptable remnant of a "totalizing" philosophical tradition and as the valorization of conformist, when not "terrorist," ideals of consensus. (Indeed, insofar as Habermas will invoke a liberatory rhetoric as well, there is a sense in which, for Lyotard, this philosophical position unites everything that is unacceptable about both traditions and myths of legitimation.)

Before examining the position in terms of which such critiques are made, however, we must turn at least parenthetically to the methodological perspective developed here, in which legitimation is secured in terms of master-narratives of the two types already described. The admission to France of such Anglo-American linguistic notions as that of Austin's "performative" is now largely an accomplished fact (although a rather unexpected development). In a more general way, the linguistic dimensions of what used to be called French structuralism and the seemingly more static possibilities of a dominant semiotics

have in recent years been corrected and augmented by a return to pragmatics, to the analysis of language situations and games, and of language itself as an unstable exchange between its speakers, whose utterances are now seen less as a process of the transmission of information or messages, or in terms of some network of signs or even signifying systems, than as (to use one of Lyotard's favorite figures) the "taking of tricks," the trumping of a communicational adversary, an essentially conflictual relationship between trickstersand not as a well-regulated and noisefree "passing of tokens from hand to hand" (Mallarmé on denotative speech). We have already observed Lyotard's promotion of the "performative" to the very fundamental principle of contemporary science itself; what is even more striking in his methodological perspective, however-indeed, to my knowledge he is one of the few professional philosophers of stature anywhere formally to have (although Paul Ricoeur and Alistair McIntyre also come to mind) drawn this momentous consequence-is the way in which narrative is affirmed, not merely as a significant new field of research, but well beyond that as a central instance of the human mind and a mode of thinking fully as legitimate as that of abstract logic.

A lengthy methodological parenthesis defends this proposition, which at once itself becomes a kind of historical narrative in its own right, since-particularly in the context of a discussion of scienceit is obvious that one of the features that characterizes more "scientific" periods of history, and most notably capitalism itself, is the relative retreat of the claims of narrative or storytelling knowledge in the face of those of the abstract, denotative, or logical and cognitive procedures generally associated with science or positivism. This parenthesis once again complicates the arguments of The Postmodern Condition insofar as it becomes itself a symptom of the state it seeks to diagnose-its own return to narrative arguments being fully as revealing an example of the legitimation crisis of the older cognitive and epistemological scientific world-view as any of the other developments enumerated in the text. Lyotard does indeed characterize one recent innovation in the analysis of science as a view of scientific experiments as so many smaller narratives or stories to be worked out. On the other hand, paradoxically, this revival of an essentially narrative view of "truth," and the vitality of small narrative units at work everywhere locally in the present social system, are accompanied by something like a more global or totalizing "crisis" in the narrative function in general, since, as we have seen, the older masternarratives of legitimation no longer function in the service of scientific

research-nor, by implication, anywhere else (e.g., we no longer believe in political or historical teleologies, or in the great "actors" and "subjects" of history - the nation-state, the proletariat, the party, the West, etc.). This seeming contradiction can be resolved, I believe, by taking a further step that Lyotard seems unwilling to do in the present text, namely to posit, not the disappearance of the great master-narratives, but their passage underground as it were, their continuing but now unconscious effectivity as a way of "thinking about" and acting in our current situation. This persistence of buried master-narratives in what I have elsewhere called our "political unconscious," I will try shortly to demonstrate on the occasion of

the present text as well.

What is most striking in Lyotard's differentiation between storytelling and "scientific" abstraction is its unexpected modulation towards a Nietzschean thematics of history. In effect, indeed, for Lyotard the fundamental distinction between these two forms of knowledge lies in their relationship to temporality, and in particular in their relationship to the retention of the past. Narrative, whose formal properties become magnified in prosody and in the rhythmic features of traditional tales, proverbs, and the like, is here characterized as a way of consuming the past, a way of forgetting: "as meter takes precedence over accent in the production of sound (spoken or not), time ceases to be a support for memory to become an immemorial beating that, in the absence of a noticeable separation between periods, prevents their being numbered and consigns them to oblivion" (section 6). One recalls the great and still influential essay of Nietzsche on the debilitating influence of historiography and of the fidelity to the past and the dead that an obsession with history seems to encourage. The Nietzschean "strength to forget the past" in preparation for the mutation of the superman to come-is here paradoxically redeployed as a property of storytelling itself, of precisely those narratives, heroic or other, in which we have been taught to see a form of primitive data storage or of social reproduction. What this formulation does very sharply achieve, at any rate, is the radical differentiation between the consumption of the past in narrative and its storage, hoarding, and capitalization in "science" and scientific thought: a mode of understanding that, like the first surplus on the economic level, will little by little determine a whole range of ever more complex and extensive institutional objectifications-first in writing; then in libraries, universities, museums; with the breakthrough in our own period to microstorage, computerized data, and data banks of hitherto unimaginable proportions, whose

control or even ownership is, as Herbert Schiller and others have warned us (and as Lyotard is very well aware), one of the crucial political issues of our own time.

We thus return to the thematics of science and knowledge in its social form: one that raises issues of social class-is the technocracy produced by such a primacy of knowledge a bureaucracy or a whole new class? - and of socioeconomic analysis - is this moment of advanced industrial society a structural variant of classical capitalism or a mutation and the dawning of a wholly new social structure in which, as Daniel Bell and other theoreticians of the concept of a properly "postindustrial society" have argued, it is now science, knowledge, technological research, rather than industrial production and the extraction of surplus value, that is the "ultimately determining instance"?

In reality, two distinct and overlapping questions are raised simultaneously by these two interrelated theoretical problems, which to his credit Lyotard does not seek here in peremptory fashion to resolve. The problem is finally that of the nature of a mode of production, and in particular the nature of the capitalist mode of production and the structural variations of which it is capable. The question may therefore be rephrased as a question about Marxism: do the categories developed there for the analysis of classical capitalism still retain their validity and their explanatory power when we turn to the multinational and media societies of today with their "third-stage" technologies? The persistence of issues of power and control, particularly in the increasing monopolization of information by private business, would seem to make an affirmative answer unavoidable, and to reconfirm the privileged status of Marxism as

a mode of analysis of capitalism proper.

But the question has often been taken to involve a second set of answers or consequences as well, having to do with the end of capitalism, the possibility of revolution, and, first and foremost, the continuing function of the industrial working class as the fundamental revolutionary "subject of history." It has at least historically been possible for intellectuals and militants to recognize the explanatory power of Marxism as the privileged mode of analysis of capitalism (including the particular social moment that is our own society) and, at one and the same time, to abandon the traditional Marxian vision of revolution and socialism, mainly out of a conviction that the industrial working class (in any case defined by its relationship to productive technologies of the first and second type, rather than the third, cybernetic or nuclear variety) no longer occupies the strategic

position of power in this social formation. A stronger theoretical form of this proposition would then be derivable in the notion that social classes—of the classical type defined by Marxism—no longer function as such today, but are rather displaced by different, nonclass formations such as bureaucracy and technocracy (and this would seem to be the position of Lyotard, whose formative political work in the Socialisme ou barbarie group turned precisely around the analysis of bureaucracy in the Eastern countries).

The question of social class, and in particular of the "proletariat" and its existence, is hopelessly confused when such arguments conflate the problem of a theoretical category of analysis (social class) with the empirical question about the mood or influence of workers in this or that society today (they are no longer revolutionary, bourgeoisified, etc.). More orthodox Marxists will agree with the most radical post- or anti-Marxist positions in at least this, that Marxism as a coherent philosophy (or better still, a "unity of theory and

praxis") stands or falls with the matter of social class.

What one can at least suggest here is that with Ernest Mandel's theorization of a third stage of capitalism beyond that of the classical or market capitalism analyzed in Capital itself, and that of the monopoly stage or stage of "imperialism" proposed by Lenin, there exists a properly Marxian alternative to non- or anti-Marxist theories of "consumer" or "postindustrial" society today, theories of which Daniel Bell's is no doubt the most influential. Mandel indeed undertakes to show that all of the features mobilized by Bell to document the end of capitalism as such-in particular the new primacy of science and technological invention, and of the technocracy generated by that privileged position, as well as the shift from the older industrial technologies to the newer informational ones-can be accounted for in classical Marxist terms, as indices of a new and powerful, original, global expansion of capitalism, which now specifically penetrates the hitherto precapitalist enclaves of Third World agriculture and of First World culture, in which, in other words, capital more definitively secures the colonization of Nature and the Unconscious: "This new period [1940 to 1965] was characterized, among other things, by the fact that alongside machine-made industrial consumer goods (as from the early 19th century) and machinemade machines (as from the mid-19th century), we now find machine-produced raw materials and foodstuffs. Late capitalism, far from representing a 'post-industrial society,' thus appears as the period in which all branches of the economy are fully industrialized for the first time; to which one could further add the increasing

mechanization of the sphere of circulation (with the exception of pure repair services) and the increasing mechanization of the super-structure."

This description is also quite consistent with the Frankfurt School's conception of the "culture industry" and the penetration of commodity fetishism into those realms of the imagination and the psyche which had, since classical German philosophy, always been taken as some last impregnable stronghold against the instrumental logic of capital. What remains problematical about such conceptions-and about mediatory formulations such as that of Guy Debord, for whom "the image is the last stage of commodity reification"-is of course the difficulty of articulating cultural and informational commodities with the labor theory of value, the methodological problem of reconciling an analysis in terms of quantity and in particular of labor time (or of the sale of labor power in so many units) with the nature of "mental" work and of nonphysical and nonmeasurable "commodities" of the type of informational bits or indeed of media or entertainment "products." On the other hand, the posing of the category of "mode of production" as the fundamental one of Marxian social analysis and the endorsement of a "problematic" that asks such systemic questions about contemporary society would seem to remain essential for political people who are still committed to radical social change and transformation. Indeed, it is precisely as a contribution to this general problematic that Lyotard's little book is valuable, even though, as we shall see shortly, its author by no means counts himself among revolutionaries of the traditional kind

If the changing status of science and knowledge (and of its experts) leads us to the question about the nature of this mode of production as a system and a functional whole, this second, larger issue returns us, after a considerable detour, to the problem of culture, and in particular of the existence or not of some properly "postmodernist" culture. For although the category of the mode of production has sometimes been misunderstood as a narrowly economic or "productionist" one, its adequate solution clearly demands a structural examination and positioning of the superstructural levels of a given social formation and, most urgently, the function and space to be assigned to culture itself: no satisfactory model of a given mode of production can exist without a theory of the historically and dialectically specific and unique role of "culture" within it.

Here Lyotard's sketch is tantalizing and finally frustrating; for the formal limitation of his essay to the problem of "knowledge" has

tended to exclude an area—culture—that has been of the greatest importance to him in his other writings, as he has been one of the most keenly committed of contemporary thinkers anywhere to the whole range and variety of avant-garde and experimental art today. This very commitment to the experimental and the new, however, determine an aesthetic that is far more closely related to the traditional ideologies of high modernism proper than to current postmodernisms, and is indeed—paradoxically enough—very closely related to the conception of the revolutionary nature of high modernism that Habermas faithfully inherited from the Frankfurt School.

Thus, although he has polemically endorsed the slogan of a "post-modernism" and has been involved in the defense of some of its more controversial productions, Lyotard is in reality quite unwilling to posit a postmodernist stage radically different from the period of high modernism and involving a fundamental historical and cultural break with this last. Rather, seeing postmodernism as a discontent with an disintegration of this or that high modernist style—a moment in the perpetual "revolution" and innovation of high modernism, to be succeeded by a fresh burst of formal invention—in a striking formula he has characterized postmodernism, not as that which follows modernism and its particular legitimation crisis, but rather as a cyclical moment that returns before the emergence of ever new modernisms in the stricter sense.

There is then here reproduced something of the celebration of modernism as its first ideologues projected it—a constant and ever more dynamic revolution in the languages, forms, and tastes of art (not yet assimilated to the commercial revolutions in fashion and commodity styling we have since come to grasp as an immanent rhythm of capitalism itself); to which a later wave of more explicitly left-wing and often Marxist ideologues and aesthetes after World War II will add an explicit political dimension—so that the revolutionary aesthetic of the modern will sometimes be grasped by the Frankfurt School, but also by the Tel Quel and Screen groups, in the more literal sense of critical negation when not of outright social and psychological transformation. Lyotard's own aesthetic retains much of this protopolitical thrust; his commitment to cultural and formal innovation still valorizes culture and its powers in much the same spirit in which the Western avant-garde has done so since the fin de siècle.

On the other hand, it would seem that the assimilation of postmodernism to this older conception of high modernism and its negative, critical, or revolutionary vocation deproblematizes a far more interesting and complex situation, which is part of the dilemma posed by "late capitalism" (or consumer or postindustrial society, etc.) in those other areas of science and technology, production, social change, and the like. Here it seems to me that Habermas—working to be sure within the far more suffocating and McCarthyist atmosphere of the Federal Republic—has a much keener sense of the political stakes involved in this seemingly theoretical matter than Lyotard has been willing to allow for. For Habermas, indeed, postmodernism involves the explicit repudiation of the modernist tradition—the return of the middle-class philistine or Spiessbuerger rejection of modernist forms and values—and as such the expression of a new social conservatism.⁶

His diagnosis is confirmed by that area in which the question of postmodernism has been mostly acutely posed, namely in architecture,7 whose great high modernists, the architects of the International Style-Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright-were very precisely revolutionaries in the senses enumerated above: proponents of innovations in form and transformations in architectural space that could be expected in and of themselves to transform social life as a whole and, by replacing political revolution (as Le Corbusier put it), to serve as the latter's substitute (but in that form, the idea is as old as Schiller's Aesthetic Education of Humankind). Postmodernism certainly means a return of all the old antimodernist prejudices (as in Tom Wolfe's recent From the Bauhaus to Our House), but it was also, objectively, the recognition of a basic failure on the architects' own terms: the new buildings of Le Corbusier and Wright did not finally change the world, nor even modify the junk space of late capitalism, while the Mallarmean "zero degree" of Mies's towers quite unexpectedly began to generate a whole overpopulation of the shoddiest glass boxes in all the major urban centers in the world. This is the sense in which high modernism can be definitively certified as dead and as a thing of the past: its Utopian ambitions were unrealizable and its formal innovations exhausted.

This is however not at all the conclusion that Habermas and Lyotard draw from what they think of in their different ways as the postmodernist movement: for both of them a return to the older critical high modernism is still possible, just as (equally anachronistically) for Lukács, writing in the thick of the high modernist period, a return to some older premodernist realism was still possible. Yet if one is willing—as both Habermas and Lyotard are—to posit the emergence of some new state of social relations (even leaving aside

the question of whether this is to be considered a whole new mode of production in its own right or not), then it does not seem particularly daring to posit some equivalent modification in the very role and dynamic of cultural production itself, something indeed one ought to be able to entertain dialectically, without any needless moralizing. Postmodernist architecture, for example, comes before us as a peculiar analogue to neoclassicism, a play of ("historicist") allusion and quotation that has renounced the older high modernist rigor and that itself seems to recapitulate a whole range of traditional Western aesthetic strategies: we therefore have a mannerist postmodernism (Michael Graves), a baroque postmodernism (the Japanese), a rococo postmodernism (Charles Moore), a neoclassicist postmodernism (the French, particularly Christian de Portzamparc), and probably even a "high modernist" postmodernism in which modernism is itself the object of the postmodernist pastiche. This is a rich and creative movement, of the greatest aesthetic play and delight. that can perhaps be most rapidly characterized as a whole by two important features: first, the falling away of the protopolitical vocation and the terrorist stance of the older modernism and, second, the eclipse of all of the affect (depth, anxiety, terror, the emotions of the monumental) that marked high modernism and its replacement by what Coleridge would have called fancy or Schiller aesthetic play, a commitment to surface and to the superficial in all the senses of the word.

It was, however, precisely to the superficial (in all those senses) that a certain French poststructuralism invited us, not excluding the earlier works of Lyotard himself: this is, however, the moment in which aesthetics gives way to ethics, in which the problem of the postmodern (even in its relationship to new forms of science and knowledge) becomes that of one's more fundamental attitude toward the new social formation—the moment, finally, in which what I have called the deeper repressed or buried symbolic narrative of *The Postmodern Condition* comes at length into view.

Lyotard's affiliations here would seem to be with the Anti-Oedipus of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who also warned us, at the end of that work, that the schizophrenic ethic they proposed was not at all a revolutionary one, but a way of surviving under capitalism, producing fresh desires within the structural limits of the capitalist mode of production as such.⁸ Lyotard's celebration of a related ethic emerges most dramatically in the context of that repudiation of Habermas's consensus community already mentioned, in which the dissolution of the self into a host of networks and relations, of

contradictory codes and interfering messages, is prophetically valorized (section 4). This view not surprisingly will then determine Lyotard's ultimate vision of science and knowledge today as a search, not for consensus, but very precisely for "instabilities," as a practice of paralogism, in which the point is not to reach agreement but to undermine from within the very framework in which the previous "normal science" had been conducted. The rhetoric in which all this is conveyed is to be sure one of struggle, conflict, the agonic in a quasi-heroic sense; nor must we forget Lyotard's related vision of nonhegemonic Greek philosophy (the Stoics, the Cynics, the Sophists), as the guerrilla war of the marginals, the foreigners, the non-Greeks, against the massive and repressive Order of Aristotle and his successors.9 On the other hand, aesthetics sometimes functions as an unpleasant mirror; and we need perhaps at least momentarily to reflect on the peculiar consonance between Lyotard's scientific "free play" and the way in which postmodernist architecture has taught us to "learn from Las Vegas" (Robert Venturi) and "to make ourselves at home in our alienated being" (Marx on Hegel's conception of Absolute Spirit). This is, at any rate, the deepest, most contradictory, but also the most urgent level of Lyotard's book: that of a narrative which-like all narrative-must generate the illusion of "an imaginary resolution of real contradictions" (Lévi-Strauss).

The formal problem involved might be expressed this way: how to do without narrative by means of narrative itself? On the political and social level, indeed, narrative in some sense always meant the negation of capitalism: on the one hand, for instance, narrative knowledge is here opposed to "scientific" or abstract knowledge as precapitalism to capitalism proper. Yet-as became clear when the narrative legitimations of science itself were evoked at their moment of crisis and dissolution-narrative also means something like teleology. The great master-narratives here are those that suggest that something beyond capitalism is possible, something radically different; and they also "legitimate" the praxis whereby political militants seek to bring that radically different future social order into being. Yet both master-narratives of science have become peculiarly repugnant or embarrassing to First World intellectuals today: the rhetoric of liberation has for example been denounced with passionate ambivalence by Michel Foucault in the first volume of his History of Sexuality; while the rhetoric of totality and totalization that derived from what I have called the Germanic or Hegelian tradition is the object of a kind of instinctive or automatic denunciation by just about everybody.

formity, and the heterogeneities of desire.

Unfortunately, the other conjoined value of the book's conclusion -that of justice-tends, as in all interesting narratives, to return on this one and undermine its seeming certainties. The dynamic of perpetual change is, as Marx showed in the Manifesto, not some alien rhythm within capital-a rhythm specific to those noninstrumental activities that are art and science-but rather is the very "permanent revolution" of capitalist production itself: at which point the exhilaration with such revolutionary dynamism is a feature of the bonus of pleasure and the reward of the social reproduction of the system itself. The moment of truth, in this respect, comes when the matter of the ownership and control of the new information banks—the profitability of the new technological and information revolution-returns in these last pages with a vengeance: the dystopian prospect of a global private monopoly of information weighs heavily in the balance against the pleasures of paralogisms and of "anarchist science" (Feyerabend). Yet that monopoly, like the rest of the private property system, cannot be expected to be reformed by however benign a technocratic elite, but can be challenged only by genuinely political (and not symbolic or protopolitical) action.

Notes

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Materialismus (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1981), in which the transformation of society is viewed in terms of Piagetian evolutionary stages: paradoxically the problem here is also that of Lyotard when he confronts the monopolization of information by multinational corporations today—namely that there is no reason to believe such a situation can be solved by peaceful evolution or by rational persuasion.

4. Ernest Mandel, Late Capitalism (London: New Left Books, 1975), pp. 190-91.

5. See his "Response à la question: qu'est-ce que le postmoderne?" in *Critique*, April 1982, pp. 357-67, which is included in this book as an appendix; as well as his interesting book on Marcel Duchamp, Les Transformateurs Duchamp (Paris: Galilee, 1977).

6. See his "Modernity versus Postmodernity," in New German Critique 22 (Winter 1981):

7. See for a useful discussion of current postmodernist theories of architecture, Paolo Portoghesi, After Modern Architecture (New York: Rizzoli, 1982).

8. Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane, with preface by Michel Foucault (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983; reprint of 1977 Viking edition), pp. 456-57.

9. See "De la force des faibles," in special Lyotard issue of L'Arc 64 (1976): 4-12.

^{1.} See for example Lovis Althusser's essays in epistemology or, in another national tradition, Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979) and his *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

^{2.} See his interesting memoir, "Pierre Souyri, Le Marxisme qui n'a pas fini," in Esprit 61 (January 1982): 11-31.

^{3.} Jürgen Habermas, Legitimation Crisis, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), p. 105. And see also his more recent Zur Rekonstruktion des Historischen

Introduction

The object of this study is the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies. I have decided to use the word post-modern to describe that condition. The word is in current use on the American continent among sociologists and critics; it designates the state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature, and the arts. The present study will place these transformations in the context of the crisis of narratives.

Science has always been in conflict with narratives. Judged by the yardstick of science, the majority of them prove to be fables. But to the extent that science does not restrict itself to stating useful regularities and seeks the truth, it is obliged to legitimate the reles of its own game. It then produces a discourse of legitimate with respect to its own status, a discourse called philosophy al will use the term modern to designate any science that leg timates incelf with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making arraxilizit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth. For example, the rule of consensus between the sender and addressee of a statement with truth-value is deemed acceptable if it is cast in terms of a possible unanimity between rational minds: this is the Enlightenment narrative, in which

the hero of knowledge works toward a good ethico-political end—universal peace. As can be seen from this example, if a metanarrative implying a philosophy of history is used to legitimate knowledge, questions are raised concerning the validity of the institutions governing the social bond: these must be legitimated as well. Thus justice is consigned to the grand narrative in the same way as truth.

Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it. To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied on it. The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements—narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive, and so on. Conveyed within each cloud are pragmatic valencies specific to its kind. Each of us lives at the intersection of many of these. However, we do not necessarily establish stable language combinations, and the properties of the ones we do establish are not necessarily communicable.

Thus the society of the future falls less within the province of a Newtonian anthropology (such as stucturalism or systems theory) than a pragmatics of language particles. There are many different language games—a heterogeneity of elements. They only give rise to institutions in patches—local determinism.

The decision makers, however, attempt to manage these clouds of sociality according to input/output matrices, following a logic which implies that their elements are commensurable and that the whole is determinable. They allocate our lives for the growth of power. In matters of social justice and of scientific truth alike, the legitimation of that power is based on its optimizing the system's performance—efficiency. The application of this criterion to all of our games necessarily entails a certain level of terror, whether soft or hard: be operational (that is, commensurable) or disappear.

The logic of maximum performance is no doubt inconsistent in many ways, particularly with respect to contradiction in the socio-economic field: it demands both less work (to lower production costs) and more (to lessen the social burden of the idle population). But our incredulity is now such that we no longer expect salvation to rise from these inconsistencies, as did Marx.

Still, the postmodern condition is as much a stranger to disenchantment as it is to the blind positivity of delegitimation. Where, after

the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside? The operativity criterion is technological; it has no relevance for judging what is true or just. Is legitimacy to be found in consensus obtained through discussion, as Jürgen Habermas thinks? Such consensus does violence to the heterogeneity of language games. And invention is always born of dissension. Postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable. Its principle is not the expert's homology, but the inventor's paralogy.

Here is the question: is a legitimation of the social bond, a just society, feasible in terms of a paradox analogous to that of scientific activity? What would such a paradox be?

The text that follows is an occasional one. It is a report on knowledge in the most highly developed societies and was presented to the Conseil des Universitiés of the government of Quebec at the request of its president. I would like to thank him for his kindness in allowing its publication.

It remains to be said that the author of the report is a philosopher, not an expert. The latter knows what he knows and what he does not know: the former does not. One concludes, the other questions—two very different language games. I combine them here with the result that neither quite succeeds.

The philosopher at least can console himself with the thought that the formal and pragmatic analysis of certain philosophical and ethico-political discourses of legitimation, which underlies the report, will subsequently see the light of day. The report will have served to introduce that analysis from a somewhat sociologizing slant, one that truncates but at the same time situates it.

Such as it is, I dedicate this report to the Institut Polytechnique de Philosophie of the Université de Paris VIII (Vincennes)—at this very postmodern moment that finds the University nearing what may be its end, while the Institute may just be beginning.

原书缺页

The Postmodern Condition

1. The Field: Knowledge in Computerized Societies

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Our working hypothesis is that the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age. This transition has been under way since at least the end of the 1950s, which for Europe marks the completion of reconstruction. The pace is faster or slower depending on the country, and within countries it varies according to the sector of activity: the general situation is one of temporal disjunction which makes sketching an overview difficult. A portion of the description would necessarily be conjectural. At any rate, we know that it is unwise to put too much faith in futurology.

Rather than painting a picture that would inevitably remain incomplete, I will take as my point of departure a single feature, one that immediately defines our object of study. Scientific knowledge is a kind of discourse. And it is fair to say that for the last forty years the "leading" sciences and technologies have had to do with language: phonology and theories of linguistics, problems of communication and cybernetics, modern theories of algebra and informatics, computers and their languages, problems of translation and the search for areas of compatibility among computer languages, problems of information storage and data banks, telematics and the

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perfection of intelligent terminals, 10 paradoxology. 11 The facts speak for themselves (and this list is not exhaustive).

These technological transformations can be expected to have a considerable impact on knowledge. Its two principal functions—research and the transmission of acquired learning—are already feeling the effect, or will in the future. With respect to the first function, genetics provides an example that is accessible to the layman: it owes its theoretical paradigm to cybernetics. Many other examples could be cited. As for the second function, it is common knowledge that the miniaturization and commercialization of machines is already changing the way in which learning is acquired, classified, made available, and exploited. It is reasonable to suppose that the proliferation of information-processing machines is having, and will continue to have, as much of an effect on the circulation of learning as did advancements in human circulation (transportation systems) and later, in the circulation of sounds and visual images (the media). ¹³1

The nature of knowledge cannot survive unchanged within this context of general transformation. It can fit into the new channels, and become operational, only if learning is translated into quantities of information.¹⁴ We can predict that anything in the constituted body of knowledge that is not translatable in this way will be abandoned and that the direction of new research will be dictated by the possibility of its eventual results being translatable into computer language. The "producers" and users of knowledge must now, and will have to, possess the means of translating into these languages whatever they want to invent or learn. Research on translating machines is already well advanced.¹⁵ Along with the hegemony of computers comes a certain logic, and therefore a certain set of prescriptions determining which statements are accepted as "knowledge" statements.

We may thus expect a thorough exteriorization of knowledge with respect to the "knower," at whatever point he or she may occupy in the knowledge process. The old principle that the acquisition of knowledge is indissociable from the training (Bildung) of minds, or even of individuals, is becoming obsolete and will become ever more so. The relationship of the suppliers and users of knowledge to the knowledge they supply and use is now tending, and will increasingly tend, to assume the form already taken by the relationship of commodity producers and consumers to the commodities they produce and consume—that is, the form of value. Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange.

Knowledge ceases to be an end in itself, it loses its "use-value." It is widely accepted that knowledge has become the principle force of production over the last few decades; this has already had a noticeable effect on the composition of the work force of the most highly developed countries and constitutes the major bottleneck for the developing countries. In the postindustrial and postmodern age, science will maintain and no doubt strengthen its preeminence in the arsenal of productive capacities of the nation-states. Indeed, this situation is one of the reasons leading to the conclusion that the gap between developed and developing countries will grow ever wider in the future. 19

But this aspect of the problem should not be allowed to overshadow the other, which is complementary to it. Knowledge in the form of an informational commodity indispensable to productive power is already, and will continue to be, a major—perhaps the major—stake in the worldwide competition for power. It is conceivable that the nation-states will one day fight for control of information, just as they battled in the past for control over territory, and afterwards for control of access to and exploitation of raw materials and cheap labor. A new field is opened for industrial and commercial strategies on the one hand, and political and military strategies on the other.²⁰

However, the perspective I have outlined above is not as simple as I have made it appear. For the mercantilization of knowledge is bound to affect the privilege the nation-states have enjoyed, and still enjoy, with respect to the production and distribution of learning. The notion that learning falls within the purview of the State, as the brain or mind of society, will become more and more outdated with the increasing strength of the opposing principle, according to which society exists and progresses only if the messages circulating within it are rich in information and easy to decode. The ideology of communicational "transparency," which goes hand in hand with the commercialization of knowledge, will begin to perceive the State as a factor of opacity and "noise." It is from this point of view that the problem of the relationship between economic and State powers threatens to arise with a new urgency.

Already in the last few decades, economic powers have reached the point of imperiling the stability of the State through new forms of the circulation of capital that go by the generic name of multinational corporations. These new forms of circulation imply that investment decisions have, at least in part, passed beyond the control of the nation-states.²¹ The question threatens to become even more

thorny with the development of computer technology and telematics. Suppose, for example, that a firm such as IBM is authorized to occupy a belt in the earth's orbital field and launch communications satellites or satellites housing data banks. Who will have access to them? Who will determine which channels or data are forbidden? The State? Or will the State simply be one user among others? New legal issues wal be raised, and with them the question: "who will know as

repercussions on the existing public powers, forcing them to reconsider their relations (both de jure and de facto) with the large corporations and, more generally, with civil society. The reopening of the world market, a return to vigorous economic competition, the breakdown of the hegemony of American capitalism, the decline of the fof this hypothesis is not arbitrary. It has been described extensively socialist alternative, a probable opening of the Chinese marketthese and many other factors are already, at the end of the 1970s, preparing States for a serious reappraisal of the role they have been accustomed to playing since the 1930s: that of guiding, or even directing investments.²² In this light, the new technologies can only increase the urgency of such a reexamination, since they make the information used in decision making (and therefore the means of control) even more mobile and subject to piracy.

It is not hard to visualize learning circulating along the same lines an alternative to the computerization of society. as money, instead of for its "educational" value or political (administrative, diplomatic, military) importance; the pertinent distinction would no longer be between knowledge and ignorance, but rather, as is the case with money, between "payment knowledge" and "investment knowledge"-in other words, between units of knowledge exchanged in a daily maintenance framework (the reconstitution of the At most, what is debated is the form that accumulation takes-some work force, "survival") versus funds of knowledge dedicated to

optimizing the performance of a project.

If this were the case, communicational transparency would be similar to liberalism. Liberalism does not preclude an organization of the flow of money in which some channels are used in decision making while others are only good for the payment of debts. One could similarly imagine flows of knowledge traveling along identical channels of identical nature, some of which would be reserved for the "decision makers," while the others would be used to repay each person's perpetual debt with respect to the social bond.

2. The Problem: Legitimation

That is the working hypothesis defining the field within which I intend to consider the question of the status of knowledge. This 1960s, in all of the most highly developed societies, it reached such

scenario, akin to the one that goes by the name "the computerization of society" (although ours is advanced in an entirely different spirit), makes no claims of being original, or even true. What is required of a working hypothesis is a fine capacity for discriminatior. The scenario of the computerization of the most highly develoned societies allows us to spotlight (though with the risk of excessive nification) certain aspects of the transformation of knowledge Transformation in the sture of knowledge, then, could welling to effects on public power and civil institutions -effects it wou I be difficult to perceive from other points of view. Our hypothesis, therefore, should not be accorded predictive value in relation to reality, but strategic value in relation to the question raised.

Nevertheless, it has strong credibility, and in that sense our choice by the experts²³ and is already guiding certain decisions by the governmental agencies and private firms most directly concerned, such as those managing the telecommunications industry. To some extent, then, it is already a part of observable reality. Finally, barring economic stagnation or a general recession (resulting, for example, from a continued failure to solve the world's energy problems), there is a good chance that this scenario will come to pass: it is hard to see what other direction contemporary technology could take as

This is as much as to say that the hypothesis is banal. But only to the extent that it fails to challenge the general paradigm of progress in science and technology, to which economic growth and the expansion of sociopolitical power seem to be natural complements. That scientific and technical knowledge is cumulative is never questioned. picture it as regular, continuous, and unanimous, others as periodic,

discontinuous, and conflictual.²⁴

But these truisms are fallacious. In the first place, scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of knowledge; it has always existed in addition to, and in competition and conflict with, another kind of knowledge, which I will call narrative in the interests of simplicity (its characteristics will be described later). I do not mean to say that narrative knowledge can prevail over science, but its model is related to ideas of internal equilibrium and conviviality25 next to which contemporary scientific knowledge cuts a poor figure, especially if it is to undergo an exteriorization with respect to the "knower" and an alienation from its user even greater than has previously been the case. The resulting demoralization of researchers and teachers is far from negligible; it is well known that during the