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## An Answer to the Question: "What is Poststructuralism?"

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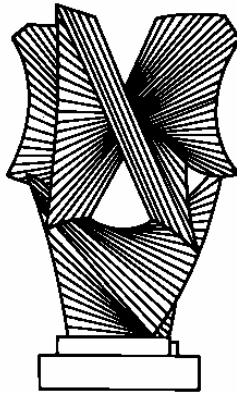
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**AN ANSWER TO THE QUESTION:  
“WHAT IS POSTSTRUCTURALISM”**

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“What Is Poststructuralism?”

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## An Answer to the Question: “What Is Poststructuralism?”

Bernard E. Harcourt<sup>1</sup>

Poststructuralism is a style of critical reasoning that focuses on the moment of slippage in our systems of meaning as a way to identify—right there, in that ambiguous space—the ethical choices that we make, whether in our writings or in everyday life, when we overcome the ambiguity and move from indeterminacy to certainty of belief in an effort to understand, interpret, or shape our social environment. Poststructuralism concentrates on the moment when we impose meaning in a space that is no longer characterized by shared social agreement over the structure of meaning. It attempts to explain how it comes about that we fill those gaps in our knowledge and come to hold as true what we do believe—and at what distributive cost to society and the contemporary subject. By so clearly identifying points of slippage, poststructuralism clears the table and makes plain the significant role of ethical choice—by which I mean decision making that is guided by beliefs about virtue and the self, not by moral or political principle.

Poststructuralism is, in this sense, a penultimate stage in the emancipation from that “self-incurred immaturity” that Kant famously identified—in his essay “What is Enlightenment?”—as “the inability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another” (Kant 1970:54). In that essay, Kant elaborated the central features of the Enlightenment, and his essay played a key role in the philosophical discourse of

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<sup>1</sup> This essay was delivered in the Seminar on Law and Political Theory held by Professors Yishai Blank, Shai Lavi, and Roy Kreitner at Tel Aviv University on December 13, 2006. The seminar participants had been asked to read excerpts from the book, *Language of the Gun* (University of Chicago Press 2006); however, it became clear that the focus of interest was on poststructuralism and its relationship to modernity, which is what gave birth to this essay. The essay draws heavily on the social theory discussion in Part II of *Language of the Gun*. Special thanks to Professors Blank, Lavi, and Kreitner for comments, discussion, disagreement, and a spectacular seminar.

modernity.<sup>2</sup> I use the term “penultimate” carefully, though, because, I would argue, in contrast to Judith Butler, who locates poststructuralism in the work of Jacques Derrida principally (*see* Butler 1990:158 n.6), that poststructuralism traces to the work of Michel Foucault and precedes deconstruction—which should more accurately be viewed as the final stage of modernity.

In her book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler defines poststructuralism in a similar fashion, despite locating it in Derrida’s writings. Butler identifies poststructuralism as the rejection of “the claims of totality and universality and the presumption of binary structural oppositions that implicitly operate to quell the insistent ambiguity and openness of linguistic and cultural signification” (Butler 1990:40). For Butler, structuralist theory recognizes the arbitrariness of the sign, but it nevertheless focuses more on the completeness of the linguistic system at the expense of the moment of difference between the signifier and the signified. In contrast, Butler suggests, poststructuralism focuses on the moment of difference. “As a result, the discrepancy between signifier and signified becomes the operative and limitless *différance* of language, rendering all referentiality into a potentially limitless displacement” (Butler 1990:40).

Though I agree with Butler’s interpretation and her focus on the gaps in structure, I trace poststructuralism instead to Michel Foucault’s break with the structural linguistics of Claude Lévi-Strauss as reflected in works such as *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*. Let me be even more precise. I locate poststructuralism, for instance, in this sentence in the first chapter of *Discipline and Punish*: “by an analysis of penal leniency as a technique of power, one might understand . . . in what way a specific mode of subjugation was able to give birth to man as an object of knowledge for a discourse with a ‘scientific’ status.”<sup>3</sup> Or, for instance, in these sentences in *The History*

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<sup>2</sup> I discuss this in an essay titled “Embracing Chance: Post-Modern Mediations on Punishment” (December 2006; available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=948774>). For readings on the discourse of modernity, *see* Jürgen Habermas, “Taking Aim at the Heart of the Present: On Foucault’s Lecture on Kant’s *What Is Enlightenment?*” in *Critique and Power*, ed. Michael Kelly (MIT 1994); *see generally* Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (MIT 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Foucault 1979:24. « En somme, essayer d’étudier la métamorphose des méthodes punitives. . . De sorte que par l’analyse de la douceur pénale comme technique de pouvoir, on pourrait comprendre à la fois comment l’homme, l’âme, l’individu normal ou anormal sont venus doubler le crime comme objets de l’intervention pénale; et de quelle manière un mode spécifique d’assujettissement a pu donner naissance à l’homme comme objet de savoir pour un discours à statut “scientifique”. (Foucault, *Surveiller et punir* 1975, 28-29).

*of Sexuality, Volume 1*: “The object, in short, is to define the regime of power-knowledge-pleasure that sustains the discourse on human sexuality in our part of the world. . . . [T]he essential aim will not be to determine whether these discursive productions and these effects of power lead one to formulate the truth about sex, or on the contrary falsehoods designed to conceal that truth, but rather to bring out the ‘will to knowledge’ that serves as both their support and their instrument.”<sup>4</sup>

In this essay, I hope to unpack these compound sentences and, in the process, provide a synoptic answer to the question “What is Poststructuralism?” It has always struck me as odd that so many contemporary critical theorists are reluctant to offer a concise answer to that question. The question, after all, is no less simplistic or embarrassing than the question famously posed in 1784 that prompted the seminal essays of Kant and Mendelssohn. It seems appropriate, today, to offer an answer to the question “What is poststructuralism?” with the same degree of clarity and sincerity.

Poststructuralism builds on, but, more importantly, rejects some of the central tenets of structuralism—from whence it gets its name. For this reason, it is crucial, in order to understand poststructuralism, to start with Claude Lévi-Strauss and the structuralist enterprise.

#### Claude Lévi-Strauss and the Four Tenets of Structuralism

Structuralism was the rage in Parisian intellectual circles in the 1960s, but its popularity distorted important differences between the theoretical approaches of the leading intellectuals labeled as “structuralist” at the time. A famous French cartoon by Maurice Henry published in *La Quinzaine Littéraire* in 1967 depicted the four key thinkers associated, in the public imagination, with structuralism—Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Of the four, only one was, strictly speaking, structuralist. That was Claude Lévi-Strauss, the anthropologist in the group.

Claude Lévi-Strauss built his structural edifice on the basis of the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, whose lectures on linguistic theory were published

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4. « Bref, il s’agit de déterminer, dans son fonctionnement et dans ses raisons d’être, le régime de pouvoir-savoir-plaisir qui soutient chez nous le discours sur la sexualité humaine. (Foucault, *La Volonté de savoir* 1976, 19)

posthumously by his students in the now famous *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916). In a concise and useful essay titled “Structural Analysis,” Lévi-Strauss summarized the central tenets of structural linguistics:

First, structural linguistics shifts from the study of *conscious* linguistic phenomena to study of their *unconscious* infrastructure; second, it does not treat *terms* as independent entities, taking instead as its basis of analysis the *relations* between terms; third, it introduces the concept of *system*. . .; finally, structural linguistics aims at discovering *general laws*, either by induction “or. . . by logical deduction, which would give them an absolute character.” (Lévi-Strauss 1967a:31; *see also* Lévi-Strauss & Éribon 1988:158)

The second tenet is perhaps the most familiar today, and represents the idea that meaning in language derives from the relationships of difference and similarity between terms, and not from the terms themselves. As Ferdinand de Saussure explained, language is a system of differences, without positive terms; it is a set of relations of difference and similarity, rather than a set of terms that are differentiated. “*In the language itself, there are only differences,*” Saussure emphasized. “Even more important than that is the fact that, although in general a difference presupposes positive terms between which the difference holds, in a language there are only differences, *and no positive terms.*” (Saussure 1989:118 [166]; *see also* Pettit 1975:8; Caws 1988:72-73). This fundamental insight of structural linguistics has had important implications for the social sciences. As applied to symbolic action, it suggests that the meaning of behaviors cannot be deciphered in isolation and do not derive their meaning from themselves alone, but rather from the distinctions and similarities between different meanings. As Lévi-Strauss explains, “The error of traditional anthropology, like that of traditional linguistics, was to consider the terms, and not the relations between the terms.” (1967a:45).

This is the heart of linguistic structuralism, and it may be worth stopping here for a moment to emphasize the point: in order to understand someone speaking a common language, meaning is derived from the relations between terms and not from the objects or the words themselves. The meaning of the “desk table” that you are leaning on taking reading this essay does not derive from the object you are leaning on only or from the concept alone, but from the relations of difference between that object/concept and other object/concepts that we call dinner tables, bar tables, coffee tables, book shelves, and

even graphic tables in books. It is in the relations of difference between these terms and between these objects that meaning is formed. I will come back to this central point repeatedly.

The third tenet of structuralism is the idea that the relations of difference and similarity form a structure or system. As Saussure explained, “A language is a system in which all the elements fit together, and in which the value of any one element depends on the simultaneous coexistence of all the others” (1989:113 [159]; *see also* Caws 1988:72). One consequence is that, as the structure becomes more apparent, patterns become evident. As Duncan Kennedy suggests, “the power of structuralist methodology is that it shows that what at first appears to be an infinitely various, essentially contextual mass of utterances (*parole*) is in fact less internally various and less contextual than that appearance” (Kennedy 1994:343).

The first tenet is that these relations of difference and the overall structure of relations are second nature. They operate at the level of the unconscious. They are taken for granted. This tenet is much less controversial than the others and it too has its source in Saussure, who suggested that language is not produced intentionally and consciously, but is the work of unconscious mechanisms. As Saussure explained, “people use their language without conscious reflexion, being largely unaware of the laws which govern it” (Saussure 1989:72-73 [106]; *see generally* Pettit 1975:10). Lévi-Strauss endorsed this notion of the unconscious, referring to the collective nature of culture as being “no more than the expression, on the level of individual thought and behavior, of certain time and space modalities of the universal laws which make up the unconscious activity of the mind” (1967b:64). An essential fact in the social sciences, according to Lévi-Strauss, is precisely this idea that “the laws of language function at the unconscious level, beyond the control of the speaking subjects, and we can therefore study them as objective phenomena, representative in this sense of other social facts” (Lévi-Strauss & Éribon 1988:59).

The fourth basic tenet of structuralism is that structural analysis can help discover general laws with universal character—this is the most controversial tenet and what really gives birth, later, to the poststructuralist break and the rejection of such notions of general laws. But let me not anticipate too much. In Lévi-Strauss’s structuralism especially, there



is a strong tendency toward both binarism and universalism. Lévi-Strauss's tendency toward binarism is reflected well, for instance, in the following passage from *The Savage Mind*:

All the levels of classification in fact have a common characteristic: whichever, in the society under consideration, is put first it must authorize—or even imply—possible recourse to other levels, formally analogous to the favoured one and differing from it only in their relative position within a whole system of reference which operates by means of a pair of contrasts: between general and particular on the one hand, and nature and culture on the other. (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 135; *see also* 217)

Lévi-Strauss attempted to derive generally applicable laws not only in the area of kinship relations, but relating as well to all other social phenomena—including legal systems. His goal was to relate the structures of kinship to structures of linguistics, and from there to a wide range of social phenomena. The goal was to find patterns, a structure that helps understand behavior. “Ethnographic analysis tries to arrive at invariants beyond the empirical diversity of human societies,” he wrote (Lévi-Strauss 1966:247). These invariants represent fundamental characteristics of mental processes—of the way we think, the way we analyze, the way we categorize and relate concepts.

It's worth noting here that many later structuralists—and scholars heavily influenced by structuralism—minimize or attenuate this fourth tenet, suggesting that Lévi-Strauss himself was not so naïve as to believe that these structures were in fact complete and binary and predictive.<sup>5</sup> As you'll see, this is the primary source of poststructuralist tension—but the seeds of that tension began early and reside right here in the conflict over this fourth tenet. I think these later structuralists are simply wrong and that Lévi-Strauss himself was deeply committed, as a social scientist, to the enterprise of deriving general, universal, and preferably binary laws.

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<sup>5</sup> Duncan Kennedy and Jack Balkin are good examples. The influence of structuralism on Jack Balkin's work is most evident, for instance, in his fascinating article *The Crystalline Structure of Legal Argument* (1986);but what is clear from that article is that, though it borrows the binary structural framework, it explicitly states at crucial junctures that the binary relations are not fixed and do not map onto political ideology. In other words, they cannot serve as predictive of outcomes. Duncan Kennedy's writings also, though heavily influenced by structuralism, especially in the earliest period, resist the idea of fixed structures and play on the ambiguities of meaning. Kennedy can be interpreted as trying to rehabilitate Lévi-Strauss from the fourth tenet of structuralism.

Lévi-Strauss's project was very ambitious and entirely scientific. His ultimate goal was to appropriate structural linguistics to understand human thought and action. As he explains in *Language and the Analysis of Social Laws* (1967b):

The road will then be open for a comparative structural analysis of customs, institutions and accepted patterns of behavior. We shall be in a position to understand basic similarities between forms of social life, such as language, art, law, and religion, that on the surface seem to differ greatly. At the same time, we shall have the hope of overcoming the opposition between the collective nature of culture and its manifestations in the individual, since the so-called "collective consciousness" would, in the final analysis, be no more than the expression, on the level of individual thought and behavior, of certain time and space modalities of the universal laws which make up the unconscious activity of the mind. (Lévi-Strauss 1967b:64)

In *La Pensée sauvage*, one of his most famous texts, Lévi-Strauss set out precisely to uncover these "universal laws which make up the unconscious activity of the mind." He explored there how North and South American native peoples classify plants and animals, and relate concepts to each other. He attempted to decipher the "untamed" mind—the *ways of thinking* of non-Western indigenous peoples. In his analysis, Lévi-Strauss compared their mode of thinking, as reflected in their legends and myths, with European scientific modes of thought during the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries—again, with the scientific aim of discovering general laws.

The turn to structuralism was intended to give us a better purchase—a more scientific perspective—on human behavior. The goal was to improve our ability to understand action and predict behavior. The purpose was to decipher *necessary* patterns. "Throughout, my intention remains unchanged," Lévi-Strauss emphasized in *The Raw and the Cooked*. "Starting from ethnographic experience, I have always aimed at drawing up an inventory of mental patterns, to reduce apparently arbitrary data to some kind of order, and to attain a level at which a kind of necessity becomes apparent, underlying the illusions of liberty" (Lévi-Strauss 1969:10).

### The Radical Nature of Structuralism

It is somewhat easy today not to see how radical structuralism was at the time. The previous discussion may seem obvious, natural or intuitive to many today—in part

because, as with most important ideas, we have absorbed today bits and pieces of structuralism. We have all become, today, a bit structuralist. But you have to understand, these four tenets were radical at the time and represented a stark departure from the dominating philosophical approach in Paris in the early 1960s, namely phenomenological existentialism which had been made popular by Jean-Paul Sartre's plays and novels and held a firm grip on the public imagination (at least on the Continent). In order to fully appreciate the radical nature of structuralism, it is useful here to contrast Lévi-Strauss' framework to Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy.

There is a fascinating passage in a little known interview of Sartre by Pierre Verstraeten in the *Revue d'Esthétique* in 1965 that reveals the stark difference between Sartre and Lévi-Strauss. In the interview, Sartre is asked whether he draws a distinction between signification and the signified—central terms in Saussurian structural linguistics that are intended to capture the distinction between concept and object. More specifically, Sartre is asked: “Do you draw a distinction between signification and the signified?”<sup>6</sup> Sartre responds:

Yes, for me the signified is the object. I define my own language, which may not necessarily be the same as linguists: this “*chair*,” it is the object, thus it is the signified; then, there is signification, it is the logical set that will be constituted by words, the signification of a phrase. If I say “This table is in front of the window,” I am aiming at a signified that is the table by significations that are the set of phrases that are constituted, and *I consider me, myself, as the signifier*. The signification, that is the noema, the correlate of the set of vocal elements proffered. (Sartre 1965:311, emphasis added)<sup>7</sup>

Sartre's response is stunning. By identifying with “the signifier,” Sartre boldly turns the focus of meaning back on the individual subject. The individual subject is the one *who gives meaning*. There is no mediation through what structural linguists would traditionally call the signifier—the socially constructed relations of concepts. For Sartre,

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6. « Faites-vous une distinction entre signification et signifié? »

7. « Oui, pour moi le signifié c'est l'objet. Je définis mon langage qui n'est pas nécessairement celui des linguistes: cette « *chaise* », c'est l'objet, donc c'est le signifié; ensuite, il y a la signification, c'est l'ensemble logique qui sera constitué par des mots, la signification d'une phrase. Si je dis « Cette table est devant la fenêtre », je vise un signifié qui est la table par des significations qui sont l'ensemble des phrases qui sont constituées, et *je me considère moi-même comme le signifiant*. La signification, c'est le noème, le corrélat de l'ensemble des éléments vocaux profferés. » (Emphasis added).

the *actor* imposes meaning by himself. The individual actor is the agent who *gives* meaning—who decides, who deliberates, who chooses, who acts.

In sharp contrast to structuralism, which begins from the intersubjectivity of shared meaning, the point of departure for existentialism is the individual meaning giver—the agent alone. This traces, at least for Sartre, to the very heart of our being as humans. According to Sartre, what defines our being—as humans—is precisely our ability to negate our situation, to create nothingness in the heart of our being through our own acts and interpretations. In contrast to inanimate objects, human subjects have the ability to negate, to reject, or to alter their own condition by imposing meaning onto the world (Sartre 1943:56). It is in this sense, Sartre declares in *L'Être et le néant*, that “Man is the being through which nothingness comes to the world” (1943:59). It is in the act of negation that possibilities present themselves. It is through the process of negation that the subject can seek alternatives to his present condition. The act of negation—of rejecting our condition—occurs precisely when the individual acts intentionally in pursuit of his project, and it is what renders the individual truly free. For Sartre, freedom is precisely the ability to negate a present condition. “Freedom is the human being placing his past off-sides, and secreting his own nothingness” (1943:64). This is, for Sartre, a moment of great anxiety—an anxiety that makes us conscious of our freedom. “It is through anxiety,” Sartre wrote, “that man becomes conscious of his freedom” (1943:64).

The individual subject as meaning giver is at the heart of Sartre’s project: situations do not give meaning to agents, agents give meaning to situations. And central to this process of meaning giving, is the act of negation. As Sartre explained:

It is important to invert general opinion and recognize that it is not the difficulty of a situation or the suffering that it imposes that are the reasons that we conceive of another state of being where everyone would be better off; on the contrary, it is on the day that we can conceive of that other state of being that a new light falls on our troubles and on our suffering and that we *decide* that they are insufferable. (Sartre 1943:489)

The focus on subjectivity and intentionality characterizes Sartre’s phenomenological gaze. “One has to start from subjectivity,” Sartre emphasized in his lecture in 1945, *L’existentialisme est un humanisme* (1958:17):

Our point of departure is in effect the subjectivity of the individual, and this for strictly philosophical reasons. Not because we are bourgeois, but

because we want a doctrine based on truth, and not on a set of pretty theories full of hope but without real foundation. There can be no other truth, to start with, than this: *I think therefore I am*. It is here that we find the absolute truth of conscience finding itself. . . . In other words, for there to be any truth, there has to be absolute truth; and this one is simple, easy to attain, accessible to all. It consists in seizing oneself without intermediary. (1958:64-65)

From this highly subjective perspective, the individual invents himself through his actions. Simply put, he is nothing more than the actions *he* takes. He defines his meaning and he defines himself through the act of giving meaning—acting on those meanings. “Man is nothing else than what he makes himself,” Sartre famously stated (1958:21-22). His actions become his project. “Man is nothing else than his project. He exists only insofar as he realizes himself. He is nothing else than the set of his actions, nothing else than his life” (1958:55).

From an existential perspective, then, the agent individually gives meaning to his acts. He does not come into a world that has meaning *ex ante*. He gives meaning at every moment. He defines himself at every moment—by his acts and by his signification. The contrast to structuralism could not be more striking: against the backdrop of the dominant theoretical approach at the time, structuralism represented a radical break intended to move social thought into the direction of social science and prediction.

### Contrasting Structuralism with Existentialism

In *Language of the Gun* (2006), I offer an illustration of how a text—specifically, Sartre’s play *Les Mains sales*—could be interpreted along both existential and structuralist lines, as a way to draw the contrast between the two approaches. The central issue in the play is how to give meaning to an assassination—whether to interpret it as an act of jealousy or as a political act. I will not rehearse the entire discussion here, but simply point to the relevant passages.

The existential reading is offered by Sartre himself: Sartre allows the protagonist of the play, Hugo, to give his own meaning to his murderous act. In the final moments of Sartre’s play, Hugo reinvents himself and, by committing suicide, puts a political gloss on the assassination (*see* Harcourt 2006:117-188). The act of signification is captured well in this short passage from Sartre’s play:

Listen: I don't know why I killed Hoederer but I know why I should have killed him: because he was engaging in bad politics, because he was lying to his comrades, and because he risked corrupting the Party. If I had the courage to fire when I was alone with him in his office, he would be dead because of that and I could look at myself in the mirror. I am ashamed of myself because I killed him. . . later. And you, you are asking me to carry even more shame and say that I killed him for nothing. . . . I have not yet killed Hoederer. . . Not yet. It is now that I will kill him, and myself with him (Sartre 1948:247-248)

And in this final act of suicide, Hugo gives meaning to his act of murder. He intentionally claims the murder as a political act. Hugo's final act of suicide is the quintessential free act that propels him out of his bad faith and gives meaning to his earlier act.

From a structuralist perspective, in contrast, the meaning of Hugo's final act is not given by Hugo—or by Sartre, for that matter. It is, instead, given by the structure of myths and stories within which *Les Mains sales* fits. The play, in all likelihood, would fall in a genre of stories about the passage to manhood. It represents one variation of the myth—one exemplar set in war-torn Europe in the mid-twentieth century—where we can observe the important relationships between betrayal and faithfulness, and how these relate to the human subject acting in bad or good faith. On one structuralist reading, multiple acts of betrayal trigger a loss of bad faith, as if the human subject is shaken out of his slumber by the pain of betrayal. We could identify, perhaps, three central tropes that represent vital moments in any coming-of-age myth: political commitment, murder, and suicide. These elements can be deployed in many different ways depending on the myth, but are often central to the narrative. A structuralist reading of the play, then, might discern central building blocks of the myth (murder/suicide), pivotal relations in the plot structure (betrayal/fidelity), and possible impacts of these relations (bad faith/good faith).

I offer one structuralist interpretation of the play on pages 127 and 128 of *Language of the Gun*. It's an interpretation that builds on the relationship between betrayal and fidelity, and between good and bad faith. As I suggest, it is in the contrasts—differences—between these different emotional relations of fidelity and betrayal and political relations of good and bad faith that a structuralist might make sense of the play. Lévi-Strauss actually dedicated a series of books to the larger enterprise of

interpreting myths, beginning with *La Pensée sauvage* but then writing four volumes specifically on the “science of mythology” (Lévi-Strauss 1969 [1964]).

According to Lévi-Strauss, there are patterns of similarity and difference within certain genres of myths—for instance, within the Oedipus myth—despite the apparent arbitrariness and contingency of any one specific rendition of the myth. Lévi-Strauss’ work attempts to resolve this apparent tension by drawing on structural linguistic writings and mapping the relations between the basic elements of the myth (Lévi-Strauss 1967d:206-207). It is possible to propose a Lévi-Straussian reading of the play, which would have four columns, each of which are in a binary relationship to the other (betrayal/fidelity; good/bad faith) (Harcourt 2006: 127-128). Using these columns, the structure of the play can be represented in a simple schema of rows and columns. As Lévi-Strauss explains, “Were we to *tell* the myth, we would disregard the columns and read the rows from left to right and from top to bottom. But if we want to *understand* the myth, then we will have to disregard one half of the diachronic dimension (top to bottom) and read from left to right, column after column, each one being considered as a unit” (Lévi-Strauss 1967d:211).

To the structuralist, then, the phenomenological focus on the individual as meaning giver, is simply incapable of generating useful findings—scientific findings. Lévi-Strauss emphasized this in *La Pensée sauvage*, where he wrote:

He who begins by steeping himself in the allegedly self-evident truths of introspection never emerges from them. Knowledge of men sometimes seems easier to those who allow themselves to be caught up in the snare of personal identity. But they thus shut the door on knowledge of man. . . Sartre in fact becomes the prisoner of his Cogito: Descartes made it possible to attain universality, but conditionally on remaining psychological and individual; by sociologizing the Cogito, Sartre merely exchanges one prison for another. Each subject’s group and period now take the place of timeless consciousness. (Lévi-Strauss 1966:249; 1962:329-330)

And so, in *Les Mains sales*, meaning doesn’t really end with the final suicidal act of Hugo. The meaning for him perhaps, since he dies at that moment. But not the meaning for us. For us it may all depend on the other acts that ensue and how they relate to the larger structure of the narrative. Perhaps Hugo’s body is dumped in the street, coded in a way that represents jealous revenge. Or perhaps there are other structural

meanings that infuse the discovery of his body: the victim of a pimp on Hugo's release from prison. Those other social meanings may infuse his act with a different interpretation.

One ironic application of all this involves Jean-Paul Sartre's own struggle to give his own play, *Les Mains sales*, the meaning that *he* had intended — he, Sartre, as *signifier*. Much to his chagrin, *Les Mains sales* was roundly attacked by Communists and praised by conservatives. The liberal press, as well as the Communist press, interpreted the play as *anti-communist* (the party leader, Hoederer, who was assassinated, was secretary of the *Communist Party*). Because of the ambiguous portrayal of the party leader, the play was often referred to, in newspapers, as “Sartre's anti-communist play” (McCall 1969:54; *see generally* de Beauvoir 1963: 166–169). “For thirty cents and a plate of American lentils, Jean-Paul Sartre sold whatever was left of his honor and integrity,” a Soviet critic wrote (de Beauvoir 1963:168).

Sartre vehemently rejected this characterization of his play as anti-communist. “I still think, subjectively, that is to say as far as what I wrote is concerned,” Sartre emphasized, “that it is not an anticommunist work but just the opposite, a work of a fellow-traveler” (Sartre 1976:213). Sartre, however, had a hard time convincing even sympathetic readers of his intended meaning. “The play's meaning,” Sartre emphasized, “does not coincide with Hugo's fate” (Sartre 1976:219). Sartre did not himself identify with Hugo, he repeatedly maintained. “I can entirely appreciate Hugo's attitude, but you are wrong in thinking that he is an embodiment of myself,” Sartre told a friend and critic. “Hoederer's role is myself. Hoederer is the person I should like to be if I were a revolutionary, so I am Hoederer, if only on a symbolic level” (Sartre 1976:219–220). “Hoederer's is the only attitude I think sound,” Sartre repeated in another interview (Sartre 1976:210). The objective of the play, Sartre emphasized, was not to valorize Hugo's final act, but instead to explore “the dialectic necessity within a praxis” (Sartre 1976:217). Sartre explained in an interview:

I have never found Hugo a sympathetic character, and I have never thought he was in the right as against Hoederer. But I was trying to present in him the torments of a certain type of youth which, though it is emotionally inclined to a protest of a kind which is very specifically communist, does not go as far as joining the party because of its humanist educational background. I did not want to say whether they were right or



wrong; if I had, my play would have been propagandist. I simply tried to describe them. But Hoederer's is the only attitude I think sound. (Sartre 1976:210)

Sartre tried to give this *malentendu* a positive spin. It reflected, he suggested, the dogmatism of Stalinism—"that is to say," in his words, "the fact that a *critical* 'fellow-traveler' was not tolerated at that time" (Sartre 1976:215). Any criticism, any opposition whatsoever, meant betrayal and had to be met with a rewriting of history. "Falsification of the past was a systematic practice of Stalinism," Sartre emphasized (Sartre 1976:217). Sartre nevertheless had great difficulty convincing others of the meaning he wanted to project onto Hugo's final act.

"I am Hoederer." "I consider me, myself, as the signifier." These are bold statements indeed. And, of course, they met structural resistance, though Sartre himself never gave up trying to define the meaning of his own play. In 1952, Sartre prohibited any further productions of the play in any country in which the local Communist Party would not agree to the performance (Sartre 1976:210). By that act, he hoped to finally imprint the meaning he chose—as meaning giver.

#### After Structuralism: Pierre Bourdieu's Synthesis

Structuralism flourished in France in the 1960s—in a climate critical of dogmatic Marxism, and, in particular, Stalinism. Jean-Paul Sartre, many believed, had failed to offer a convincing account of Stalinism. Structuralism offered such an account. Politically, it suggested that the larger structure of institutions and discourses form the functional equivalent of a language that sustains certain practices within a political community, that acts as a mythical narrative, and that has symbolic efficacy. This provided a way of understanding how institutions that seemed appalling could nevertheless gain legitimacy.

Structuralism offered a critique of both dogmatic Marxism and of liberal institutions in the period leading up to the student protests of May 1968. As Vincent Descombes explains (in far better jargon):

The semiological theorem of the exteriority of the signifier has thus a political corollary. The self-styled 'political ideologies' of our societies are, very precisely, myths, and their symbolic efficacy (the trust

of the faithful, the adherence of the masses) is no guarantee of their correspondence with the reality which they claim to describe. Lévi-Strauss is explicit on this point. “Nothing resembles mythological thought more than political ideology.” A myth is the account of a founding event, of a privileged episode belonging at once to a certain time (its origin) and to all time (since festivals are given over to repeating it). (Descombes 1980:107)

Structuralism, in this sense, offered a legitimation story that functioned much like critical theory—like the writings of Lukacs, Gramsci, and the early Frankfurt School. For Lévi-Strauss, Sartre’s philosophy was precisely a specimen of contemporary political ideology. Lévi-Strauss wrote, in *The Savage Mind*, that “[Sartre’s] philosophy (like all the others) affords a first-class ethnographic document, the study of which is essential to an understanding of the mythology of our own time” (Lévi-Strauss 1966:249 n.\*; see also Lévi-Strauss & Éribon 1988:165).<sup>8</sup> Whereas critical theory had been deployed principally to expose the false-consciousness of the proletariat, though, structuralist theory was used primarily against Stalinism and dogmatic Marxism—and also against Sartrian existentialism.<sup>9</sup> The result, as Mark Lilla suggests, is that “[i]n the Paris of the late Fifties, the cool structuralism of Lévi-Strauss seemed at once more radically democratic and less naive than the engaged humanism of Sartre” (Lilla 2001:167).<sup>10</sup>

But structuralism failed to deliver on its promise of scientific predictability. Though politically attractive at the time, it failed to help social scientists and critical theorists deploy the structures to anticipate or project future outcomes. Linguistic

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8. The ensuing dialogue between Sartre and Lévi-Strauss, though, was short-lived. Sartre did not respond in writing to Lévi-Strauss’ criticisms, and Lévi-Strauss did not earnestly respond to Sartre’s comments (Lévi-Strauss & Éribon 1988:164). Though much has been written about the dispute, it did not lead to further productive exchanges between Sartre and Lévi-Strauss.

9. To be fair to Sartre, I do discuss, in *Language of the Gun*, Sartre’s attempt to reconcile existentialism with structuralism—more specifically, dialectical materialism—in his book *Critique de la raison dialectique*, as well as Lévi-Strauss’s critique.

10. In addition, for many young leftists in France during the 1960s, the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss offered a theoretical avenue that valued other cultures, especially non-Western cultures. Not only did Lévi-Strauss’ work explicitly reject the idea that primitive societies were in any sense inferior, it also offered a critique of the universalizing tendencies in Western thought that seemed to serve only imperialist goals. As Mark Lilla explains, “Lévi-Strauss’ structuralism cast doubt on the universality of any political rights or values, and also raised suspicions about the ‘man’ who claimed them. Weren’t these concepts simply a cover for the West’s ethnocentrism, colonialism, and genocide, as Lévi-Strauss charged? And wasn’t Sartre’s Marxism polluted by the same ideas?” (Lilla 2001:167). By studying non-Western cultures and praising them, Lévi-Strauss was offering a living example of the value of the Other. “And though Lévi-Strauss may not have intended it, his writings would soon feed the suspicion among the New Left that grew up in the Sixties that all the universal ideas to which Europe claimed allegiance—reason, science, progress, liberal democracy—were culturally specific weapons fashioned to rob the non-European Other of his difference” (Lilla 2001:168).

structures, for instance, impose some constraints on the way that agents talk, but not necessarily on what they say. The structures do not necessarily control or determine behavior. The constraints of language coexist with freedom of individual expression, so that the patterns that emerge are no more than that—patterns. They help make sense of individual expression, but do not dictate how agents will deploy language.

This deficiency led many to seek different avenues *post* structuralism. One of the more successful—or at least interesting—is Pierre Bourdieu’s attempt to synthesize structuralism and existentialism. Bourdieu’s theoretic approach—what he called “practice theory”—stressed that, through habituation, agents may internalize the structures that surround them. They may internalize the binary distinctions that Lévi-Strauss identified and that then may become part of their *habitus*—part of their way of understanding the world and acting within it.

“The social world,” Bourdieu wrote in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* in 1972, “may be the object of three modes of theoretical knowledge, each of which implies a set of (usually tacit) anthropological theses” (1977:3). The first mode of theoretical knowledge, Bourdieu associated with Jean-Paul Sartre. This mode of knowledge “sets out to make explicit the truth of primary experience of the social world” (1977:3). The second mode of theoretical knowledge, Bourdieu called “objectivist” and he associated it with Claude Lévi-Strauss. This mode focused on the linguistic relations that structure primary knowledge of the social world.

The third mode of knowledge, Bourdieu attributed to himself: it is a theory of practice, and it represents a break—though I would suggest, a synthesis as well—from both existential and structuralist modes of knowledge. Its aim is “to make possible a science of the *dialectical* relations between the objective structures to which the objectivist mode of knowledge gives us access and the structured dispositions within which those structures are actualized and which tend to reproduce them” (1977:3). It is a mode of knowledge that treats actors as ensconced within structures—semiotic and material—that are internalized and taken for granted, and who navigate these structures strategically. Actors understand the rules of the game, and play by, manipulate, and strategize the rules often in a second-hand way. It incorporates both the Lévi-Straussian

moment of unconscious structures and the Sartrean moment of subjectivity in a theory of practice that is intended to let us better understand and predict actions.

For Bourdieu, the tension between structuralism and existentialism crystallized the central problem in contemporary thought—namely, the lack of a theory of human agency. The thrust of Bourdieu’s intervention was to emphasize how Sartre, but also Lévi-Strauss, circumvented this main problem—of how practice relates to the explanatory structures that we are able to discern in our scientific inquiry.

Bourdieu’s work is fascinating and helps understand how structuralism can translate into an active theory. But our focus today is on “poststructuralism,” and Bourdieu was no poststructuralist. Post-structuralist, perhaps, in the sense that he developed one post-structuralist approach that built on structuralism; however, not “poststructuralist” in the sense in which the term has meaning today. The groundwork, though, is now posed to turn to “poststructuralism.”

### Poststructuralism

In relation to the four basic tenets of structuralism discussed earlier, poststructuralism builds on the first three tenets, but rejects the fourth—the idea that we could discover general laws. It builds on the notion that meanings are derived from relations of difference, that these are largely subconscious, and that they form a structure. But it emphasizes the gaps and ambiguities in the structure of meanings. Lévi-Strauss had said that “starting from ethnographic experience, I have always aimed at drawing up an inventory of mental patterns, to reduce apparently arbitrary data to some kind of order, and to attain a level at which a kind of necessity becomes apparent, underlying the illusions of liberty” (Lévi-Strauss 1970 (1964): 10). This is precisely what post-structuralism rejects.

Poststructuralism resists, then, the fourth tenet: structures of meanings are not universal, and do not reflect ontological truths about humans or society. Poststructuralists focus on those gaps and ambiguities in the system of meaning and *find meaning there*. The inquiry is, in essence, flipped on its head: the idea is not to find regularity, but instead to probe what the “discovered regularity” could possibly mean. What does it mean that we find patterns and closed systems of meaning? How is it that we come to

believe that the semiotic structure is complete? This is the key move of poststructuralism: How is it that we come to believe the meaning we impose in order to hide the gaps and ambiguities?

The central question that poststructuralists pose in their work is precisely how knowledge becomes possible at any particular time under specific historical conditions. In Foucault's words, the question is: "how is it that the human subject turns himself into an object of possible knowledge, through what forms of rationality, under what historical conditions, and finally at what price? My question is this one: at what price can the subject tell the truth about himself?" (Foucault 1983:442).

Foucault's perspective, in effect, asks a different set of questions than the structuralists, but derived from the structuralist framework. Foucault is interested in the history of knowledge and rationality, the history of the subject. How is it possible that any of these discourses—existentialism, structuralism or practice theory—could be received as correct, useful, intelligible? How does the process of making a discourse 'true' shape the way we, as subjects, judge, think, categorize, desire the other? How is it that we turn ourselves into objects of study? This is not to suggest, of course, that discourses do not become 'true.' They certainly have. They are true to many of us. But that is not the issue, for Foucault. The real question is, how is it that they have come to be seen as true at this particular time?

Post-structuralism and Foucault's project thus bear a strained relationship to structuralism—building on parts, but rejecting others. Foucault himself was adamant that he was not structuralist. "I have never been structuralist," Foucault exclaimed in interview (Foucault 1983b:435). In the English preface to *The Order of Things*, he explained: "In France, certain half-witted 'commentators' persist in labelling me a 'structuralist'. I have been unable to get it into their tiny minds that I have used none of the methods, concepts, or key terms that characterize structural analysis. I should be grateful if a more serious public would free me from a connection that certainly does me honour, but that I have not deserved" (Foucault 1970:xiv).<sup>11</sup>

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11. Although his structuralist disclaimer is usually what gets the most attention in Foucault's preface, it is interesting to note that Foucault expressed an even greater degree of animosity and rejection toward Sartre's existential phenomenology. "If there is one approach I do reject, however, it is that (one might call it, broadly speaking, the phenomenological approach) which gives absolute priority to the observing

Foucault's request was, in part, rhetorical. He was, at least in part, trying to assure himself that his reader would not be prejudiced and would not give his text a facile treatment. In this sense, he wrote, "it is only too easy to avoid the trouble of analysing such work by giving it an admittedly impressive-sounding, but inaccurate, label" (1970:xiv). But as a substantive matter, it is true that even *The Order of Things*, which is perhaps Foucault most structuralist book, is not properly structuralist. The purpose of the work, in line with Foucault's earlier statements about his central question, is to explore how certain discourses make themselves persuasive: what is necessary for a certain discourse to become accepted. Thus, Foucault explained:

I should like to know whether the subjects responsible for scientific discourse are not determined in their situation, their function, their perceptive capacity, and their practical possibilities by conditions that dominate and even overwhelm them. In short, I tried to explore scientific discourse not from the point of view of the individuals who are speaking, nor from the point of view of the formal structures of what they are saying, but from the point of view of the rules that come into play in the very existence of such discourse: what conditions did Linnaeus (or Petty, or Arnauld) have to fulfill, not to make his discourse coherent and true in general, but to give it, at the time when it was written and accepted, value and practical application as scientific discourse—or, more exactly, as naturalist, economic, or grammatical discourse? (Foucault 1970:xiv).

To be sure, in *The Order of Things*, the specific conditions of different periods take on a structuralist flavor. This is reflected in his project of unearthing what he calls the "code of knowledge" (1970:ix) or "system" (1970:x) of given periods—of revealing what he calls "a *positive unconscious* of knowledge: a level that eludes the consciousness of the scientist and yet is part of scientific discourse, instead of disputing its validity and seeking to diminish its scientific nature" (1970:xi). These are the unconscious, but shared rules that scientists from different disciplines converge on during a period. These common rules are a code, a language, an episteme. "It is these rules of formation, which were never formulated in their own right, but are to be found only in widely differing theories, concepts, and objects of study, that I have tried to reveal, by isolating, as their specific locus, a level that I have called, somewhat arbitrarily perhaps, archaeological" (1970:xi). And, in a highly self-reflexive move, Foucault recognized that his link to

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subject, which attributes a constituent role to an act, which places its own point of view at the origin of all historicity—which, in short, leads to a transcendental consciousness" (Foucault 1970:xiv).

structuralism was in part brought about by his having to place his own discourse within contemporary debate. Just as Linnaeus had to fulfill specific conditions to make his thought intelligible, Foucault also had to deploy certain current discursive practices to make his research value. “It would hardly behoove me, of all people, to claim that my discourse is independent of conditions and rules of which I am very largely unaware, and which determine other work that is being done today” (Foucault 1970:xiv). In other words, he recognized that his writings too were shaped and framed in part by the *episteme* of his epoch, which is in large part a structuralist idea. He was, in this sense, caught in a structuralist framework.

But, his inquiry was different. His focus was not on the structures in the discourses, but rather on how scientists had to shape their discourse in any particular period to make it intelligible. And second, he was resisting the cohesiveness of the structuralist framework. He focuses on the many “gaps” in the story that define the work, and help make it an “open site” (1970:xii). His “main concern” was with the many changes that reorganize, alter, transform the sciences and the codes of knowledge (1970:xii). He allowed for individual agency and biographies, and expressly stated that what he set out to do was not to eliminate the subject completely from the history of science. “I do not wish to deny the validity of intellectual biographies. . .” (xiii). He emphasized: “It is simply that I wonder whether such descriptions are themselves *enough*, whether they do justice to the immense density of scientific discourse, whether there do not exist, *outside their customary boundaries*, systems of regularities that have a decisive role in the history of the sciences” (1970:xiii-xiv, emphasis added).

Foucault posed a different set of questions than the structuralists, and these questions are what trigger the poststructuralist inquiry: how is it that any one interpretation becomes convincing and at what price?

### The Final Stages of Modernity

Poststructuralism, then, is a type of critical theory that shares with its genus the aspiration of achieving the kind of knowledge that, as Raymond Geuss explains of critical theory more generally, “gives agents a kind of knowledge inherently productive of enlightenment and emancipation” (1981:2). It attempts to do this by helping agents

realize that their strongly held rational beliefs in certain theories or premises rest on a leap of faith, which then makes it possible to trace the genealogy of how those agents took that leap. It does this by focusing on the ambiguities between knowledge and belief in order to produce enlightenment and emancipation. Once we lift the veil from our eyes and realize fully that our rational belief in certain theories or premises are no better than religious faith—that we have taken a leap of faith to arrive at our conclusion—it then becomes possible to trace the genealogy of how we took that leap. It became possible to explore how we came to believe what we did believe and at what price. That is precisely what the great critical thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth century did along the three principal dimensions of radical thought—power (from Nietzsche to Agamben), economic production (from Marx and the Frankfurt School to Althusser), and desire (from Freud through Lacan to Žižek).

In contrast to other forms of critical theory, poststructuralism focuses on the social distribution of power associated with the construction of knowledge, what has come to be known as the “power/knowledge” critique: How, exactly, do we come to believe what we hold as true? How is it, for instance, that we come to believe a progress narrative of punishment? What institutions and practices shape us to believe in the idea of the “delinquent”—or, for that matter, in the idea that we could possibly “rehabilitate” or “correct” that “delinquent”? How have our own disciplinary practices contributed to shaping our beliefs? And at what cost?

As noted earlier, in her book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler locates post-structuralism in the work of Jacques Derrida (Butler 1990:158 n.6). If, as I suggest, her definition is right, then why the different location? “Why not in Derrida?” you may ask. Why do I classify Derrida as a deconstructionist and distinguish deconstruction from poststructuralism?<sup>12</sup> The primary reason, I would argue, is that deconstruction never embraces the moment of developing an explanation—a complex social theoretic, historical, and genealogical explanation—for how we come to believe what we do believe. Foucault does—for instance, when he meticulously explains how we came to

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<sup>12</sup> For some of the best discussions of deconstruction, see Balkin 1987 through 1998; see also Bernard E. Harcourt, “Jacques Derrida, *Force de loi*, et son influence sur the movement Critical Legal Studies aux Etats-Unis,” in *Les grandes oeuvres et grands auteurs juridiques*, eds. Jean-Louis Halperin et Olivier Cayla. Paris: Editions Dalloz (forthcoming 2007).



believe that it was right to judge the soul of the delinquent, not just the delinquent act, in *Discipline and Punish*. Deconstructive practice does not provide explanation, nor does it analyze the price we pay when we do that—it does not flesh out the distributive consequences of those ethical choices. It identifies the choice, but stops there. Deconstruction, in effect, never overcomes the radical moment of ambiguating meaning, which distinguishes it significantly from poststructuralist work.

One can see this well in a text like *Force de loi*, the first part of which is a keynote lecture that Jacques Derrida delivered in October 1989 at a conference titled “Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice” in New York City. The text is fascinating and plays on the structural relations between law and justice, but it does not move significantly past the slippage once it has identified the ethical choice. Relying on a “pensée” of Pascal, Derrida excavates in *Force de loi* the basis of a modern critique of liberal legalism. The “pensée” in question concerns the relationship between justice, law, and might (la force), and is indeed provocative: “It is important then to bring together justice and might; and to that end, to make sure that that which is just be strong, and that which is strong be just” (Derrida 1994:28). This exposes, for Derrida, the mystical foundation of the authority of law, and enables a modern critique of liberal legalist ideology (32). The foundation of law, Derrida suggests, is precisely the force required to first create, inaugurate, or found the law itself. This, Derrida suggests, requires “un appel à la croyance” (a leap of faith) and thus represents “un coup de force” (32-33); and it exposes deconstructive possibilities. It makes possible, according to Derrida, the very possibility of deconstruction (35), which is precisely what leads him, paradoxically, to assert that “*La deconstruction est la justice*” (35). What he means by that is that it is precisely the auto-authorization of law—the moment of the appeal to faith—in law itself that represents the moment of rupture, of indeterminacy, and of force that makes possible the critique of liberal legalism and that represents the moment of deconstructive practice. In typical fashion, it represents a Derridean inversion of the very title of the conference, “Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice.” It is justice—because it is self-authorizing—that creates the possibility of critique and thus, the possibility of deconstruction. Notice here, though, and importantly, that Derrida does not take the further step—which I associate with poststructuralism—of offering a social theoretic,

historical, or genealogical account of how we come to take that central leap of faith. Derrida stops with the identification itself.

In the end, then, poststructuralism should be distinguished from deconstruction, and represents the penultimate stage of modernity. It is the stage where we began to focus on the ambiguity in meaning as the central location at the edge of critical reason that helps identify ethical choice. Derridean construction, I would argue, comes after poststructuralism and represents the last stage of modernity: no longer willing to offer thick descriptions of how we come to take our leaps of faith, deconstruction focuses only on the ethical choice itself. What comes after deconstruction? Perhaps the absolute acknowledgment of the limits of critical reason and the refusal to take any leap of faith at all. Perhaps a turn, instead, to randomization.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> I stop here and offer this only as a prolegomenon to further reflection on the role of chance and randomization in a post-modern period. I have made some tentative beginnings along this direction in an essay titled *Embracing Chance: Post-Modern Meditations on Punishment*.

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