

2 POSTMODERNISM'S APPLIED TURN



Making Oppression Real

Postmodernism first burst onto the intellectual scene in the late 1960s and quickly became wildly fashionable among leftist and left-leaning academics. As the intellectual fad grew, its proselytes set to work, producing reams of radically skeptical Theory, in which existing knowledge and ways of obtaining knowledge understood as belonging to Western modernity were indiscriminately criticized and dismantled. The old religions—in the broadest sense of the word—had to be torn down. Thus, the ideas that we can come to know objective reality and that what we call “truth” in some way corresponds to it were placed on the chopping block, together with the assumptions that modernity had been built upon. The postmodernists sought to render absurd our ways of understanding, approaching, and living in the world and in societies. Despite proving simultaneously modish and influential, this approach had its limits. Endless dismantling and disruption—or, as they call it, *deconstruction*—is not only destined to consume itself; it is also fated to consume everything interesting and thus render itself *boring*.¹

That is, Theory couldn't content itself with nihilistic despair. It needed something to do, something actionable. Because of its own mor-

ally and politically charged core, it had to apply itself to the problem it saw at the core of society: unjust access to power. After its first big bang beginning in the late 1960s, the high deconstructive phase of postmodernism burnt itself out by the early 1980s. But postmodernism did not die. From the ashes arose a new set of Theorists whose mission was to make some core tenets of postmodernism applicable and to *reconstruct* a better world.

The common wisdom among academics is that, by the 1990s, postmodernism had died.² But, in fact, it simply mutated from its earlier high deconstructive phase into a new form. A diverse set of highly politicized and actionable Theories developed out of postmodernism proper. We will call this more recent development *applied postmodernism*. This change occurred as a new wave of Theorists emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s. These new applied postmodernists also came from different fields, but, in many respects, their ideas were much more alike than those of their predecessors and provided a more user-friendly approach. During this turn, Theory mutated into a handful of Theories—postcolonial, queer, and critical race—that were put to work in the world to deconstruct social injustice.

We therefore might think of postmodernism as a kind of fast-evolving virus. Its original and purest form was unsustainable: it tore its hosts apart and destroyed itself. It could not spread from the academy to the general population because it was so difficult to grasp and so seemingly removed from social realities. In its evolved form, it spread, leaping the “species” gap from academics to activists to everyday people, as it became increasingly graspable and actionable and therefore more contagious. It mutated around a core of Theory to form several new strains, which are far less playful and far more certain of their own (meta)narratives. These are centered on a practical aim that was absent before: to reconstruct society in the image of an ideology which came to refer to itself as “Social Justice.”

THE MUTATION OF THEORY

For postmodernists, Theory refers to a specific set of beliefs, which posit

that the world and our ability to gather knowledge about it work in accordance with the postmodern knowledge and political principles. Theory assumes that objective reality cannot be known, “truth” is socially constructed through language and “language games” and is local to a particular culture, and knowledge functions to protect and advance the interests of the privileged. Theory therefore explicitly aims to *critically* examine discourses. This means something specific. It means to examine them closely so as to expose and disrupt the political power dynamics it assumes are baked into them so that people will be convinced to reject them and initiate an ideological revolution.

Theory, in this sense, has not gone away, but neither has it stayed the same. Between the late 1980s and roughly 2010, it developed the applicability of its underlying concepts and came to form the basis of entirely new fields of scholarship, which have since become profoundly influential. These new disciplines, which have come to be known loosely as “Social Justice scholarship,” co-opted the notion of social justice from the civil rights movements and other liberal and progressive theories. Not coincidentally, this all began in earnest just as legal equality had largely been achieved and antiracist, feminist, and LGBT activism began to produce diminishing returns. Now that racial and sexual discrimination in the workplace was illegal and homosexuality was decriminalized throughout the West, the main barriers to social equality in the West were lingering prejudices, embodied in attitudes, assumptions, expectations, and language. For those tackling these less tangible problems, Theory, with its focus on systems of power and privilege perpetuated through discourses, might have been an ideal tool—except that, as it was wholly deconstructive, indiscriminately radically skeptical, and unpalatably nihilistic, it was not really fit for any productive purpose.

The new forms of Theory arose within postcolonialism, black feminism (a branch of feminism pioneered by African American scholars who focused as much on race as on gender³), intersectional feminism, critical race (legal) Theory, and queer Theory, all of which sought to describe the world critically *in order to change it*. Scholars in these fields increasingly argued that, while postmodernism could help reveal the socially constructed nature of knowledge and the associated “problematics,” activism was simply not compatible with fully radical skepticism.

They needed to accept that certain groups of people faced disadvantages and injustices based on who they were, a concept that radically skeptical postmodern thinking readily deconstructed. Some of the new Theorists therefore criticized their predecessors for their privilege, which they claimed was demonstrated by their ability to deconstruct identity and identity-based oppression. Some accused their forebears of being white, male, wealthy, and Western enough to afford to be playful, ironic, and radically skeptical, because society was already set up for their benefit. As a result, while the new Theorists retained much Theory, they did not entirely dispense with stable identity and objective truth. Instead, they laid claim to a limited amount of both, arguing that some identities were privileged over others and that this injustice was objectively true.

While the original postmodern thinkers dismantled our understanding of knowledge, truth, and societal structures, the new Theorists reconstructed these from the ground up, in accordance with their own narratives, many of which derived from the means and values of New Left political activism, which in turn had been the product of the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School. Thus, while the original (postmodern) Theorists were fairly aimless, using irony and playfulness to reverse hierarchies and disrupt what they saw as unjust power and knowledge (or power-knowledge) structures, the second wave of (*applied*) postmodernists focused on dismantling hierarchies and making truth claims about power, language, and oppression. During its applied turn, Theory underwent a *moral* mutation: it adopted a number of beliefs about the rights and wrongs of power and privilege. The original Theorists were content to observe, bemoan, and play with such phenomena; the new ones wanted to reorder society. If social injustice is caused by legitimizing bad discourses, they reasoned, social justice can be achieved by delegitimizing them and replacing them with better ones. Those social sciences and humanities scholars who took Theoretical approaches began to form a left-wing moral community, rather than a purely academic one: an intellectual organ more interested in advocating a particular *ought* than attempting a detached assessment of *is*—an attitude we usually associate with churches, rather than universities.

A NEW DEFAULT VIEW

New Theories arose, which primarily looked at race, gender, and sexuality, and were explicitly critical, goal-oriented, and moralistic. They retained, however, the core postmodern ideas that knowledge is a construct of power, that the categories into which we organize people and phenomena were falsely contrived in the service of that power, that language is inherently dangerous and unreliable, that the knowledge claims and values of all cultures are equally valid and intelligible only on their own terms, and that collective experience trumps individuality and universality. They focused on cultural power, regarding it as objectively true that power and privilege are insidious, corrupting forces, which work to perpetuate themselves in almost mysterious ways. They explicitly stated that they were doing this with the purpose of remaking society according to their moral vision—all while citing the original postmodern Theorists.⁴

Brian McHale, the American literary theorist whose work centers on postmodernism, observes this change when he writes,

With the arrival of poststructuralism in North America, “theory” was born, in the freestanding sense of the term that became so familiar in subsequent decades: not theory of this or that—not, for instance, theory of narrative, as structuralist narratology aspired to be—but theory in general, what in other eras might have been called speculation, or even indeed philosophy.⁵

Elsewhere, he notes,

“[T]heory” itself, in the special sense that the term began to acquire from the mid-sixties on, is a postmodern phenomenon, and the success and proliferation of “theory” is itself a symptom of postmodernism.⁶

That is, by the late 1990s, postmodernism in its purest, original form had fallen out of fashion, but Theory had not. It provided radical activists, including scholar-activists, with an all-encompassing way of think-

ing about the world and society, which still informs much scholarship in the humanities and has made considerable inroads into the social sciences, especially sociology, anthropology, and psychology.⁷ Postmodernism had been reenvisioned and has since become the backbone of dominant forms of scholarship, activism, and professional practice around identity, culture, and Social Justice.

Nevertheless, it is not uncommon for academics who work according to the postmodern knowledge and political principles to be disparaging of postmodernism and insist that they do not use it in their work. Jonathan Gottschall, noted scholar of literature and evolution, offers an explanation of this strange phenomenon. He argues that what he calls the “liberationist paradigm”—an understanding of society that seeks to detach human nature from biology—has become so pervasive among left-wing academics as to be simply the default in many fields. “Buzzing rumors of the demise of Theory,” Gottschall therefore tells us, “are clearly premature.”⁸

Perhaps, ironically, Theory has been internalized by—and thus rendered invisible to—many academics, even those who consider themselves to have eschewed Theory and claim to work with empirical data.⁹ As Brian McHale argues,

“[T]heory” itself has survived down to the new millennium. If it is less conspicuous now than it was in the peak years of postmodernism in the seventies and eighties, this is only because it has become so pervasive as to pass largely unnoticed. Since the late eighties, “theory” has especially animated the discourses of feminism, gender studies, and sexuality studies, and it underwrites what has come to be called “cultural studies.”¹⁰

Whether we call it “postmodernism,” “applied postmodernism,” “Theory,” or anything else, then, the conception of society based on the postmodern knowledge and political principles—that set of radically skeptical ideas, in which knowledge, power, and language are merely oppressive social constructs to be exploited by the powerful—has not only survived more or less intact but also flourished within many identity- and culture-based “studies” fields, especially in the so-called “Theoreti-

cal humanities.” These, in turn, influence and often hold sway over the social sciences and professional programs like education, law, psychology, and social work, and have been carried by activists and media into the broader culture. As a result of the general academic acceptance of Theory, postmodernism has become applicable, and therefore accessible to both activists and the general public.

APPLYING THE INAPPLICABLE

In the early seventeenth century, as the Enlightenment began to take hold and revolutionize human thought in Europe, a number of thinkers of the time started to grapple with a new problem: radical doubt—a belief that there is no rational basis to believe *anything*. Most famous among these was the French mathematician, scientist, and philosopher René Descartes, who articulated what was, for him, a bit of philosophical bedrock upon which belief and philosophy could rest. In 1637, he first wrote the phrase, “*Je pense, donc je suis,*” in *Discourse on the Method*,¹¹ which was later rewritten in the far more famous Latin—“*Cogito, ergo sum*” (I think, therefore I am). This was Descartes’ response to the deconstructive power that Enlightenment skepticism introduced to the world.

Something similar occurred some three and a half centuries later, in the 1980s. Faced with the far more intense deconstructive power of postmodern radical skepticism, an emerging band of cultural Theorists found themselves in a similar crisis. Liberal activism had won tremendous successes, the radical New Left activism of previous decades had fallen well out of favor, and the antirealism and nihilistic despair of postmodernism wasn’t working and couldn’t produce change. The correction to this problem required grasping upon something both radically actionable and real, and Theory and activism therefore started to coalesce on a new idea in parallel to Descartes’ most famous meditation. For him, the ability to think implied existence—that *something* must be real. For the activist-scholars of the 1980s, the suffering associated with oppression implied the existence of something that could suffer and a mechanism by which that suffering can occur. “I think, therefore I am” was given new life under the axiomatic acceptance of new existential

bedrock: “I experience oppression, therefore I am... and so are dominance and oppression.”

As postmodernism progressed, building itself upon this new philosophical rock, a number of new academic enclaves emerged. These drew upon Theory, often heavily, focusing on specific aspects of the ways in which language and power influence society. Each of these fields—postcolonial, queer, and critical race Theories, along with gender studies, disability studies, and fat studies—will receive detailed treatment in its own chapter. Among them, queer Theory is the only field that exclusively applies postmodern Theoretical approaches, but all these fields of study have come to be dominated by applied postmodernist thinking. The Theorists who took elements of postmodernism and sought to apply them in specific ways were the progenitors of the applied postmodern turn and therefore of Social Justice scholarship.

Postcolonial studies was the first applied postmodern discipline to emerge. Although other approaches to studying the aftermath of colonialism exist, postmodern Theory formed so much of the basis of this discipline that postmodernism and postcolonialism are often taught together. Edward Said, the founding father of postcolonial Theory, drew heavily on Michel Foucault, and his work therefore focused on how discourses construct reality.¹² For Said, it was not enough to simply deconstruct power structures and show how perceptions of the East had been constructed by the West. It was necessary to revise and rewrite history. In his ground-breaking book, *Orientalism*, he argues that “history is made by men and women, just as it can also be unmade and rewritten...so that ‘our’ East, ‘our’ Orient becomes ‘ours’ to possess and direct.”¹³

Said’s successors, Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, also valued Foucault, but relied more on Derrida. They distrust the ability of language to convey meaning at all—but they also believe it conceals within it unjust power dynamics. Because of this focus on power conveyed through language, postcolonial Theory developed an explicitly political purpose: to deconstruct Western narratives about the East in order to uncover and amplify the voices of colonized peoples. As the postcolonial scholar Linda Hutcheon puts it,

The post-colonial, like the feminist, is a dismantling but also constructive political enterprise insofar as it implies a theory of agency and social change that the postmodern deconstructive impulse lacks. While both “post-”s use irony, the post-colonial cannot stop at irony.¹⁴

Another new Theory developed within women’s studies—and, later, gender studies—which grew out of the overlap between feminist thought and literary theory. Women’s studies did not begin as postmodern, however. For the most part, it tracked with other forms of feminist theory, many of which analyzed the status of women through a critical Marxist lens, according to which Western patriarchy is largely an extension of capitalism, through which women are uniquely exploited and marginalized. Foucault famously rejected this top-down understanding of power, in favor of a society-permeating grid, produced by discourses. The Foucauldian Theorists who established queer Theory followed him in this.

By the late 1980s, this distinction had begun to drive a wedge between various types of feminists, who disagreed as to how far to take deconstructive methods,¹⁵ a disagreement which persists today. Mary Poovey, a materialist feminist—a feminist who focuses primarily on how patriarchal and capitalist assumptions force women into socially constructed gender roles—described this clearly. Poovey was attracted to deconstructive techniques for their ability to undermine what she saw as socially constructed gender stereotypes (the belief that such stereotypes reflect intrinsic human nature is often referred to as “essentialism”), but as a materialist she was concerned that deconstruction in its purest form did not allow the category “woman” to exist at all.¹⁶ This was new.

Like the postcolonial Theorists, Poovey wanted to adapt postmodern techniques for the purposes of activism. She therefore advocated a “toolbox” approach to feminism, in which deconstructive techniques could be used to dismantle gender roles, but not sex. She argued that we must accept as true the oppression of one class of people—women—by another—men—in order to combat it. This requires giving a sense of stable and objective reality to the classes of “women” and “men” and the power dynamic between them. She introduced some aspects of Theory into feminism and gender studies.

Judith Butler, a feminist and LGBT scholar and activist who was foundational to the development of queer Theory, epitomizes the opposite approach to this dilemma. In her most influential work, *Gender Trouble*,¹⁷ published in 1990, Butler focuses on the socially constructed nature of both gender and sex. For Butler, “woman” is not a class of people but a performance that constructs “gendered” reality. Butler’s concept of *gender performativity*—behaviors and speech that make gender real—allowed her to be thoroughly postmodern, deconstruct everything, and reject the notion of stable essences and objective truths about sex, gender, and sexuality, all while remaining politically active. This worked on two levels. Firstly, by referring to “reality-effects” and social or cultural “fictions,” Butler is able to address what she sees as the reality of social constructions of gender, sex, and sexuality. For Butler, the specific constructions themselves are not real, but it is true that constructions exist. Secondly, because the “queer” is understood to be that which falls outside of categories, especially those used to define male and female, masculine and feminine, heterosexual and homosexual, disrupting and dismantling those categories is essential to activism. “To queer” can therefore be used as a verb in the Butlerian sense, and the “queering” of something refers to the destabilization of categories and the disruption of norms or accepted truths associated with it. The purpose of this is to liberate the “queer” from the oppression of being categorized.

Despite drawing heavily on both Foucault and Derrida, Butler does not consider herself a postmodernist. In fact, she does not consider “postmodernism” a coherent term. However, this is not a disparagement of postmodernism, since incoherence and indefinability are central to Butler’s queer Theory. In her 1995 essay, “Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of ‘Postmodernism,’” Butler writes, in her usual semi-incomprehensible prose, that the point of postmodernism is to understand that oppressive power structures form as a result of firm definitions and stable categories and that recognizing this enables queer political activism.¹⁸ Therefore, rather than denying postmodern assumptions or methods, Butler argues that—just as it is better not to define sexes, genders, or sexualities—it is better not to define postmodernism. To do so would allow or even cause it to become yet another powerful

oppressive force—a violence of categorization, an idea which she derives from Jacques Derrida.

Butler avoided the aimlessness that handicapped the original postmodernism by making indefinability and ambiguity integral to her own philosophies. She explains that “the task is to interrogate what the theoretical move that establishes foundations authorizes, and what precisely it excludes or forecloses.”¹⁹ In Butlerian thought, the endless examination and deconstruction of categories can enable us to liberate those who do not fit neatly into categories.

In a different Theoretical thread, another highly influential feminist, whose work began in the late 1980s and who saw the need to modify postmodern Theory, is bell hooks (the pen name of Gloria Watkins, which she intentionally writes in lower case). hooks is an African American scholar and activist who took issue with postmodernism—especially postmodern Theory and feminism—for its exclusion of black people, women, and the working class, which she felt limited its ability to achieve social and political change. She criticized postmodernism not for its assumptions or thought, but for its association with, development by, and popularity among elite white male thinkers. hooks’ 1990 essay, “Postmodern Blackness,” criticizes postmodernism for being dominated by white male intellectuals and academic elites, even as it usefully draws attention to difference and otherness. She was particularly critical of its dismissal of stable identity, arguing that postmodernism should apply the politics of identity:

The postmodern critique of “identity,” though relevant for renewed black liberation struggle, is often posed in ways that are problematic. Given a pervasive politic of white supremacy which seeks to prevent the formation of radical black subjectivity, we cannot cavalierly dismiss a concern with identity politics.²⁰

She asks,

Should we not be suspicious of postmodern critiques of the “subject” when they surface at a historical moment when many subjugated people feel themselves coming to voice for the first time?²¹

For hooks, the problem was not that postmodernism was useless; it was that it was tailored to the experiences of white male intellectuals and did not allow for identity politics. hooks claimed that postmodern thought erred in destabilizing the concept of identity, which led it to exclude the unified voices and experiences of black Americans—particularly black women—and their aspirations to disrupt dominant narratives for the purposes of pursuing racial equality. She even suggested that postmodernism had silenced the black voices that had arisen in the 1960s, who had achieved civil rights by adopting a modernist universalizing agenda.²² To be of value, hooks argued, postmodernism needed to come out of the universities and into the world; question the perspective of the white male, who could afford to doubt the importance of identity because of his privilege; and serve everyday activism being done by the politically radical black layperson. She writes,

Postmodern culture with its decentered subject can be the space where ties are severed or it can provide the occasion for new and varied forms of bonding. To some extent ruptures, surfaces, contextuality and a host of other happenings create gaps that make space for oppositional practices which no longer require intellectuals to be confined by narrow, separate spheres with no meaningful connection to the world of every day.²³

hooks' ideas arose in parallel with critical race Theory, which originated with critical legal scholars, most notably Derrick Bell. One of Bell's students was a legal scholar much influenced by black feminists like hooks: Kimberlé Crenshaw. Crenshaw makes a similar critique of postmodernism in her groundbreaking 1991 essay, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,"²⁴ which developed the groundwork for the hugely influential concept of *intersectionality*, which she had introduced two years earlier, in a more polemic piece (see chapter 5).

Intersectionality accurately recognizes that it is possible to uniquely discriminate against someone who falls within an "intersection" of oppressed identities—say black and female—and that contemporary dis-

crimination law was insufficiently sensitive to address this. Crenshaw noticed that it would be possible, for example, to legally discriminate against black women in a workplace that hired plenty of black men and white women, but almost no black women. She also rightly recognized that the prejudices that intersecting identity groups face can include not only the ones directed against both identity groups but also unique ones. For example, a black woman might face the usual prejudices that come with being black and with being a woman while also experiencing additional prejudices that apply specifically to black women. Crenshaw makes some important points. Simultaneously, she was generally positive about the deconstructive potential of postmodern Theory and centered it in her new “intersectional” framework for addressing discrimination against women of color. She wrote, “I consider intersectionality to be a provisional concept linking contemporary politics with postmodern theory,”²⁵ and set out a more politicized form of postmodernism that would be actionable for race activists.²⁶

Like Poovey, Butler, and hooks, Crenshaw wanted to both keep the Theoretical understanding of race and gender as social constructs and use deconstructive methods to critique them, *and* assert a stable truth claim: that some people were discriminated against on the grounds of their racial or sexual identities, a discrimination she planned to address legally, using identity politics. She writes,

While the descriptive project of postmodernism of questioning the ways in which meaning is socially constructed is generally sound, this critique sometimes misreads the meaning of social construction and distorts its political relevance. . . . But to say that a category such as race or gender is socially constructed is not to say that that category has no significance in our world. On the contrary, a large and continuing project for subordinated people—and indeed, one of the projects for which postmodern theories have been very helpful in thinking about—is the way power has clustered around certain categories and is exercised against others.²⁷

Crenshaw argues that (identity) categories “have meaning and consequences”;²⁸ that is, they are objectively real. She distinguishes between a

“black person” and a “person who happens to be black,”²⁹ and sides with the former, arguing that this distinction is integral to identity politics and marks its difference from the universal liberal approaches that characterized the civil rights movements. These are common themes within the applied turn in postmodernism.

Once identity and power had been made objectively real and analyzed using postmodern methods, the concept of intersectionality very rapidly broke the bounds of legal theory and became a powerful tool for cultural criticism and social and political activism. Because applied postmodern Theory explicitly applied postmodernism to identity politics, it began to be used by scholars who were interested in myriad aspects of identity, including race, sex, gender, sexuality, class, religion, immigration status, physical or mental ability, and body size. Following Crenshaw’s recommendation, these rapidly emerging fields of critical studies of culture all rely heavily on social constructivism to explain why some identities are marginalized, while arguing that those social constructions are themselves objectively real.

For example, fields like disability studies³⁰ and fat studies³¹ have recently become notable presences on the Social Justice scholarship scene. While disability studies and fat feminism already existed and addressed prejudice and discrimination against the disabled and the obese, these movements have taken a radically socially constructivist approach in recent years, explicitly applying postmodern principles and themes, particularly those of queer Theory. They have become part of the intersectional framework and adopted much of the applied postmodern Theoretical approach, in which the disabled and the fat are believed to have their own embodied knowledge of disability and fatness, which is worth more than scientific knowledge. This is not simply about the obvious truth that disabled and fat people know what it is like to be disabled or fat in a way that able-bodied and slim people do not. Scholars and activists in these fields insist instead that the understanding of disability or obesity as a physical problem to be treated and corrected where possible is itself a social construct born of systemic hatred of disabled and fat people.

THE POSTMODERN PRINCIPLES AND THEMES IN APPLICATION

Despite mutating to become actionable for identity politics, applied postmodernism has retained the two postmodern principles at its core.

- **The postmodern knowledge principle:** Radical skepticism about whether objective knowledge or truth is obtainable and a commitment to cultural constructivism.

This denial of objective knowledge or truth and commitment to cultural constructivism, and belief that whatever it is we call truth is nothing more than a construct of the culture calling it that, has been largely retained, with one important proviso: under applied postmodern thought, identity and oppression based on identity are treated as known features of objective reality. That is, the conception of society as comprised of systems of power and privilege that construct knowledge is assumed to be objectively true and intrinsically tied to social constructions of identity.

- **The postmodern political principle:** A belief that society is formed of systems of power and hierarchies, which decide what can be known and how.

This has also been retained. In fact, this is central to the advocacy of identity politics, whose politically actionable imperative is to dismantle this system in the name of Social Justice.

The four key themes of postmodern thought also survived the death of the high deconstructive phase and the subsequent applied postmodern turn.

1. The Blurring of Boundaries

This theme is most evident in postcolonial and queer Theories, which are both explicitly centred on ideas of fluidity, ambiguity, indefinability, and hybridity—all of which blur or even demolish the boundaries between categories. Their common concern with what they call “disrupting binaries” follows from Derrida’s work on the hierarchical nature and

meaninglessness of linguistic constructions. This theme is less evident in critical race Theory, which can be quite black-and-white (double meaning intended), but, in practice, the intersectional feminist element of critical race Theory encompasses many identity categories simultaneously and tries to be inclusive of “different ways of knowing.” This results in a messy mixing of the evidenced with the experiential, in which a personal interpretation of lived experience (often informed—or misinformed—by Theory) is elevated to the status of evidence (usually of Theory).

2. The Power of Language

The power and danger of language are foregrounded in all the newer applied postmodern Theories. “Discourse analysis” plays a central role in all these fields; scholars scrutinize language closely and interpret it according to Theoretical frameworks. For example, many films are watched “closely” for problematic portrayals and then disparaged, even if their themes are broadly consistent with Social Justice.³² Additionally, the idea that words are powerful and dangerous has now become widespread and underlies much scholarship and activism around discursive (or verbal) violence, safe spaces, microaggressions, and trigger warnings.

3. Cultural Relativism

Cultural relativism is, of course, most pronounced in postcolonial Theory, but the widespread use of intersectionality in Social Justice scholarship and activism and the understanding of the West as the pinnacle of an oppressive power structure have made cultural relativism a norm in all applied postmodern Theories. This applies both in terms of how knowledge is produced, recognized, and transmitted—one cultural artifact—and in terms of moral and ethical principles—another cultural artifact.

4. The Loss of the Individual and the Universal

The intense focus on identity categories and identity politics means that the individual and the universal are largely devalued. While mainstream liberalism focuses on achieving universal human rights and access to

opportunities, to allow each individual to fulfill her potential, applied postmodern scholarship and activism is deeply skeptical of these values and even openly hostile to them. Applied postmodern Theory tends to regard mainstream liberalism as complacent, naive, or indifferent about the deeply engrained prejudices, assumptions, and biases that limit and constrain people with marginalized identities. The “individual” in applied postmodernism is something like the sum total of the identity groups to which the person in question simultaneously belongs.

THE EMERGENCE OF SOCIAL JUSTICE SCHOLARSHIP

These changes may seem too slight to consider Theory a serious departure from postmodernism—yet they are significant. By losing the ironic playfulness and despair of meaning characteristic of high-deconstructive postmodernism and by becoming goal-oriented, Theorists of the 1980s and 1990s made postmodernism applicable to institutions and politics. By recovering the idea of identity as something that—although culturally constructed—provided group knowledge and empowerment, they enabled more specific forms of activism-scholarship to develop. Theory therefore turned from being largely descriptive to highly prescriptive—a shift from *is* to *ought*. After the applied postmodern turn, postmodernism was no longer a mode of describing society and undermining confidence in long-established models of reality: it now aspired to be a tool of Social Justice. This ambition would come to fruition in the early 2010s, when a second significant evolutionary mutation in postmodernism occurred.

The new Theories emerging from the applied postmodern turn made it possible for scholars and activists to *do* something with the postmodern conception of society. If knowledge is a construct of power, which functions through ways of talking about things, knowledge can be changed and power structures toppled by changing the way we talk about things. Thus, applied postmodernism focuses on controlling discourses, especially by *problematizing* language and imagery it deems Theoretically harmful. This means that it looks for then highlights ways in which the oppressive problems they assume exist in society manifest themselves, sometimes quite subtly, in order to “make oppression vis-

ible.” The intense scrutiny of language and development of ever stricter rules for terminology pertaining to identity often known as *political correctness* came to a head in the 1990s and has again become pertinent since the mid-2010s.

This carries politically actionable conclusions. If what we accept as true is only accepted as such because the discourses of straight, white, wealthy, Western men have been privileged, applied Theory indicates this can be challenged by empowering marginalized identity groups and insisting their voices take precedence. This belief increased the aggressiveness of identity politics to such an extent that it even led to concepts like “research justice.” This alarming proposal demands that scholars preferentially cite women and minorities—and minimize citations of white Western men—because empirical research that values knowledge production rooted in evidence and reasoned argument is an unfairly privileged cultural construct of white Westerners. It is therefore, in this view, a moral obligation to share the prestige of rigorous research with “other forms of research,” including superstition, spiritual beliefs, cultural traditions and beliefs, identity-based experiences, and emotional responses.³³

As these methods can be applied to virtually anything, a vast body of work drawing on any (or all) identity-based fields has emerged since roughly 2010. It asserts the objective truth of socially constructed knowledge and power hierarchies with absolute certainty. This represents an evolution that began with the applied turn in postmodernism as its new assumptions became known-knowns—that which people take for granted because it is known that they are “known.” This work incorporates methodologies known as “feminist epistemology,” “critical race epistemology,” “postcolonial epistemology,” and “queer epistemology,” together with the study of broader “epistemic injustice,”³⁴ “epistemic oppression,”³⁵ “epistemic exploitation,”³⁶ and “epistemic violence.”³⁷ (“Epistemology” is the term for the ways in which knowledge is produced and “epistemic” means “related to knowledge.”) Frequently, all these approaches are combined to produce what is usually known as “Social Justice scholarship.” Though apparently diverse, these approaches to “other knowledges” are all premised on the idea that people with different marginalized identities have different knowledges, stemming

from their shared, embodied, and lived experiences as members of those identity groups, especially of systemic oppression. Such people can both be disadvantaged as knowers, when they are forced to operate within a “dominant” system that is not their own, and also enjoy unique advantages, because of their familiarity with multiple epistemic systems. They can alternately be victims of “epistemic violence” when their knowledge is not included or recognized or of “epistemic exploitation” when they are asked to share it.

These changes have been steadily eroding the barrier between scholarship and activism. It used to be considered a failure of teaching or scholarship to work from a particular ideological standpoint. The teacher or scholar was expected to set aside her own biases and beliefs in order to approach her subject as objectively as possible. Academics were incentivized to do so by knowing that other scholars could—and would—point out evidence of bias or motivated reasoning and counter it with evidence and argument. Teachers could consider their attempts at objectivity successful if their students did not know what their political or ideological positions were.

This is not how Social Justice scholarship works or is applied to education. Teaching is now supposed to be a political act, and only one type of politics is acceptable—identity politics, as defined by Social Justice and Theory. In subjects ranging from gender studies to English literature, it is now perfectly acceptable to state a theoretical or ideological position and then use that lens to examine the material, without making any attempt to falsify one’s interpretation by including disconfirming evidence or alternative explanations. Now, scholars can openly declare themselves to be activists and teach activism in courses that require students to accept the ideological basis of Social Justice as true and produce work that supports it.³⁸ One particularly infamous 2016 paper in *Géneros: Multidisciplinary Journal of Gender Studies* even favorably likened women’s studies to HIV and Ebola, advocating that it spread its version of feminism like an immune-suppressing virus, using students-turned-activists as carriers.³⁹

Surprising or worrying as these changes may be, this is not the result of a hidden agenda. The agenda is open and explicit and always has been. For example, in 2013, as activist and scholar Sandra Grey insisted,

Part of being active academic citizens involves challenging our students to do and be more. In early universities it was students who took the ideas of universities to the illiterate, acting as missionaries, teaching new ideas to peasants, thus spreading movements like Lutheranism through the countryside. While not suggesting that our students should be out in society professing Lutheran ideals, I would like to think we provide the tools of critique, debate and research to students to enable active citizenship and even inspire some to take up activist roles. Finally, there is a need for academics as part of their normal working lives to form alliances and connections, and even at times to become members of political and advocacy organisations. Rigorous research carried out “for a cause” must again be accepted as legitimate knowledge generation.⁴⁰

In 2018, activist-scholars published a collection of essays entitled *Taking It to the Streets: The Role of Scholarship in Advocacy and Advocacy in Scholarship*.⁴¹ While scholars can, of course, be activists and activists can be scholars, combining these two roles is liable to create problems and, when a political stance is taught at university, it is apt to become an orthodoxy, which cannot be questioned. Activism and education exist in a fundamental tension—activism presumes to know the truth with enough certainty to act upon it, while education is conscious that it does not know for certain what is true and therefore seeks to learn more.⁴²

Applied postmodern ideas have escaped the boundaries of the university in ways that the original postmodern Theory did not, and they did so at least in part because of their ability to be acted upon. Out in the world, these ideas have gained sway. The postmodern knowledge and political principles are now routinely evoked by activists and increasingly also by corporations, media, public figures, and the general public.

We, everyday citizens who are increasingly befuddled about what has happened to society and how it happened so quickly, regularly hear demands to “decolonize” everything from academic curricula to hairstyles to mathematics. We hear laments about cultural appropriation at the same time we hear complaints about the lack of representation of certain identity groups in the arts. We hear that only white people can

be racist and that they always are so, by default. Politicians, actors, and artists pride themselves on being intersectional. Companies flaunt their respect for “diversity,” while making it clear that they are only interested in a superficial diversity of identity (not of opinions). Organizations and activist groups of all kinds announce that they are inclusive, but only of people who agree with them. American engineers have been fired from corporations like Google for saying that gender differences exist,⁴³ and British comedians have been sacked by the BBC for repeating jokes that could be construed as racist by Americans.⁴⁴

For most of us, this is both confusing and alarming. Many people are wondering what’s happening, how we got here, what it all means, and how (and how soon) we can fix it and restore some common ground, charity, and reason. These are difficult questions. What has happened is that applied postmodernism has come into its own, been *reified*—taken as real, as The Truth according to Social Justice—and widely spread by activists, and (ironically) turned into a dominant metanarrative of its own. It has become an article of faith or an operational mythology for a wide swathe of society, especially on the left. To fail to pay obeisance to it can be literally or—more often figuratively—fatal. One does not merely challenge the dominant orthodoxy.

Fortunately, it is unlikely that the majority of people—let alone corporations, organizations, and public figures—really are radical cultural constructivists, with postmodern conceptions of society and a commitment to intersectional understandings of Social Justice. However, because these ideas offer the appearance of deep explanations to complicated problems and work within the Theory, they have successfully morphed from obscure academic theories—the sorts of things that only intellectuals can believe—to part of the general “wisdom” about how the world works. Because these ideas are so widespread, matters won’t improve until we show them for what they are and resist them—ideally by using consistent liberal principles and ethics.

To understand how Social Justice scholarship developed from postmodern Theory via the applied postmodern turn, we have to explore the new Theories in greater depth and specificity. It is these applied Theories—postcolonial, gender, queer, critical race, and so on—not postmodernism itself, that have gone out into the world and manifested

themselves in scholarship, activism, and our institutions. Over the next five chapters, we hope to explain how these applied Theories have developed. Then, in chapter 8, we will explain how they came to be taken for granted as capital-T Truth, through the ideology of Social Justice.