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Structuralism and post-structuralism

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Introduction

The relationship between structuralism and post-structuralism has been widely misunderstood due to the way in which the ideas associated with both isms came into academic discourse. Part, if not the entirety, of the problem was the very fact that these two clusters of ideas (I hesitate to say intellectual movements) – the former a product of the 1950s and the latter of the 1960s–1970s – were lumped into what would in the 1980s and 1990s be known as ‘postmodernism’. As structuralism and post-structuralism were, rightly or wrongly, known as the intellectual sources of postmodernism, hopes of a proper understanding in the English-speaking world would be all but jettisoned. Depending on one’s intellectual allegiances and sympathies, postmodernism would be seen as either totally revolutionary or intellectual detritus, and with it structuralism and post-structuralism.

Total disdain and complete admiration are two sides of the same anti-intellectual coin. It is no way to give a proper and fair, or even critical, assessment of ideas. But there is at least one identifiable feature of structuralism and post-structuralism that has become a rallying point for many of its detractors. It is, as Charles Lemert writes, their ‘specific commitment to the idea that language is necessarily the central consideration in all attempts to know, act, and live’ (1997: 104), this linguistic emphasis being mostly drawn from the work of Ferdinand de Saussure. In turn, there was a unique consequence to this substantive and methodological focus on language: a certain inscrutable style of writing and argumentation. For instance, from the semiologist and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva:

In this way, only the subject, for whom the thetic is not a repression of the semiotic chora but instead a position either taken on or undergone, can call into question the thetic so that a new disposition may be articulated. Castration must have been a problem, a trauma, a drama, so that the semiotic can return through the symbolic position it brings about.

(2002: 45)

Needless to say, reading this is tough going.

The overall effect of the passage is to subject the reader so an insistence triply qualified, presented in the guise of an argument. It is not an argument that one can ‘follow’ along
a direct line of clear and distinct logical understanding. It is not a statement open to logical or empirical verification, but an invitation to enter a different, postmodern (that is, in 1966, poststructural) language within which one finds that everything is language. The argument which is not an argument is found only in a series of juxtaposed, different elements – conditional ‘perhaps’ proclamation, structuralism and poststructuralism/continuity of structuralism, argument/insistence.

(Lemert 1997: 105–6)

This description, by Lemert, is interestingly not of Kristeva’s but a passage from Derrida. Yet, it still works, as the point regarding the mode and style of argumentation in post-structuralism holds. There is not only a focus on language but a rigorous, and creative, use of language. This is reflective of what Lemert identifies as structuralism’s wishing to ‘destroy the ideal of pure, meaningful communication between subjects as a corollary to the disruption of the metaphysical distinction between subjects and objects’ (Lemert 1997: 106). Therefore, language becomes a proxy to metaphysics. When language, so long considered to be the transparent ‘tool’ of human beings, is questioned, it ‘invades the universal problematic’, with the lesson being: there is no ‘transcendent’, ‘grand, organizing principle’, not limited to language but also including ‘God, natural law, truth, beauty, subjectivity, Man, etc’ (ibid.). Thus we can see the reason behind the grating feeling that structuralisms caused for many years among so many. It was a bold challenge to western thought’s privileging of the individual subject and its ability to know itself.

In this chapter, key ideas and thinkers of structuralism and post-structuralism are discussed, analysed and overviewed. Beginning with the development and claims of structuralism, I discuss the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes, with an emphasis on how Saussure’s structural linguistics influenced the structural anthropology of Lévi-Strauss and the semiology of Barthes. I then move on to post-structuralism, detailing the critique of Lévi-Strauss levelled by Jacques Derrida in order to make clear the differences, however slight, between the two structuralisms. I principally stress the theme of subjectivity, using the work of Jacques Lacan but also the ‘authorship’ discussions which took place between Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. Carrying this theme of subjectivity, I then move on to critiques of structuralist and post-structuralist thinking, focusing on lines of thought that highlight the perceived anti-humanism of these perspectives. In this regard, I offer up the work of Manfred Frank and Anthony Giddens, two of the most judicious critics of structuralisms. The chapter then goes on to summarize some of the future directions of structuralist and post-structuralist theory in order to demonstrate its lasting prescience in various disciplines. But instead of outlining contemporary studies that draw from structuralism or post-structuralism, I look at some of the ways in which they have fuelled thinking in a variety of disciplines. I touch on the work of sociologist Scott Lash, media theorist Mark Poster and historian Hayden White as examples.

**The historical and intellectual development of structuralism**

Structuralism emerged in a very peculiar time in the postwar intellectual life of France. Sartre, for so long the utter embodiment of what it meant to be an intellectual, was accumulating challengers to his throne, including the liberal sociologist Raymond Aron and his one-time friend Albert Camus, who had distanced himself from Sartre after the latter’s allegiance to the Communist Party even after the brutalities carried out under Stalin. But
Aron and Camus were mainstays in the French intellectual scene. They were frequent interlocutors for Sartre in the pages of various periodicals, newspapers and public forums.

With the figure of Sartre also comes the weight of his philosophy. Existentialism, along with Marxism, the two wells from which Sartre drew most frequently, were the main traditions of thought. Structuralism’s emergence, as well as that of Claude Lévi-Strauss, its main articulator, was, in effect, a direct challenge not only to existentialism but also to the intellectual status quo of the time.

Structuralism differed from existentialism in important ways. Existentialism drew from phenomenology and inherited the latter’s main analytic tool – consciousness. Structuralism, on the other hand, was inspired directly by the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, effect- ively jettisoning the individual as the starting point of analysis for something Lévi-Strauss believed to be ‘above’ (or ‘below’) the individual – structure, as exemplified by language. (It could even be said that structuralism and post-structuralism are explicitly philosophies of language that extend far beyond the eponymous philosophical subfield, which in the analytic tradition goes back to Wittgenstein. They are intellectual moves that can be called what Richard Rorty (1992), in another context, called ‘the linguistic turn’.)

Saussure’s key insights in Course in General Linguistics (1966), collected and published post- humously by his students, consisted of two radical separations: (1) between la langue (language itself) and parole (speech) and (2) between words (‘the signifier’) and the things to which they referred (‘signified’). The first separation was between parole and langue. Parole, for him, consists of the individual production of meaningful statements: in other words, the way language is put into practice as what are called ‘speech acts’. La langue, however, is the system of language itself – its grammar, syntax and other rules – that individuals, when speaking or writing, draw upon passively (if one wishes to think of it that way), not engaging in the rule-making process themselves. Parole, therefore, can be thought of as heterogeneous, subject to individual interpretation, as is made clear by the varieties of patois and slang that are produced in nearly all languages. Langue, on the other hand, is homogeneous, systematic and rigid: in other words, structured and thus more open to study in a scientific manner.

Additionally, against the understanding of language as derivative of an innate relationship between word and object, Saussure suggested that the relationship between the signifier and signified was arbitrary. To put a twist on his famous example, the word ‘tree’, made up of the letters ‘t’, ‘r’ and ‘e’, has no relationship to the object in the world. However, for those of us who are English-speaking, ‘tree’ nonetheless will create an image in our minds of that brown, usually vertical object with green leaves hanging from its limbs called branches. Hence, the relation between ‘tree’ (signifier) and a tree as existing in the world (signified) is constituted, reinforced and maintained socially. That is to say, this relation must be confirmed over and again in use with others. When they come together they form a sign. Language, the system of signs, is then rooted in a system of differences held tenuously together under the sign. Therefore it comes as no surprise that Saussure called his version of linguistics ‘semiology’ – the study of signs as they are used socially.

Saussure’s ideas became popular in the postwar intellectual life of Paris, especially among literary scholars, who saw semiology as the basis of a new way of thinking about literature beyond the individual work itself, as part of a great web of texts. Among them was literary critic Roland Barthes, who was one of the first to adopt Saussure’s ideas in the analysis of culture and literature. In two books, Elements of Semiology (1977) and his more widely read Mythologies (1972), which is appreciated largely as a prefiguring of cultural studies in the Anglophone world, Barthes attempted a popularization of Saussure’s ideas. Mythologies in particular set out to accomplish this. Consisting mostly of short vignettes that would be
considered cultural criticism, the book culminates with ‘Myth today’, a more theoretically inclined chapter that argues for myth as a ‘semiological system’.

By this, Barthes means that ‘myth is a system of communication’. Hence, myth is not ‘an object, a concept or an idea; it is a mode of signification, a form’ (Barthes 1972: 109). The ‘materials of myth’, he notes, are already ‘conveyed by discourse’. He writes: ‘Myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message: there are formal limits to myth, there are no “substantial” ones’ (1972: 109). Alternatively, he describes myth as ‘a newly acquired penury’ which ‘signification [fills]’ (1972: 118). To explain this rather technical argument, Barthes, as he so well does, gives us a rather brilliant example:

Take a bunch of roses: I use it to signify my passion. Do we have here, then, only a signifier and a signified, the roses and my passion? Not even that: to put it accurately, there are here only ‘passionified’ roses. But on the plane of analysis, we do have three terms; for these roses weighted with passion perfectly and correctly allow themselves to be decomposed into roses and passion: the former and the latter existed before uniting and forming this third object, which is the sign.

(1972: 113)

In other words, the roses are already imbued with passion. The chain of signification is something that needs no voluntary effort on behalf of the giver and receiver of the roses because the work of myth is done through what Barthes calls ‘a signifying consciousness’. It is this that allows for the ‘very principle of myth’ – the transformation of ‘history into nature’ – to operate successfully. Myth is a semiological system precisely because it is consumed ‘innocently’ as an inductive, causal process: ‘the signifier and signified have’, in the eyes of the myth consumer, ‘a natural relationship’ (Barthes 1972: 131).

While Barthes used Saussurian structural linguistics to analyze everyday mythologies such as the romanticism of roses, in anthropology Lévi-Strauss became the torchbearer of structuralism, beginning with his *Elementary Structures of Kinship* and reaching a boiling point with the publication of *The Savage Mind*. Lévi-Strauss’s structural anthropology incorporated aspects of Saussure’s semiology to analyze collective phenomena such as what was then called ‘primitive religion’, in particular the study of myth (Lévi-Strauss 1995). Myths, according to Lévi-Strauss, can be thought of as language. They are both made up of structural elements. While language contains morphemes, phonemes and sememes, myths contain what he dubs ‘mythemes’. These units form relations with each other, to form binaries.

Myths are not cosmological explanations of universal, existential questions such as the nature of the universe, life, death and the afterlife, but something else. They exhibit, he argues, a structure much like that of language, since myths must be uttered and spoken. Like Saussure before him, Lévi-Strauss suggests two levels of myth: (1) as they are uttered and spoken and (2) as they are structured. In studying the structured, more rigid aspect of myth, its *langue* if you will, he argues that myths contain a similar structure across cultures, though varying in content, even modern ones. In a widely read essay titled ‘The structural study of myth’, Lévi-Strauss analyzes the myth of Oedipus, which of course holds a prominent place in western culture, not only as it was written by one of the most revered ancient dramatists, Sophocles, but also because it plays such a prominent role in Freudian psychoanalysis. Knowingly, Lévi-Strauss argues that the structural units of myth present in the Oedipal myth exist in myths of North American Indians, illustrating the presence of the family drama of Oedipus, more specifically the theme of parental attachment, in Zuni and Pueblo mythology. Thus, he argues that the structure of myths is universal, a markedly different position from...
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those of anthropologists who had treated so-called primitive societies’ systems of cultural symbols as chaotic and unorganized.

We can summarize structuralism as not simply a ‘turn to language’ but as the reorienting of social analysis towards ‘difference’. The key difference is of course between ‘signifier’ and ‘signified’, the separation of word and object. It is with this key insight into the instability, or the mythological nature, of language, and signification more broadly, that structuralism set itself up for its own structuralist dressing down by post-structuralists.

Major claims and developments of structuralism and post-structuralism

Post-structuralism was as much a radical break from structuralism as it was a logical outgrowth of it. It is, if anything, a critique of structuralism from within. Many commentators have called post-structuralism a ‘structuralism of structuralism’ (Frank 1989; White 1985). Hence, Derrida’s landmark ‘Structure, sign and play’, which he delivered in Baltimore at Johns Hopkins University, is at once a pointed critique of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s structural anthropology and an appreciation. Lévi-Strauss, in 1966, was still at the height of his intellectual powers. By then, not only had he occupied the chair once held by anthropologist Marcel Mauss at the Collège de France, one of the most distinguished academic posts any French intellectual could attain, but his book Savage Mind had been published and achieved critical success. At the time, Lévi-Strauss was the doyen of Parisian intellectual life, due in part to his devastating critique of Sartre, which, in effect, put the last nail in the coffin of existentialism’s dominance by structuralism. Hence, to offer a critical reading of Lévi-Strauss, as Derrida did, was to attack the leading intellectual in France.

Derrida’s essay critiqued the ‘structurality’ of structuralism, using the very linguistic theory of Saussure from which Lévi-Strauss drew. The basis of Derrida’s critique of Lévi-Strauss is his concept of the ‘centre’, one of the most oft-used phrases of his writings. In spite of the aura surrounding the word ‘deconstruction’, which was, at first, Derrida’s invocation of Heidegger’s destruktion, and would later become a part of the popular lexicon, as some commentators have already suggested, Derrida’s philosophy could be better described as ‘de-centring’. ‘Centre’ is how Derrida explains the aspect of ‘structure’ that holds, in his estimation, the metaphysical tendencies of totality, presence and origin. ‘The function of this center’, he writes, ‘was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure . . . but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the freeplay of the structure’ (1978: 352). This centre that exists in all forms of thought in the western tradition, not just in structuralism, he goes on to argue, is disturbed by the introduction of linguistic analysis. Building on Saussure’s insistence of the arbitrariness of the sign, Derrida writes:

This moment was that in which language invaded the universal problematic; that in which, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse – provided we can agree on this word – that is to say, when everything became a system where the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences.

(1978: 358)

In both statements, Derrida is taking Saussure’s earlier pronouncement of the arbitrariness of sign and radicalizing it to the point where he argues that reality itself must be scrutinized as part of language. By arguing that language allows viewing ‘everything’ as ‘discourse’, he is
prefiguring a later statement that he became quite famous for: ‘There is no outside-text’ (Derrida 1997: 158). (As we shall see below, it is this statement above others that caused most trouble for sceptics of Derrida and post-structuralism.)

Consequently, it is no surprise that his critique of Lévi-Strauss begins from what he views to be the ‘centre’ of the structure of myths – its supposed ‘origin’. But as Derrida points out, even Lévi-Strauss acknowledges that myths do not have an absolute origin. They are passed down from generation to generation; there is no way to know who it was that started it. Hence, myths, for Derrida, are rather ‘acentric’ structures. In addition, Derrida also points out the rather totalizing nature of Lévi-Strauss’s structuralist reading of myth. For Lévi-Strauss, mythical structures are ahistorical and universal. Though varying in content, the structure remains the same across cultures and linguistic groups, not to mention historical periods. For Derrida, this is a misreading of Saussurian linguistics, for, in effect, as the tenuous and rather arbitrary relation of the signifier and signified hints at, language ‘excludes totalization’, as it is a system of infinite potential connections. Derrida calls this element of language ‘free play’.

If totalization no longer has any meaning, it is not because the infinity of a field cannot be covered by a finite glance or a finite discourse, but because the nature of the field – that is, language and a finite language – excludes totalization. This field is in fact that of freeplay, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions in the closure of a finite ensemble.

(1978: 288)

‘Free play’ is in opposition to what Derrida refers to throughout his corpus as the ‘philosophy of presence’, which he considers to be a metaphysical remnant of Platonism. Presence, for Derrida, was an ideal in western philosophy that was at the root of the concept of being. To ‘be’ was to be ‘here’. But Derrida views this to be disingenuous, as no entity can ever be fully ‘present’, especially in a system of representative differences such as that of la langue. The signifier, the word ‘cow’ for instance, does not conjure an actual beast when used by a speaker or when written on a page. There exists in every instance of signification, for Derrida, a contingent agreement of meaning that allows for communication built on a foundation of sand. The accomplishment of meaning is never a fait accompli but one that is reached tentatively, if looked at from the perspective of the numerous (or infinite) possibilities of the signifier.

Freeplay is the disruption of presence. The presence of an element is always a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and the movement of a chain. Freeplay is always an interplay of absence and presence, but if it is to be radically conceived, freeplay must be conceived of before the alternative of presence and absence; being must be conceived of as presence or absence beginning with the possibility of freeplay and not the other way around.

(Derrida 1978: 294)

In this way, Derrida juxtaposes his reading of Saussure to Lévi-Strauss’s, thus concluding that there are two approaches to structure – one based on the sign, the other based on free play. The former emphasizes ‘the sign’ as the centre, the privileged element of language. The latter, which he associates with his own approach, focuses less on the accomplishment of the positive identification of the signifier and signified in the sign, but wades in the tenuousness and arbitrariness of the system itself. Thus, Derrida’s subsequent writings are full of double entendre, which was one of the major reasons why so many American scholars had such difficulty with his work.
The contributions of structuralisms

In this brief engagement with the differences between Lévi-Strauss and Derrida, I have attempted to draw out the principle themes of post-structuralism – centre, origin and totality. These three, though they are particular to Derrida’s lexicon, do indeed point us towards some of the larger concepts utilized by post-structuralist thinkers. In particular, I wish to home in on post-structuralist understandings of subjectivity.

As mentioned above, structuralism and post-structuralism came in the wake of Sartre’s existentialism. This is the case not only in terms of intellectual history but also substantively. To be clearer, I mean that structuralism and post-structuralism carry forth a critique of the model of subjectivity that is at the heart of Sartrean existentialism. To begin to unpack this claim, it must be noted that Sartre’s orientation vis-à-vis subjectivity is influenced heavily by phenomenology, especially the Husserlian kind. While many critics and commentators of Sartre have highlighted the importance of Heidegger for his thinking – indeed this claim is accurate – Heidegger was in some ways a means for Sartre to get to a certain conclusion about the concept of ‘intentionality’. In other words, Heidegger provided Sartre with a way of thinking through and beyond Descartes’s dualism.

The Cartesian split is, of course, between subject and object, which differentiates not only the observer and the observed but also mind from matter. This is the famed dichotomy between res cogitans and res extensa. A result of this radical dualism is the analytic and methodological privileging of the subject. The subject, as in grammar, is the initiator of action. The object, to continue with the grammatical image, is the receiver of action. Hence, in Descartes, the subject maintains an advantaged position.

In Husserlian phenomenology, this translates into the ‘epoche’, or the bracket. According to Husserl, the proper way of practising phenomenology was to ‘bracket’ out the question of the existence of the natural world and the objects therein. Instead, the phenomenologist should turn his attention towards the structure of consciousness, that is, the experience of the world. Whether it ‘exists’ or not is of no consequence. He is to bracket the question of whether an object that we perceive exists outside of our conscious experience. He must remain focused on the subjective experience of the object, not the object itself. As a result, the subject is crowned as king of philosophical reflection. But the king must not be a mad king. The subject must retain stability. It must, in short, be identifiable. This in part means that the subject–object dichotomy must be held rigidly. If not, then the entire enterprise would crumble. This logic extends into social theory, especially its dominant conceptualization of the individual’, which is most often the subject of consciousness.

One can find in the work of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan arguments explicitly oriented towards the status of the subject, or in this case the Freudian ‘ego’ or, more properly, ‘the I’, made along similar thematic lines as Derrida.

In his ‘Mirror stage’ essay of 1949, Lacan offers a unique and radical theory of the infant development of the ego, arguing that the infant does not fully realize her body to be a unitary totality until she is able to see herself in a reflection of a mirror, or some other kind of reflective surface. It is only after this stage, he argues, that the child understands herself to be a total unit, an effect of identification with her image, and thus attains the proper coordination of her limbs. ‘It suffices’, he writes, ‘to understand the mirror stage in this context as an identification, in the full sense analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes [assume] an image’ (2006: 76). Prior to this stage, the infant experiences her body as fragmented, as different pieces – an arm here, an arm there. But when she views what he calls her ‘specular image’ she begins to identify with it in all of its totality.
The specular image, which Lacan refers to as the *imago*, is an ideal I, a representation of the ego, not the ego itself. In fact, one of the major critiques that Lacan launches is of the ‘I’s mental permanence’, so as to say that the ‘I’ does not exist prior to this encounter with its *imago*. This then assumes not only the social nature of the formation of the ego, but also that the I’s primordial nature is necessarily fragmentary.

[Lacan 2006: 78, emphasis added]

Further, Lacan insists that the fragmentary primordial nature of the ego actualizes symptomatically in the appearance of disconnected limbs and exoscopical organs in dreams later in life. Indeed, what he is proposing is no less than a full reconsideration of the way in which identity is viewed, beginning with the Platonic equation of the psyche with the soul through Descartes’s ‘cogito’, as beginning with the self, the I, the internal. But as he says, if he were to build strictly from subjective data to build his theory of the ego, then he would be ‘lapsing into the unthinkable, that of an absolute subject’ of the Platonic/Aristotelian tradition (Lacan 2006: 79). The moment of the encounter with the mirror, for the infant, decisively tips the whole of human knowledge into being mediated by the other’s desire, constitutes its objects in an abstract equivalence due to competition from other people, and turns the I into an apparatus to which every instinctual pressure constitutes a danger, even if it corresponds to a natural maturation process. The very normalization of this maturation is henceforth dependent in man on cultural intervention.

(2006: 79, emphasis added)

Lacan’s dual emphasis on fragmentation and recuperation of alienation resonates with Derrida’s, albeit chronologically later, scepticism towards notions of the centre, origin and totality. By suggesting that the infant experiences her own body as initially fragmented, Lacan is engaging in a de-centring project himself. Whereas Derrida’s de-centring involved moving away from the characterization of the relation of the signifier and signified under ‘the regime of the sign’, as he called it, Lacan’s, however, is based on the definition of identity as unitary and total, which, judging from the term’s current popular usage, remains. Therefore, Lacan concludes, the formation of the ego or the ‘I’ is a result of a ‘misunderstanding’ (*méconnaissance*). When humans form their ‘sense of self’ or identity, he suggests, they do so, in fact, in relation to an image and as a ‘function of misrecognition’ (2006: 80). At the heart of identity is, therefore, a void, a lack.

The ‘empty subject’ of Lacan is carried through in other post-structuralist thinkers. This is especially evident in the discussions on ‘the author’ that took place among those post-structuralists who had backgrounds in literary criticism, including again Barthes, but also Michel Foucault, though he was more of a historian. But history, along with literature, is an area in which authorship plays a crucial part in, among other things, interpretation and legitimacy. In two essays, ‘The death of the author’ (Barthes 1978) and ‘What is an author?’ (Foucault 1980), the authors seemingly engage in a debate of sorts on what authorship means in the wake of structural linguistics. But upon closer inspection, the points debated are just as
much about the status of identity and subjectivity in the wake of structuralism’s discovery of the constitutive nature of language. It just so happens that Barthes and Foucault make their arguments with particular attention to literature.

One of the shared emphases is the historicization of the figure of the author in modernity. This functional demystification serves to throw a wrench into the dynamics of certainty, which tracing a set of words or a text back to an individual strives to maintain. As Barthes notes:

[T]he author is a modern figure, produced no doubt by our society insofar as, at the end of the Middle Ages, with English empiricism, French rationalism, and the personal faith of the Reformation, it discovered the prestige of the individual, or, to put it more nobly, of the ‘human person.’

(1978: 142–3)

The connections between the figure of the author and the idea of the ‘human person’ are echoed by Foucault, who coined the term the ‘figure of man’, which he, inspired by Nietzsche, suggests emerged with modernity. Thus, the importance of the author in the culture has very little to do with actual authors but with what Foucault dubs ‘the author function’. The author, as Foucault argues, emerges as a metaphor for the property-bearing individual, the hegemonic subject of the capitalist modes of production. As he writes:

It is as if the author, beginning with the moment at which he was placed in the system of property that characterizes our society, compensated for the status that he thus acquired by rediscovering the old bipolar field of discourse, systematically practicing transgression and thereby restoring danger to a writing which was now guaranteed the benefits of ownership.

(1980: 108–9)

Thus authorship is not merely the assignation of written text to a human individual, but a way of representing the subject positions that emerge in a particular socio-historical condition.

For Barthes and Foucault, there is evidence of the ‘death’ or decline of authorship. According to Barthes, linguistics has furnished an analytic instrument that demonstrates that utterance in its entirety is a void process, which functions perfectly without requiring to be filled by the person of the interlocutors: linguistically, the author is never anything more than the man who writes, just as I is no more than the man who says I: language knows a ‘subject,’ not a ‘person,’ and this subject, void outside of the very utterance which defines it, suffices to make language ‘work,’ that is, to exhaust it.

(1978: 145)

Thus, a text does not ‘release a single “theological” meaning (the “message” of the Author–God)’; rather, it is ‘a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture’ (Barthes 1978: 146). Foucault argues a similar point when he asks:

What is a work? What is this curious unity which we designate as a work? Of what elements is it composed? Is it not what an author has written? Difficulties appear immediately. If an individual were not an author, could we say that what he wrote, said, left behind in his papers, or what has been collected of his remarks, could be called a ‘work’?

(1980: 103)
Barthes and Foucault raise two important points. For one, they both raise the issue of the explanatory power of the author in the interpretation of a text, or, more broadly, the ‘work’. The text, within the idea of the modern author, is decipherable and enclosed. The work of the critic, in turn, is merely to discover ‘the Author (or his hypostases: society, history, the psyche, freedom) beneath the work: once the Author is discovered, the text is “explained:” the critic has conquered’ (Barthes 1978: 147). Against this author-centric text, Barthes argues for what he calls ‘readerly texts’. Barthes again:

[T]he unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination; but this destination can no longer be personal: the reader is a man without history, without biography, without psychology; he is only that someone who holds gathered into a single field all the paths of which the text is constituted. This is why it is absurd to hear the new writing condemned in the name of a humanism which hypocritically appoints itself the champion of the reader’s rights. 

(1978: 148)

Foucault echoes this also, describing the ‘author function’ in terms of power, specifically legitimacy. The author, specifically the name of the author, he argues, is metonymic of an entire discourse. The author’s name provides legitimacy, or, better yet, authority.

The author’s name serves to characterize a certain mode of being of discourse: the fact that the discourse has an author’s name, that one can say ‘this was written by so-and-so’ or ‘so-and-so is the author,’ shows that this discourse is not ordinary everyday speech that merely comes and goes, not something that is immediately consumable. On the contrary, it is a speech that must be received in a certain mode and that, in a given culture, must receive a certain status.

(Foucault 1980: 107)

By moving from ‘work to text’, Barthes effectively decentres the author function. The work of decentring is, in many ways, as Barthes describes, ‘counter-theological’. It is a refusal to ‘arrest meaning’ and so a refusal of a transcendental abstraction such as God, reason, science or the law (Barthes 1978: 147).

In this, there are clear overlaps with the famed ‘incredulity to metanarratives’ that Jean-Francois Lyotard pronounced in The Postmodern Condition (1984). Indeed, it must be mentioned that post-structuralism is often equated to, or even collapsed with, postmodernism. There are very sensible reasons for this. Post-structuralism, as just seen above, is largely a critique of structuralism using some of its own terms. This does very much imply certain assessments of some modern categories and ideas. But post-structuralism, that is, the writers and thinkers associated with it, does not overtly orient itself around ‘debunking’ the intellectual and political foundations of modernity.

Main criticisms of structuralism and post-structuralism

The debunking of metanarratives is part and parcel of the larger project of moving away from metaphysics, and its foundational intellectual categories. While Derrida has argued this most forcefully, due in part to his debt to Heidegger, who had already attempted a critique of metaphysics (Heidegger 2000), a case can be made to include Foucault, Barthes, Lacan and others as well. Of the many foundational categories of metaphysics, much of which has been
inherited from the Greeks, albeit translated through the Enlightenment, the one that has received most attention from structuralists and post-structuralists intending to ‘demystify’ it has been subjectivity, as can be seen in the discussion of Lacan, and especially the discussions of authorship. Subjectivity, thus, is also the major issue that critics of structuralism and post-structuralism have in the crosshairs.

Manfred Frank’s *What Is Neostructuralism?* (1989), one of the most widely cited assessments of post-structuralism, while containing many criticisms of what he calls ‘neostructuralism’, hits Derrida, Foucault and Lacan hardest on this very issue. Generally, Frank’s project is not only to explicate post-structuralism, which he does rather judiciously, but also to accuse it of ‘antirationalism’, a charge that has come from other theorists. One who comes to mind the quickest is Jürgen Habermas (1990). For Frank, and perhaps unlike Habermas, the tack he takes has to do with the unnecessary nature of the division between rationalism and its others. In fact, he suggests that the gap between rationalism and antirationalism is rather small and ultimately commensurable. Most interestingly, Frank puts forward the example of Friedrich Schleiermacher as one who was able to negotiate between the two.

Yet in spite of the conciliatory talk, Frank does have a fundamental beef with post-structuralist thinking, especially the position it stakes out regarding subjectivity. For him, the post-structuralists all too happily welcome the death of the subject. As Frank notes, ‘[b]ut it is one thing to explain the death of subjectivity as a result of the course of the world, and another thing altogether to greet it with applause, as Foucault does’.

The factual is not already the true; a ‘happy positivism’ that dissolves this difference mimics, consciously or not, the dominating power. It is true that the individual disappears more and more in the ‘code’ (of the state, of bureaucracy, of the social machine, of all varieties of discourse), which has become autonomous. And it is also correct that a dead subject emits no more cries of pain. However, that interpretation that would like to extract a scientific-historical perspective from the silence of the subject, and which culminates in the gay affirmation of a subjectless and reified machine (à la Deleuze and Guattari), appears to me to be cynical.

(Frank 1989: 9–10)

Moreover, Frank accuses this kind of position, which he attributes most frequently to Foucault, of not only ‘nonmorality’ (that is, a Nietzschean ‘beyond good and evil’ position) but even ‘amorality’. Thus, for Frank, the task is to take seriously the ‘diagnostic power of the talk about the death of the subject’ without ‘meanwhile lapsing into the opposite extreme of applauding the death of the subject on a moral level’ (1989: 10). For instance, a tack that Frank takes is to argue that structuralism and neostructuralism, while talking a big talk, do not follow through in their subjectivity rhetoric. They rely ‘explicitly or implicitly on the category of the individual’.

Even the reified statement ‘Language speaks itself’ . . . has to employ reflexive pronouns that then hypostatize what was earlier considered a characteristic of the speaking subject as a characteristic of language or of the system itself. The subject that is crossed out in the position of the individual recurs in the position of a subject of the universal: this is a classic case of the ‘return of the repressed.’

(Frank 1989: 10)

While Frank argues methodologically (and historically), sociologist Anthony Giddens takes a different approach. For Giddens, the structuralist and post-structuralist assaults on
individualized, Enlightenment-derived notions of subjectivity, which we can call ‘self-
consciousness’, are theoretically unproductive. This is especially true since this perspective
tends to side too easily with what Pierre Bourdieu (1977) calls ‘objectivism’. By this Giddens
means that ‘structure’, for instance, too easily undermines the agency of the individual actor.
In his ‘structuration theory’, Giddens suggests that

Human social activities, like some self-reproducing items in nature, are recursive.
That is to say, they are not brought into being by social actors but continually
recreated by them via the very means whereby they express themselves as actors. In and
through their activities agents reproduce the conditions that make these activities
possible.

(1986: 2)

This ‘recursivity’, which Giddens also calls ‘reflexivity’, goes against the ‘objectivist’ tendency
of structuralism as well as the ‘death of the subject’ position of post-structuralism, both of
which are reductive. On the one hand, structuralism rather simply equates human social
activities to a singular set of mechanisms. On the other hand, post-structuralism does away
with any explanation. Both, in the mind of Giddens, are misguided.

We should guard against two forms of reductionism . . . One is a reductive conception of
institutions which, in seeking to show the foundation of institutions in the unconscious,
fails to leave sufficient play for the operation of autonomous social forces. The second is
a reductive theory of consciousness which, wanting to show how much of social life is
governed by dark currents outside the scope of actors’ awareness [structuralism], cannot
adequately grasp the level of control which agents are characteristically able to sustain
reflexively over their conduct.

(1986: 5)

Structuration theory, and its conceptualization of ‘reflexivity’, therefore allows for an under-
standing of human social action that includes both ‘structure’ and ‘agency’, to use two rather
hackneyed though extant sociological terms. Agents, or individual actors, participate in the
constitution of structures.

More importantly, for the present concerns, reflexivity occasions a new way of thinking
about the subject beyond ‘self-consciousness’. For Giddens, there is no doubt that all of social
life is ‘monitored’ by the self. This monitored character, however, does not mean that terms
such as ‘purpose’ or ‘intention’, ‘reason’, ‘motive’, and so on can so easily be accepted without
any sort of critical modification. The usage of these terms has been, as Giddens rightly points
out, ‘associated with a hermeneutical voluntarism, and because they extricate human action
from the contextuality of time-space’ (1986: 3).

To remove, or decontextualize, human action would be to de-emphasize what Giddens
calls ‘practical consciousness’, which ‘consists of all things which actors know tacitly about
how to “go on” in the contexts of social life without being able to give them direct discursive
expression’ (1986: xxiii). Practical consciousness plays a particularly important role in
structuration theory, especially in the way it formulates the human subject. In acknowledging
and embracing the subject’s inability to articulate the rules and contexts that we may call
‘structure’, Giddens, largely influenced by psychoanalysis and Bourdieu, does not appeal
to the human individual’s ability to understand, via language or anything else, that which
is ‘structuring’ his or her actions. This is a position that comes close to that of structuralism
Structuralism and post-structuralism

in that it positions human action within a matrix of possibilities that are happening beyond the control of the individual subject. But there is a crucial difference. For Giddens, structures are not merely ‘rules’ or ‘resources’, as structuralism and post-structuralism would have it in their elision of structure as language. Is not language, he asks, ‘embedded in the concrete activities of day-to-day life’ (1986: xvi)? And thus, Giddens leads us to his definition of structure:

Structure thus refers, in social analysis, to the structuring properties allowing the binding of time-space in social systems, the properties which make it possible for discernibly similar social practices to exist across varying spans of time and space and which lend them ‘systemic’ form. To say that structure is a ‘virtual order’ of transformative relations means that social systems, as reproduced social practices, do not have ‘structures’ but rather exhibit ‘structural properties’ and that structure exists, as time-space presence, only in its instantiations in such practices and as memory traces orienting the conduct of knowledgeable human agents.

(1986: 17)

What distinguishes structuration from structuralisms of various kinds is not only his emphasis on practices and memory, not language, but the insistence that the human agents are knowledgeable and are in on the social processes that construct the environments in which they live. This ‘knowledgeability’ requires a stable entity called the subject. This stable subjectivity is what Giddens calls ‘ontological security’. Ontological security is a sense of order in one’s life. It expresses

an autonomy of bodily control with predictable routines. The psychological origins of ontological security are to be found in basic anxiety-controlling mechanisms... hierarchically ordered as components of personality. The generation of feelings of trust in others, as the deepest lying element of the basic security system, depends substantially upon predictable and caring routines established by parental figures.

(1986: 50)

Routinization is key here, especially as it relates to reflexivity, as it is the ‘continual “reproving”’ of the familiar in circumstances of substantial ontological security’ (Giddens 1986: 104). Hence, Giddens offers up ‘a sense of place’ as being of ‘major importance in the sustaining of ontological security’. This is so, he argues, because of the ‘psychological tie between the biography of the individual and the locales that are the settings of time-space paths through which the individual moves’ (1986: 367). He goes on: ‘Feelings of identification with larger locales – regions, nations, etc. – seem distinguishable from those bred and reinforced by the localized contexts of day-to-day life. The latter are probably much more important in respect of the reproduction of large-scale institutional continuities’ (ibid.).

The importance that Giddens places on ‘identification’ looms rather large for his position vis-à-vis structuralism and post-structuralism. Identification is usually dealing with singularities: individual subjects identifying with individual places, notwithstanding differences in scope and scale in the examples Giddens provides (regions, nations, etc.). But post-structuralism, for the most part, views subjectivity to be a product of misidentification, as noted earlier with Lacan. For Giddens, this would harm ontological security. Giddens’s reflexive subject is, at the end, a stable one.
Lasting importance and future developments of structuralism and post-structuralism

Today, principles of structuralism and post-structuralism have made their way into a variety of disciplines. They can be found in the continually widespread scepticism towards foundationalism and anti-essentialism across history, sociology, media studies and theology. This section will review some of the ways in which this has occurred along the lines of two recurring themes.

We can begin by returning to Giddens’s ‘ontological security’. In an article that assesses the ‘reflexive modernization’ thesis, most notably associated with the work of German social theorist Ulrich Beck and Giddens, sociologist Scott Lash offers a critique of the subject theory at the root of Giddens’s ‘ontological security’. Lying beneath Giddens’s notion of ‘ontological security’, Lash argues, is a commitment to ‘order’, that is, ‘how we can cope with . . . psychic and social hazards, and maintain reasonable levels of order and stability in our personalities and in society’ (Beck, Giddens and Lash 1994: 117). Thus for Giddens the default setting, or normative mode, of the subject in the contemporary world is what he dubs ‘rational individualism’. But, as Lash suggests, there are large-scale social transformations that have occurred that pose a challenge to such a view of subjectivity, particularly to one such as ‘rational individualism’ embedded in a strong subject–object dichotomy. This is especially so as the means of social formation have been recast by the rise of new technologies and media systems (Beck et al. 1994: 148).

The social analyst of new media technologies who has most productively theorized these changes in the context of post-structuralism has been the late Mark Poster. In The Mode of Information, Poster diagnoses a ‘generalized destabilization of the subject’ wherein ‘the subject is no longer located in a point in absolute time/space, enjoying a physical, fixed vantage point from which rationally to calculate its options’ (1990: 15). This has come to be thanks to ‘changes in communication patterns’, which, in turn, ‘involve changes in the subject’ (1990: 11). What has occurred with the rise of new media technologies is the intensification of the ‘crisis of representation’, in which words lose their connection with things and come to stand in the place of things, in short, when language represents itself. The complex linguistic worlds of the media, the computer and the databases it can access, the surveillance capabilities of the state and the corporation, and finally, the discourses of science, are each realms in which the representational function of language has been placed in question by different communicational patterns each of which shift to the forefront the self-referential aspect of language.

(1990: 13)

With words separated from things (Poster’s way of designating the arbitrary signifier of Saussure), there is inevitably a destabilizing effect on ‘the rational individual or centered subject whose imagined autonomy is associated with the capacity to link sign and referent, word and thing, in short a representational function of language’ (Poster 1990: 14). Moreover, in this context, it ‘becomes pointless’, as Poster states, ‘for the subject to distinguish a “real” existing “behind” the flow of signifiers, and as a consequence social life in part becomes a practice of positioning subjects to receive and interpret messages’. Thus the mode of information puts into question how subjectivity looks, what form it takes or, as Poster says, its ‘very shape’ (1990: 15).

Beyond new media studies, structuralist and post-structuralist approaches can be found in the discipline of history, no better embodied than in the work of Hayden White. The
founding editor of *History and Theory*, a journal that did a lot in order to bring structuralist and post-structuralist perspectives to the attention of historians, White, in *The Tropics of Discourse* (1985), considered a classic in the discipline, provides the most distilled argument for the importance of these perspectives for historiography. In it, White makes a strong case for viewing ‘historical texts as literary artifacts’ and, in doing so, articulates something called *metahistory*, an approach to history that asks about the way in which historical evidence and explanations are constructed (1985: 81). It not only asks about how historians do what they do but also aims to ‘demystify’ it. If so inclined, we could even call it an ‘anti-metaphysical’, or decentred, approach to history. If that is the case, then it is necessary to see what aspects of mainstream historiography White critiques, in order to see the influence of post-structuralism on his thinking.

For White, the practice of history gains its explanatory power largely by ‘making stories out of mere chronicles’, a systematic operation of commanding authority and authorship through ‘emplotment’. Emplotment is the encoding of ‘facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific kinds of plot structures’ (1985: 83). These techniques are, however, not so foreign, as they are reflective of the way in which scientific explanation works, as White notes. It is simply to ‘familiarize the unfamiliar’ by making ‘sense of a set of events which appears strange, enigmatic, or mysterious in its immediate manifestations to encode the set of terms of culturally provided categories, such as metaphysical concepts, religious beliefs, or story forms’ (ibid.). In historiography, ‘data’ are indeed foreign or strange ‘simply by virtue of their distance from us in time and their origin in a way of life different from our own’ (White 1985: 86). (This sentiment could also be extended to bear on other disciplines.) Quite simply, historians translate fact into fictions but do not like to think so. As White puts it:

> The evasion of the implications of the fictive nature of historical narrative is in part a consequence of the utility of the concept of ‘history’ for the definition of other types of discourse. ‘History’ can be set over against ‘science’ by virtue of its want of conceptual rigor and failure to produce the kinds of universal laws that the sciences characteristically seek to produce. Similarly, ‘history’ can be set over against ‘literature’ by virtue of its interest in the ‘actual’ rather than the ‘possible,’ which is supposedly the object of representation of ‘literary’ works. Thus, within a long and distinguished critical tradition that has sought to determine what is real and what is ‘imagined’ in the novel, history has served as a kind of archetype of the ‘realistic’ pole of representation.

(1985: 89)

Otherwise stated, there is an investment in denying (or repressing) the fictive character of history because it operates so strongly in an epistemological capacity for other discourses, especially literature. Undoubtedly, the arguments made here are reflective of the previous discussion of Barthes and Foucault. For White, as with Foucault and Barthes, there is no attachment to the notion of the incrementality of knowledge, which sciencechiefly holds dear. ‘Our knowledge of the past may increase incrementally’, he writes, ‘but our understanding of it does not’ (1985: 89).

History, and historiography, is but a fiction. Yet, we must be careful not to misread the ‘but’ here. For White, to call something ‘fiction’ is in no way disparaging. Rather it is to come to grips with the reality of history; therefore to think of history as the imposition of a formal coherency on the world ‘in no way detracts from it’. If it were to, then it would mean ‘literature did not teach us anything about reality, but was a product of an imagination which was not of this world but some other, inhuman one’ (White 1985: 99).
At the very least, we can see the influence of this type of approach to scholarship in the emergence of methodologies and theoretical stances that unabashedly blur the line between fiction and the social sciences/humanities. Stephen Pföhl, for instance, in Death at the Parasite Café (1992), writes a collage using various methods which he calls ‘social science fiction’. A similar tack is taken by Avital Ronell, a Derridean, in The Telephone Book (1991), which contains comics in addition to academic prose.

What is common in Pföhl and Ronell is the deployment of the first person. Pföhl, the sociologist, describes the kind of ethnography he writes as ‘surreal’. ‘It invites its readers’, he writes, ‘not so much to agree with the analysis set forth by its author, but to enter actively into the process of re-searching of one’s own HIStorical and biographically given position’ (1990: 428). This explains the highly stylized and unusual nature of his writing, especially in comparison with most other social science.

This is the Parasite Café, a dark if brilliantly enlightened space of postmodernity where a transnational host of corporate informational operatives feed upon the digitally coded flesh of others. Here, bodies are being transferentially invaded and then extended outward into the consumptive networkings of media itself . . . This is the story of the postmodern.

What are the social, historical, economic roots of a society of such immense material abstraction? How might the disembodied lure and seductive violence of such a society be subverted, diverted, or transformed? For me these are urgent questions. Why only this morning I found myself eating before the screen, or after, when suddenly my eyes/I’s were transferred across the televisionary space of this our ungiving HIStorical present . . . 20 seconds into the future. This is a story of the violent rituals of an ultramodernizing first world culture. This is not a pleasing story to tell.

(1990: 424)

Ronell similarly adopts the first person along with a unique (for academic writing) style. She begins an essay in the following manner:

Please bear with me. I don’t know how it started but when it happened, I got up and lit a cigarette, kind of serenely. The click was still resonating in my ear, the smoke crawled up to where it hurt. I had no image, just a sonic blaze in my head.

When they hung up on me, it felt like an amputation. I got to thinking how it was by a thin thread that everything had been related. As long as they kept calling, contact was never really broken, nor was the break clean. This time it was over. I had heard the click, like a gun pointed at your head. Like I said, I got to thinking. About the amputation, to be exact. In a sense, it was a story about the invention of a body part. I had my ear trained on the telephone. I don’t know where their voices went when I picked up the receiver, whether they were coming from elsewhere or coming from my insides.

(1991: 75)

Though there remain restrictions on form as well as institutional factors, such as the increasingly precarious nature of tenure in North America and Europe, which results in the disciplining of academic writing in both substance and form, there is nevertheless a sign that a shift is under way in the way that academic writing reads and also is distributed. For instance, recent years have seen an uptick in journals and scholarly associations with websites as well as micro-sites, which straddle the line between ‘formal’ academic writing and ‘less formal’
blogging. This not only allows for a quicker turnaround time for academics to engage with events on the ground, but it also reorients, and perhaps even reconstitutes, what theorizing is. It is undoubtedly the case that to make a direct link between structuralism and post-structuralism and shifts in the technological conventions of intellectualism is speculative; I would nevertheless argue that these developments could not have occurred without the structuralisms’ rise. As academic discourse shifts along with new media, it will undoubtedly be the case that this trend will continue. While structuralism and post-structuralism may have injected their ideas and approaches into the work of researchers of many stripes, their most lasting impact may be of their no-holds-barred attitude towards overarching principles of any kind, not excluding those of the academy.

Note

1 This chapter contains elements of my chapter in Han (2011).

References