The fragmentation of identity
Post-structuralist and postmodern theories

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Introduction

Unfortunately, the terms “post-structuralism” and “postmodernism” are sources of confusion too often within and outside the halls of the academy. At times collapsed into each other, and also given the jingoistic moniker of “French theory” (Cusset 2008), post-structuralism and postmodernism, though perhaps already passé, are still terms that are worth clarifying. If anything, though they are rarely understood (well at least), post-structuralist and postmodern thought, at this point, are too widely influential in a variety of disciplines not to be taken seriously. And it is precisely because post-structuralist and postmodern thought have gained some kind of “legitimacy” in Western academic discourse that I believe it is high time to revisit it.

Broadly speaking, post-structuralism is an intellectual trend (as distinct from an intellectual movement) that began sometime in the 1960s in France. As inspiration, it drew from structuralism, an approach to the study of social phenomena that was rooted in the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure. Post-structuralism, simultaneously an immanent critique and logical extension of structuralism, also drew from the work of the Swiss linguist but with a critical difference on key issues. Associated with it is an entire generation of French thinkers including Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Jean Baudrillard among others.

Postmodernism, which, of the two, has gained far more traction in non-academic contexts, in an ironic twist of fate, has become the most floating of signifiers, used now to describe everything from the American comedy series *The Simpsons* to contemporary capitalism. Many view the term to have emerged, not in the social sciences or philosophy, as did “structuralism” and “post-structuralism,” but in architecture in the works of figures such as Robert Venturi, which later on led to its use in various contexts (Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour 1972).

In the context of this collection, it is important to revisit post-structuralism and postmodernism with specific attention paid to the concept of identity, since it was the particular implications for prior theories of identity that post-structuralist and postmodern critique challenged, that
sounded the alarm for a sustained backlash in the academy. One of the major discourses that stemmed from post-structuralist and postmodern thought has been what has been called “death of the Subject.” By this, many of post-structuralism and postmodernism’s critics were trying to point out that the logical extension of the critique of the Enlightenment and its modern categories of knowledge that characterized much of post-structuralist and postmodern theory would mean that human subjectivity itself was at stake.

Surprisingly enough, they were not wrong.

Post-structuralist and postmodern thought, if it is to be categorized at all, can be described in the words of the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, who was one of the first to use the term “postmodern” – “incredulity to metanarratives” (Lyotard 1984). Of the several metanarratives he lists, along with Hegel’s teleological dialectics of Spirit and the hermeneutics of meaning, is what he refers to as the “emancipation” of the rational subject. The rational subject is the *cogito* ego of Descartes, a founding principle upon which all of modern thought is based. The Cartesian *cogito* privileges the individual subject as the bearer of Reason, and separates her from objects. The subject, in short, is the observer; the object is observed. Indeed, even Kant’s Three Critiques, which were to have been a “Copernican revolution” in the realm of the subject–object problem, owed much intellectual debt to Descartes. By expressing skepticism toward the narrative of the self, Lyotard was up-ending the entire Western epistemological tradition that was based on the mutual exclusivity of subject and object.

Fredric Jameson, perhaps the most well-known theorist of the postmodern in North America, argues along these lines that the “death of the subject” can be viewed in relation to the changes in cultural production and capitalism (Jameson 1998). According to Jameson, the discourse surrounding the death of the subject is speaking directly about a particular kind of subject – the bourgeois individual subject. If one chooses to look in the history of aesthetic modernism, the idea that one’s art is “in some way organically linked to the conception of a unique self and private identity, a unique personality and individuality, which can be expected to generate its own unique vision of the world and to forge its own unique unmistakable style” has withered away due, in part, to the type of ideological shift correlative to the changes in the capitalist mode of production (ibid.: 115). Hence, the classic age of “competitive capitalism” wrought the nuclear family, social class and individualism in the arts. In contemporary corporate capitalism, this no longer exists. Yet, Jameson also notes that there can be another way of looking at the “death of the subject,” which he describes as the “post-structuralist position.” This position maintains that not only is the bourgeois, individual subject passé but it may have never existed. It is, according to this position, a myth, “merely a philosophical and cultural mystification which sought to persuade people that they ‘had’ individual subjects and possessed this unique personal identity” (ibid.: 115).

This chapter will provide an overview of key developments in post-structuralism and postmodernism that bear most heavily on identity studies. It will begin with a brief account of structuralism, focusing on the use of Saussurian linguistics by Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Derrida, and Jacques Lacan. The importance of the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure cannot be overemphasized in the trajectory of post-structuralist and postmodern theory. Then, it will proceed to looking at key figures in post-structuralism and postmodernism, including Judith Butler, Donna Haraway, and Jean Baudrillard, as well as some of their key interlocutors including Nancy Fraser and Anthony Giddens, teasing out key arguments that resonate most strongly to theories of identity. The chapter concludes with a look at the future directions of post-structuralist and postmodern identity studies.
Historical and intellectual development of structuralist and post-structuralist critiques of identity

In the lore surrounding post-structuralism, a paper by philosopher Jacques Derrida called “Structure, sign and play in the human sciences,” presented at the Johns Hopkins University in 1966 for a conference entitled “The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man,” is viewed to have signaled the beginning of post-structuralism (though the irony seems lost to many who hold this position since it would be quite un-Derridean to posit an “origin” of post-structuralism, as will be made clear below). Whether one chooses to invest in the aura of this event or not, it is indeed the case that post-structuralism, though perhaps yet unnamed and unknown as such at the time, began to gel around a group of concepts and positions that would eventually be coherent enough for scholars to then proceed to draw from it, resulting in its influence in a variety of academic fields, including art history, psychoanalysis, anthropology, sociology and literature.

As the “post-” makes clear, 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. Hence, “Structure, sign and play” is at once a pointed critique of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s structural anthropology, as it is 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 College de France, one of the most distinguished academic posts any French intellectual could attain, but also his book *Savage Mind* had been published to 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 at the hands of structuralism. Hence, to offer a critical reading of Lévi-Strauss, as Derrida did, was to attack the leading intellectual in France.

Structuralism differed from existentialism in key ways. While existentialism drew from phenomenology and thus inherited the latter’s main analytic tool – consciousness – structuralism drew from the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, effectively 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 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, in another context, called “the linguistic turn.”

Saussure’s key insights in *Course in General Linguistics* (1966), collected and published posthumously by his students, consisted of two radical separations: (1) between *la langue* (language itself) and *parole* (speech), (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 individual production of meaningful statements; in other words, the way in which 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, but do not engage 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 suggests that the relationship between the signifier and
signified was arbitrary. To put a twist to his famous example, the word “tree” made up of the letters “t,” “r,” and “e” have 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 of “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 a rooted in a system of differences held tenously 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 post-war 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 anthropology, Claude 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 1955). Myths, according to Lévi-Strass, 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 after-life, 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, *la langue* of myth if you will, he argues that myths contain a similar structure across cultures though varying in content, even modern ones. In widely read essay “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 is 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 are universal, a markedly different position from those of anthropologists who had treated so-called primitive societies’ systems of cultural symbols as chaotic and unorganized.

In turn, Derrida’s “Structure, sign and play” (1978) 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 on his concept of the “Center,” one of the most oft-used phrases of Derrida’s philosophy. 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 popular lexicon, as some commentators have already suggested, Derrida’s philosophy could be better described as “de-centering.” “Center” is how Derrida explains the aspect of “structure” that holds, in his estimation, 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
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limit what we might call the *freeplay* of the structure*” (Derrida 1978: 352). This center 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 difference.

(Derrida 1978: 358)

In both statements, Derrida is taking from 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 allowed viewing “everything” as “discourse,” he is prefiguring a later statement that he became quite famous for: “There is no outside-text” (Derrida 1998: 158). (As we shall see below, it is this statement above others, which caused most trouble for skeptics of Derrida and post-structuralism.)

Consequently, it is no surprise that his critique of Lévi-Strauss begins from, what he views to be the “center” of 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 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 linguistics 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 an 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.

(Derrida 1978: 289)

“Freeplay” 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 lalangue. A signifier such as the word “cow” does not conjure an actual beast when used by a speaker nor when written on a page. In every instance of signification, for Derrida, exists 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: 292)

In this way, Derrida juxtaposes his reading of Saussure to Lévi-Strauss, thus concluding that there are two approaches to structure – one based on the sign, the other based on freeplay. The former emphasizes “the sign” as the Center, 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 in no small part, one of the major reasons why so many American scholars had such difficulty with his work.

Major claims and developments, and key contributions of post-structuralist perspectives of identity

In this brief engagement with the work of Saussure, Lévi-Strauss and Derrida, I have attempted to draw out the principle themes of post-structuralism – center, origin and totality. These three themes, though they are particular to Derrida’s lexicon, do indeed point us toward some of the key concepts utilized by post-structuralist thinkers who have contributed to new understandings of identity. Although Derrida does not explicitly address issues of identity, one can find in the work of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan similar themes that are more explicitly oriented toward the study of identity, or in this case, the Freudian “ego” or more properly “the I.”

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 imago, and thus attaining 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” (Lacan 2006: 76). Prior to this stage, the infant experiences her body as fragmented, as different pieces – an arm here, 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.

[T]he mirror stage is a drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation – and, for the subject caught up in the lure of spatial identification, turns out fantasies that proceed from a fragmented image of the body to what I will call an “orthopedic” form of its totality – to the finally donned armor of an alienating identity that will mark his entire mental development with its rigid structure.

(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 (ibid.: 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. (ibid.: 79; emphasis added)

Lacan’s dual emphasis on fragmentation and recuperation of alienation resonates with Derrida’s, albeit chronologically later, skepticism toward notions of the Center, origin and totality. By suggesting that the infant’s experiences her own body as initially fragmented, Lacan is engaged in a de-centering project himself. Whereas Derrida’s decentering 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 from the definition of identity as unitary and total, which judging from the term’s current popular usage remains. Indeed even today, some North American recent college graduates go off on road trips seeking their “true” identities, as if it were a tangible thing that one could seek and adopt. Therefore, Lacan concludes, the formation of the ego or the “I” is a result of a “misunderstanding” [méconnaissance]. At the very moment when humans are forming their “sense of self” or identity, he suggests, it is, in fact, with an image and a “function of misrecognition” (ibid.: 80). At the heart of identity is, therefore, a void, a lack.

Thus, we can view Derrida and Lacan as prototypes for subsequent post-structuralist thought on identity. The themes explored above – de-centering, freeplay, (anti-) origin, and (anti-) totality – become articulated as a move away from the self-sameness of the fixed notion of modern identity through a critique of categorizations. If modern identities are based on a logic of accumulation, in which one’s identity can be attributed to her membership into a variety of categories such as race, gender, class, religion, ethnicity, etc., then postmodern identities reject categories in favor of fluidity.

**Main criticisms of post-structuralist perspectives of identity**

To a large extent, the criticisms of post-structuralist and postmodern theories of identity have been launched within the realm of politics. In particular, critics have charged theorists in this tradition of being apolitical. In other words, they claim that a post-structuralist and postmodern view of identity would only lead to political fragmentation and, potentially, complacency. This tension played itself out most demonstrably in the debates of the 1980s and 1990s. In order to review some of the main criticisms of post-structuralist and postmodern theories of identity, let us look with some level of detail at a very specific debate about identity-politics within feminist theory. We can treat it as a microcosm of the core issues that lay underneath the detractions of post-structuralist and postmodern theories of identity.
One of the major intellectual inheritors of post-structuralist identity theory in America has been Judith Butler, whose early work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* is a contemporary classic. Drawing from Derrida, Butler’s work on gender argues against an essentialist, biological notion of gender and sexual identity in favor of a performative one. In her much anthologized essay “Imitation and gender insubordination” (1991), Butler begins by rejecting identity categories, including “lesbian” and “gay,” as they “tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points of a liberatory contestation of that very oppression” (p. 558). Butler’s resistance to fixed categories of “gay” or “lesbian” is indicative of the intellectual movement of which she is arguably the chief theorist – queer theory. Once a common homophobic slur in the Anglophone world, “queer” was reinterpreted by the gay liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s as a label of self-identification to remove the stigma of the term. Additionally, “queer” also has the added bonus of not reproducing the binary logic of “heterosexual/homosexual” and “male/female,” which, as we shall see, is something that Butler attempts to move away from in her analysis of gay/lesbian identity.

Drawing from Esther Newton’s work on drag, Butler asserts that gender identity is always an imitation of a set of behavioral practices that are not biologically innate but a result of the social process of imitation much like drag. While “drag” is commonly understood as a member of one gender imitating (usually comically) the normative behaviors of another, Butler widens this meaning to encompass all gender practices, thus claiming that “drag enacts the very structure of impersonation by which any gender is assumed” (p. 563; emphasis added). She, however, radicalizes the notion of drag by delinking it from being a “copy” of an “originary” gendered behavior:

Drag is not the putting on of a gender that belongs properly to some other group, i.e. an act of expropriation or appropriation that assumes that gender is the rightful property of sex, that “masculine” belongs to “male” and “feminine” belongs to “female.” There is no “proper” gender, a gender proper to one sex rather than another, which is in some sense that sex’s cultural property . . . Drag constitutes the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn and, done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation . . . [G]ender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original. (p. 563)

In arguing that gender identity is not only delinked from sex but, more importantly, that no set of behaviors are exclusively a property of one sex or another, Butler is effectively evoking the key themes of post-structuralism as represented by Derrida and Lacan. On the one hand, by suggesting that all identity is performed, Butler is evoking the Derridean notion of “freplay,” by removing the centrality of the sex-gender correlation that is so naturalized in contemporary society. Further, the idea of gender as a copy or “imitation without an original,” her critique of an “originary” masculine or feminine behavior, recalls Derrida’s critique of the “origin” of myths or what he calls “the Center.”

According to Butler, what is constructed, as “the Center” or the “origin,” is heterosexuality. All others are seen as copies, imitations or fakes. However, she contends that the logic of homophobia is not simply rooted seeing homosexual identity as a copy of straight identity but, moreover, an investment in a system of knowledge that privileges the “originary” or the real. Within this framework, all imitations are delegitimized. Thus, in reference to the heterosexist charge that queens and butches and femmes are “copies” of a heterosexual original, Butler retorts:
Logically, this notion of an “origin” is suspect, for how can something operate as an origin if there are no secondary consequences which retrospectively confirm the originality of that origin? The origin requires its derivatives in order to affirm itself as an origin, for origins only make sense to the extent that they are differentiated from that which they produce as derivatives. Hence, if it were not for the notion of the homosexual as copy, there would be no construct of heterosexuality as origin.

(p. 563)

In other words, heterosexuality, the purported “original” sexuality, requires its “fakes” to maintain its originary status. Heterosexuality and homosexuality, then, are locked into a definitional relationship in which each term comes to be and attains its meaning through the differentiation of the other, without a stable ground. “The parodic or imitative effect of gay identities [as queens, butches or femmes],” Butler concludes, “works neither to copy nor to emulate heterosexuality, but rather, to expose heterosexuality as an incessant and panicked imitation of its own naturalized idealization” (p. 564). For Butler, identity, more broadly, is not so much rooted in “ontological security” as sociologist Anthony Giddens has argued (Giddens 1991), but is an unstable process, inverting the unease that instability usually connotes. Instability, that is, the uncategorizability of identity, in Butler’s view, does not cause existential anxiety but rather provides a certain kind of “pleasure” (Butler 1991: 558).

The emergence and widespread influence of Butler’s and sympathetic approaches to identity in addition to the fall of socialism as well as the surfacing of what were called “new social movements” created in the 1980s and 1990s a rather lively debate around the politics of identity. Social theorists of various disciplinary backgrounds weighed in on the merits of social movements rooted in newly visible and politicized identities such as LGBT identities in lieu of older, more traditional identitarian positions such as “working class.” One of the major criticisms of the identity theory proposed by Butler has come from socialist-feminist social theorist Nancy Fraser, who has had several exchanges in books and journals with Butler regarding the politics of identity.

Fraser’s critique of Butler begins from an analytic separation between a politics of recognition and a politics of redistribution. The former, encompassing Butler and likeminded post-structuralist theories of identity, work to destabilize traditional identity categories so as to effect a multitude of identities. This, in Fraser’s estimation, comes precisely at the wrong time in the history of capitalism. On the one hand, the call to recognize various identities are coming when issues of economic justice are much more pertinent, or so Fraser claims, in an era of unfettered global capitalism, and serves to merely complicate the issue of economic justice. This, she argues, is indicative of a “culturalist” bias in Butler and others. On the other hand, Fraser argues, Butler’s position also promotes a particularism in left politics, leaving little to no room for coalition building based on commonalities. Further, this position reifies identities, she contends:

In this way, culturalist proponents of identity-politics simply reverse the claims of an earlier form of vulgar Marxist economism: they allow the politics of recognition to displace the politics of redistribution, just as vulgar Marxism once allowed the politics of redistribution to displace the politics of recognition. In fact, vulgar culturalism is no more adequate for understanding contemporary society than vulgar economism was.

(Fraser 2000: 111)

Judging from this line of argument, it is unsurprising that a repeated theme in the various critiques of Butler has been on the issue of what Fraser perceives to be a lack of attention paid
to social structure and too much attention paid to language. This, Fraser goes on to argue, is a symptom of post-structuralism’s larger problem of ahistoricism as it relies on linguistic analysis, which Fraser accuses of being transhistorical. Thus, in lieu of Butler’s approach, Fraser opts for what she calls the “status model” as opposed to the “identity model” that “can remedy misrecognition without encouraging displacement and reification,” since it understands recognition as a proxy of economic class (Fraser 2000: 120).

The key differences between Fraser and Butler, and in turn those between socialist-feminism and post-structuralism, are thus made clear in viewing the identity model in opposition to the status model. Fraser’s concern is with what she calls the politics of redistribution, which have to do with issues of economic justice in the face of structured inequality in capitalist society. Butler’s, however, is a social theory of differences that does not separate issues of economic redistribution from issues that are “merely cultural,” as Butler notes in tongue-in-cheek fashion. In her estimation, Fraser’s argument is too subservient to the idea of a unified left, which, as far as Butler is concerned, overlooks the differences within identity movements and deems the issues of recognition as secondary. For her, fragmentation within “the Left” shows the shaky ground upon which the idea of a unified Left stood upon:

Factionalization, understood as the process whereby one identity excludes another in order to fortify its own unity and coherence, makes the mistake of locating the problem of difference as that which emerges between one identity and another; but difference is the condition of possibility of identity or, rather, its constitutive limit: what makes its articulation possible at the same time what makes any final or closed articulation possible.

(Butler 1998: 37)

In sum, there is no essential or universal Left experience for Left identity to appeal to.

**Major claims and developments, and key contributions of postmodern perspectives of identity**

In 1980, another conference occurred, though in France this time, presented by Jean-Luc Nancy and Phillip Lacoue-Labarthe, on the work of Jacques Derrida and the political, entitled “Les Fins de l’homme” (“The ends of man”). If we are to call “Structure, sign and play” as the “beginning” of post-structuralism, then we can tentatively call “The ends of man” conference the beginning of post-post-structuralism, which is how one could view “postmodernism.” As the name of the conference would suggest, a major tenet of post-post-structuralism, which we can cautiously call “postmodern,” is a critique of humanism in particular.

For post-structuralists such as Derrida and even more so Michel Foucault, who referred to the “Figure of Man,” in hopes of labeling it as a discursive formation, against the normative claim of the “givens” of human nature. Humanism was a remnant of metaphysics, a leftover of the Enlightenment, which while it tooted its own secularist horn, functionally replaced “God” for “the human” as its holy category. Hence, the critique of identity put forth by post-structuralist theories was pushed to the limit in postmodern theories of identity, to the point of challenging human ontology itself.

This is made no clearer than in the contemporary discourse around the post-human and the cyborg, of which Donna Haraway made the first call in her “A manifesto for cyborgs: science, technology and socialist feminism in the 1980s” (Haraway 1990). The image of the cyborg is a rhetorical and political strategy that Haraway deploys in order to accomplish one of the major themes of her essay – hybridity. “A cyborg,” she writes, “is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of
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machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (ibid.: 191). As Haraway argues, what a post-modernist theory of identity demands is a reconsideration of the boundaries of what any identity is. In her case, she is most concerned with feminism, and thus what counts as “women’s experience.” According to her, “women’s experience,” the collective object of feminism, is built upon a totalized, and abstracted, view of what binds women together and is political fiction, albeit useful at times. Cyborg, she contends, could serve a similar function though without an appeal to an originary or natural unity.

Like Butler, Haraway suggests that there is a “pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction” (ibid.). The last portion, about responsibility of the construction of categories, is perhaps the key phrase in the entirety of the “Cyborg Manifesto,” as it has been subsequently called. Haraway’s use of the image of the cyborg is not so much a rejection of the existence of categories, but a call to try to acknowledge the social, historical and political construction of them, though they take on such magnitude in everyday life that they take on a “givenness” or (second-) natural state. Therefore, one can view the overall project of the cyborg manifesto as the de-naturalization of categories of thought, especially one in particular – the human.

Though according to Genesis the human emerged as imago Dei from dust, it has always been defined in relation to beings considered non-human – one being animal, the other being machine. But, according to Haraway, the distinctions between animal/human/machine have become “leaky” thanks to advances in biology, evolutionary theory, cybernetics, and microelectronic technologies, which are indicative of a greater diminishing boundary – between physical and nonphysical. Thus, the cyborg is representative of a kind of identity that takes into account these various diminishing distinctions that, for Haraway, signal a new way of thinking about identities and standpoints as always partial and contradictory, or, as she is noted for putting it, fractured:

Identities seem contradictory, partial, and strategic. With the hard-won recognition of their social and historical constitution, gender, race, and class cannot provide the basis for belief in “essential” unity. There is nothing about being “female” that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as “being” female, itself a highly other social practices . . . Which identities are available to ground such a potent political myth called “us,” and what could motivate enlistment in this collectivity?

(Haraway 1990: 197)

Though it is clear that Haraway displays the anti-essentialism of Butler, and shares the suspicion of the politics grounded in a concept of “us,” what distinguishes her is the historical nature of her argument for cyborg imagery. The cyborg, she argues, is necessitated by an intensification of the relationship between capitalism and technoscience, whereby a major shift in social, economic, and political relations – the changes in domesticity, economic neoliberalization, the decline of the American welfare state, among other things – have caused a related shift in the epistemological assumptions of modernity, the most crucial of which in her estimation is dualism:

Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves. This is a dream not of a common language but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia.

( ibid.: 223)

Thus, to appeal to the category of “woman” based on something such as “women’s experience” is to deny not only the multitude of different experiences but to orient a politics that is
unreflective of the types (or informatics, as Haraway refers to them) of domination that exist in late twentieth-century capitalist societies.

It should be noted here that Haraway’s arguments can be read as having parallels to Fraser’s, especially in either theorist’s resistance to the reification of identity. They, however, come to this end from very different routes. Fraser’s argument against the reification of identity stems from the privileging of labor and class in the articulation of left politics. Hence, “new” identities, such as those based on race, gender, and sexuality, that ask for recognition become distractions to the goals of economic redistributive justice. Haraway, on the other hand, resists the reification of identity based on a suspicion of any unitary thinking, a trait she shares with Butler. Thus, to form a politics based on a rigid categories is, for her, a failure of epistemology to get beyond humanism.

We can, at this point, say that Haraway’s cyborg brings into relief the vast epistemological suspicion characteristic of postmodern thought. Indeed, this stems from the reading of Saussure that highlights the arbitrariness of the signifier. The signifier does not have a natural relation to that which is being signified. Let us explore these themes in greater detail. For the epistemological suspicion, we will look at the work of Jean Baudrillard, whose early work consisted of attempts to synthesize Marx and Saussure and who was unquestionably one of the leading voices of the postmodern epistemological challenge. As brilliant an analyst of contemporary culture as he was an intellectual provocateur (he once expressed his desire to be known as the “[Salman] Rushdie of the Left”), Baudrillard looks at the role of media technologies that function to represent reality and, more scandalously, the separation of reality from its representation, in many of his key works. Like other post-structuralists and postmodernists, Baudrillard frequently uses Saussurian linguistics in his writings. But to say that Baudrillard “uses” anything is a bit of a misnomer as he turns “Saussure against Saussure.” For instance, he rejects Saussure’s attempt to neatly systematize the process of signification. Indeed like subsequent commentators on Saussure such as Lévi-Strauss and Derrida, Baudrillard pulls from structural linguistics the potentiality of its theory of language as a system of differences and applies it to, most fruitfully, two aspects of Western epistemology – interpretation and Truth, which do not exactly bear on the issue of identity directly; but, there is, in his work, a rich conceptualization of the process of identification, which he argues has undergone massive changes due to the development of media technologies and consumer capitalism.

One of the recurrent themes in Baudrillard’s work is the radical separation between images and appearances from meaning – an effect, he argues, of the increasing mediatized representation of reality today. New media, particularly television and the World Wide Web, he suggests give the effect of a being “realer than real,” what he calls the “hyperreal.” Hence, he calls the represented reality of television news, for instance, “disenchanted simulation,” akin to “porn, more real than the real” (Baudrillard 1988: 154). This is a phenomenon that subsequent critics have referred to as the “crisis of representation.” For Baudrillard, the mediatization of reality is not so much a crisis but the upending of the representational hierarchy, upon which our concept of reality is rooted. An instance of such a case is in the way wars are reported by 24-hour cable news networks. In the recent American invasion in Iraq, networks such as CNN utilized “embedded reporters,” fitted with night-vision cameras, so as to give the audience the effect of “taking part” in a firefight with the enemy. This experience allows the viewer, according to Baudrillard, to be “seized” by the images:

As a result, this seizure rebounds on the surrounding world we call “real,” revealing to us that “reality” is nothing but a staged world, objectified according to rules of depth, that is to say, the principle upon which paintings, sculptures and the architecture of a period are
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defined, but only a principle; a simulacrum which the experimental hypersimulation of the trompe-l’oeil undermines.

(p. 156)

Thus, Baudrillard argues that in today’s mediatized world, “interpretation” is no longer an appropriate term to describe the process of identification, or more generally the knowing subject in relation to her object of knowledge.

In his view, “meaning has been abducted,” effectively delinking appearance from meaning, which of course the exercise of interpretation assumes. Contemporary media achieves what the Surrealists attempted as a rupture, an intervention, into modern consciousness. Though he may not have put it this way, the triumph of the image or appearance has had the same effect in the realm of “reality” as what Derrida claimed the arbitrary signifier had on language, but on reality itself, undermining, as Baudrillard put it, “the world’s certainty” (p. 157).

It should be clear, at this point, that Baudrillard is reinterpreting the “arbitrary signifier” of Saussure and applying it to not only language but also to reality itself. Representations of reality are so far removed from “truth” that Baudrillard sees them as simulation. The logic of correlation exemplified, for instance between signifier and signified, is broken to the point where there is no signified due to the “substituting of signs of the real for the real itself” (p. 167). The certainty of Truth, Baudrillard contends, no longer holds. We can think of this difference as between the regime of representation and the regime of simulation. The regime of representation is founded upon a logic of equivalence between “the sign and the real,” which Baudrillard parenthetically notes is “utopian.” This, of course, is the basis of successful communication, of symbolic exchange. On the contrary, the regime of simulation rips open the boundary between true/false and real/imaginary. “Whereas representation tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as false representation,” Baudrillard writes, “simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulacrum” (p. 170).

Baudrillard has made several public pronouncements based on his theory of simulation and hyperreality. Perhaps one of the most well known of them was in regards to Disneyland in Southern California, which he argues is a miniaturized simulation of America itself. Its main thematic elements – pirates, the frontier, future world – are all at the root of what sociologist of religion Robert Bellah, in another context, called American “civil religion.” Baudrillard offers this phenomenological account:

[W]hat draws the crowds is undoubtedly much more the social microcosm, the miniaturized and religious reveling in real America, in its delights and drawbacks. You park outside, queue up inside, and are totally abandoned at the exit. In this imaginary world the only phantasmagoria is in the inherent warmth and affection of the crowd, and in that sufficiently excessive number of gadgets used there to specifically maintain the multitudinous affect.

(p. 171)

The function of Disneyland, then, is to maintain the status quo in the certainty of reality as such. Disneyland is there, and assumed to be imaginary and “not real,” to make us think that the rest of the world, outside of Disneyland, is somehow real. However, Baudrillard argues, Disneyland operates much like how the prisons work in modern societies, to mask the carceral nature of society itself, an argument that has parallels with Durkheimian and Foucauldian perspectives on this issue. It is, as Baudrillard calls it, a deterrence machine, attempting to withhold from us the receding horizon of the reality principle.
Main criticisms of post-modern perspectives of identity

If there is no certainty in ontological reality, how can there be ontological security of the self to ward off existential anxiety? This is precisely how sociologist Anthony Giddens frames the questions that arise from the questions asked by Baudrillard’s analysis. Whereas Baudrillard’s position on the hyperreal is fatalistic, Giddens holds a normative component, with clear tendencies toward the necessity of stability in self-identity. Before moving onto the work of Giddens, it must be noted that he is not in any way a part of what can be described as the postmodern backlash, which is full of critics who do not take any serious consideration of postmodern theories. A self-described “radical modern,” Giddens is quite sympathetic to many postmodern theories. Thus, the difference between Giddens and Baudrillard is one of degree not of kind.

According to Giddens, self-identity is based on reflexivity, knowing, either cognitively or subconsciously, what one is doing and why (Giddens 1991). He goes on to argue that the most important element in modern identity is “ontological security,” which refers “to the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action” (p. 92). Thus, ontological security is not only the ability for the individual to construct a narrative of the self, but also ensure that the uncertainties of the world do not negatively affect her to the point where she develops existential anxiety, a concept, which of course Giddens takes from Kierkegaard and subsequent existential thinkers.

Why Giddens places such emphasis on security is revealed by another category that is crucial to his social theory – trust. According to him, because one’s self-identity is always a product of the social process, trust, in Giddens’s estimation, is paramount. But Giddens defines the term in a very particular way; it is a trust in a collective reality. This provides the existential anchorings of identity, allowing for the individual to rely confidently on other persons. Drawing on the British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott, who famously endowed the world with the concept of the “transitional object,” Giddens suggests that “reality” is not a given object-world but constructed through mutuality, such as the one between the infant and the caretaker. Because of this mutual experience of trust, one is able to develop confidence in the reliability of other persons. A threat to the reality of things, such as the one that Baudrillard signals, is, for Giddens, a threat to ontological security, and cause for potential chaos, which he describes as “the loss of a sense of the very reality of things and of other persons” (p. 36).

The chaos that threatens on the otherside of the ordinariness of everyday conventions can be seen psychologically as dread in Kierkegaard’s sense: the prospect of being overwhelmed by anxieties that reach to the very roots of our coherent sense of “being in the world.” (p. 37)

We can clearly see a few thematic differences between Giddens and Baudrillard here. Whereas Giddens understands the coherence of reality to be an absolutely essential part of self-identity, Baudrillard views reality to have “imploded.” This difference in coherence of reality leads us to another point of disagreement between Giddens and Baudrillard, that of the stakes of reality. As mentioned above, there is a strong normative strain in the former’s social theory of identity. The latter, however, does not. The normative feature of Giddens’s formulation of self-identity and reality makes for a particular adherence and investment in the faith, or correlation, between, in post-structuralist terms, the signifier and the real. As he puts it:

It is “faith” in the reliability and integrity of others which is at stake here. Trust in others begins in the context of individual confidence – confidence in the caretaking figures . . .
Trust, interpersonal relations and a conviction of “reality” of things go hand in hand in the social settings of adult life. (pp. 51–2)

Hence, for Giddens, to see the self as fragmented would then be to concede the possibility of epistemology and individual agency, upon which his reputed concept of “reflexivity” rests. If the individual is simply seen as powerless, simply riding the wave of meaningless signifiers, there could be no possibility of the process of the dialectical process of reflexive self-identity. (See Chapter 7 on this topic in this volume.) If reality were not stable and constant, there would be, in turn, no trust and therefore no ontological security. Baudrillard’s simulacrum is, quite simply, Giddens’s nightmare.

The continuing importance of post-structuralist and postmodern theories of identity, and future prospects

Today, post-structuralist and postmodern theory has made its way into a variety of disciplines, some of which are the former hotbeds of earlier backlash against post-structuralism. Yet, its influence cannot be said to exist in a singular discipline more than any other. Its impact cannot, however, be seen in the adoption of various principles of post-structuralist and postmodern thought. But rather it can be found in the continually widespread skepticism toward foundationalism and anti-essentialism, in theory and research on identity.

One of the places in which it is occurring most visibly is at the intersection of media/technology and science studies. It is in this nether region in which the epistemological and ontological suspicions of post-structuralism and postmodernism come together. A good example of such is Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory (ANT). As its name suggest, actor-network theory is a radical departure from the dominant social-science framework that views social identity as the interplay of social structure and agency. Moreover, ANT views non-human entities as agentive forces along with humans. It is this radical de-privileging of the human subject in the research process that one can view ANT as having incorporated both the epistemological critique of “reality” in Baudrillard, for instance, and the ontological critique of “the human” in Haraway.

The incorporation of anti-foundationalist tenets of post-structuralist and postmodern thought are not, however, strictly limited to actor-network theory. Along similar lines, sociologists Karen Knorr-Cetina and Sherry Turkle have created fruitful research programs that view “objects” (again, non-human entities) with a level of sociality. In the case of Knorr-Cetina, she presents “objectualization” as an alternative to “individualization,” a term that “ignores the degree to which the modern untying of identities has been accompanied by the expansion of object-centered environments which situate and stabilize selves, define individual identity just as much as communities or families used to do, and which promote forms of sociality . . . that feed on and supplement the human forms of sociality” (Knorr-Cetina 1997: 1). Thus, “objectualization” takes into consideration the very techniques by which the modern self has been, as she put it, untied. This has led her to claim that we no longer exist within the same social structures as we did in the past.

Similarly, Sherry Turkle (2007) has used the term “evocative objects” to develop a research paradigm that views sociality and identity beyond the subject by beginning with “objects,” things that she argues express identities. Hence, to study identity, in fact, may fruitfully begin with not the “bearer” of the identity itself but that which reflects it. As she writes:
The notion of evocative objects brings together these two less familiar ideas, underscoring the inseparability of thought and feeling in our relationship to things. We think with the objects we love; we love the objects we think with.

(2007: 5)

Thus, we see in Turkle the thread of post-structuralist and postmodern thought that shirks the research on identity that starts from “within” human consciousness. Scott Lash has recently even called for studying “technological forms of life” (Lash 2001).

In our increasingly technological world, post-structuralist and postmodern theories of identity remain most significant for new research on science, technologies and media, areas of research that broaden the notion of identity to non-human entities. Judging by the use of the World Wide Web, mobile smart phones and other new media in the realm of not only “social networking,” as has been greatly publicized in news media, but also for full-scale political movements such as that of what is called the Green Movement in Iran, which emerged after the contested presidential elections of 2009, it seems that media and technology studies will undoubtedly be where greater research takes place across disciplines and across particular academic interests as the world itself becomes more aware of its technicity.

When we live with implanted chips, we will be on a different footing in our relationships with computers. When we share other people’s tissue and genetic material, we will be on a different footing with the bodies of others. Our theories tell us stories about the objects of our lives. As we begin to live with objects that challenge the boundaries between the born and created and between humans and everything else, we will need to tell ourselves different stories.

(Turkle 2007: 326)

If we are to believe Turkle’s portrayal of our technological future (and there is much evidence that supports it), the ghost of post-structuralist and postmodernist thought will haunt the future of identity studies for some time to come.

References


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