

CHAPTER 1

CRITICAL BACKGROUND TO POSTSTRUCTURALIST THEORIES AND PEDAGOGIES OF ALTERITY

The Positivist tradition of Auguste Comte valued knowledge that borrowed from a scientific model and transformed itself into a system, understood as an ensemble of scientific changes. Systems (or, as they came to be called, structures) became increasingly important in the development of various academic disciplines. For anthropology, in particular, structure would become a key concept. The principal theorist of what would be called the “structuralist” trend in anthropology was Claude Lévi-Strauss. Before structuralism, ethnography had been linked to the natural sciences, especially the physical anthropology that had dominated the nineteenth century. Lévi-Strauss was innovative in that he sought a new model for anthropology in the social sciences and, especially, in linguistics. The linguistic distinction between synchrony (the signifier) and diachrony (the signified) formulated by Ferdinand de Saussure (1915) came to be interpreted by Lévi-Strauss as the distinction between structure (signifier) and meaning (signified). The alliance that Lévi-Strauss would draw between linguistics and anthropology proved pivotal for literary theory in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Lévi-Strauss also brought to prominence the role of the unconscious, as it is mediated through language. Sigmund Freud had claimed that the unconscious governed society, and Emile Durkheim had acknowledged the unconscious workings of collective practices. Freud and Durkheim would influence structuralism’s quest for the hidden mechanisms underlying all textualities. Structural anthropology’s examination of the Other would become analogous to psychoanalysis’s examination of the estranged Self. Just as psychoanalysis gave access to the Self and sought to represent the Other in the

repressed libido and unconscious, ethnology now gave access to the foreign Other revealing the repressed of history.

What was marginal could now be justified and even celebrated philosophically. The sociologist Jean Duvignaud would appoint Lévi-Strauss the vicar of the tropics, pursuing a nostalgic dream of mankind's original purity as had the Savoyard vicar of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Dosse 1991:1.179).¹ With this quip, Duvignaud touched upon a significant characteristic of Lévi-Strauss's anthropology: its romanticism. Lévi-Strauss had a tendency to relativize behavior on culturalist grounds and trade in nostalgic guilt, traits that would inspire *tiers-mondistes* who had been radicalized by the Algerian War (Lilla 2001:168). However, it was his valorization of the exotic marginalized Other and application of a presumed scientific method that make Lévi-Strauss an important figure for our investigation. It is fitting, therefore, that we begin our study by evoking his work. Structuralism would become a model for those areas of study in the social sciences and humanities that lacked formalism (anthropology, sociology, psychoanalysis, literary criticism) but would themselves become important disciplines in the postwar period.

It should be noted that much of the intellectual ferment engendered by structuralism arose from the waning influence of Sartrean existentialism in the 1960s, especially its notion of a transcendental abstract subject that was singular in its otherness. Structuralism provided an attractive alternative to existentialism. In lieu of the existential subject, it offered the immobility of structures and thus decentered (if not, extinguished) that same subject. It provided an opportunity for those who wanted to distance themselves from Sartre, his "idealism," and the inconsistencies of existentialism.

Structuralism also offered an alternative to phenomenology, whose main proponents in the 1960s were Paul Ricoeur and Emmanuel Levinas. Ricoeur's hermeneutics opposed the structural logic that held to a system of relations made autonomous from content and, subsequently, open to infinite interpretation. Ricoeur did not reject the scientificity of structuralism per se, but he contested what he saw as its transgression of limits. Structuralism was legitimate only so long as it remained conscious of the conditions of its validity (Ricoeur 1963:605). Levinas touted ethics, believing that everything began with the rights of others and our obligation to them. He used phenomenology to distinguish between the Same and the Other and established an ethics based on their copresence (Dosse 1991:2.284). Structuralist anthropology proposed a more radical project. It claimed to address questions regarding the Other by seeking to exhume primitive peoples from the place in which Eurocentrism had interred them.²

Structuralism's focus on permanent invariables, synchrony, and hermetic texts essentially questioned the conditions necessary for articulating scientific knowledge. A similar inquiry would be initiated in the sciences by Thomas Kuhn. In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), Kuhn presented science as created from discontinuous, flexible, temporary theories. Science now came to be understood as a creation of perspectives. One could reject the objectivity of knowledge in favor of "discourses."³ Once objective truth was called into question, the writing of history soon followed suit. Thanks to structuralism's disavowal of historical context, search for origins, diachrony, and teleology, history now became a text open to various disparate interpretations. In *Écrits* (1966), Jacques Lacan rejected the notion that history had any meaning, claiming it to be an illusion. Only analytic discourse could give voice to the unconscious and historical. The present could be seen as an eternal recycling of different configurations of the past. In this process, the traditional subject was split, reduced, and dethroned.

Two Bulgarian emigrés, who perhaps carried the burden of history more than their native-born French colleagues, recognized the limitations of the structuralist model. In order to acknowledge the historical fabric in which a text was written, Julia Kristeva resuscitated the element of subjectivity, not, however, the classical subject, but the fragmented Self described by Lacan. Kristeva's compatriot, Tzvetan Todorov, shared her *méfiance* with certain aspects of structuralism. Todorov, who knew firsthand totalitarian reality, saw a form of Stalinistic dogmatism in the obligatory reading grids that structural criticism imposed. This concern was shared by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu who questioned the hegemonic role of institutional positions. Bourdieu studied how social actors, even those who considered themselves free from social determinism, were influenced by outside forces. Like Kristeva, Bourdieu also wanted to reintroduce agents that had been lost as epiphenomena of structure. By installing the subjectivity of the non-Cartesian subject, Bourdieu sought not the ego, but the individual trace of an entire collective history (Bourdieu 1987:40). However, fearing a new legitimization of philosophical discourse and a corporatist defense of privilege that allowed intellectuals to continue to judge the criteria of scientificity, Bourdieu specifically warned against theories that allow theorists to act as guardians before the temple, denounce deviation, and form a priesthood.

There was indeed a clear paradox inherent in structuralist theory. While intellectuals were ostensibly working for change and developing theoretical weapons to advance a progressive struggle, they were at the same time being seduced by a paradigm that stifled all desire for change and announced

the end of history (Dosse 1991:2.72). With a vengeance, May 1968 would exhume history and the subject that structuralism had repressed. The *Annales* historians, in particular, were beneficiaries of 1968, since they were able to transform “History” into “histories” (Veyne 1971). History was still discovering the Other. However, this Other was not in other lands, but could now be studied within Western civilization in the form of cultural histories and the study of *mentalités*.⁴ Anthropology’s Other had become its own past and values. Sometimes the Other became just the theorist’s present. Simone de Beauvoir’s mandarins of existentialism became Kristeva’s samurai in the new cult of personality.⁵ Criticism turned its attention to the discovery of the Self and its pleasures, in the case of Barthes,⁶ or in the case of Kristeva, its abjection. While it may seem to be truly the grand return of the repressed subject, it would be a mistake to think that the Self had not always been present for theorists.

It became increasingly fashionable to situate oneself at the edges of a system of thought in order to manipulate and move those edges. We were no longer interested in the hell of others, but the hell in the Self. In the *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Michel Foucault claimed that man was an invention of recent date soon to disappear (Foucault 1972:387). He championed the destruction of history, faceless writing, and pure freedom (Foucault 1972:17). The idea was to decenter man as author, subject, and speaker. Georges Canguilhem’s work on psychology (asking whether it served science or the police) set the stage for Foucault’s work on asylums, prisons, and madness. Self-awareness regarding the limits of knowing others now became a precondition for engagement. Foucault focused on the periphery and the margins of a system. He analyzed the development of European civilization as a process of marginalizing domestic misfits who were kept under surveillance through the cooperation of social “power” and “knowledge.” He further examined deviation and marginality in *Discipline and Punish* (1975). *The History of Sexuality* (1976) offered a discourse on sex as a form of managerial power found in censuses and the psychiatrization of deviation. The structuralist ideal had shifted from a scientific method informed by political and cultural pessimism into a liberation antitheology celebrating difference, wherever it might be found.

The *Gulag Archipelago* had appeared in 1974. With it, Solzhenitsyn brought the 1956–67 reality of totalitarianism to the attention of Western scholars who could now no longer blithely choose to ignore its real dimensions. In the wake of Solzhenitsyn, critical theories that had evolved from an impassioned critique of democracy and its institutions ideally should have undergone reevaluation. To a significant degree, they did not. Louis Althusser, for example, continued to theorize socialism without confronting its reality.

He was not forced to reflect on the historical lessons drawn from the disaster of the Soviet Union. Academic Marxism's essentialisms did not allow logical consequences to be drawn from the totalitarian reality, even after the events in Czechoslovakia of August 1968 and Cambodia in 1977.

The Gulag showed that all you had to do was look, listen, and read. It posed a real problem for structuralist Marxism: why, in its quest for hidden logic, did it even now refuse to grant validity to empirical reality? From an objective point of view, structuralism could even be viewed as complicit with the torturers, when, after having eliminated subjectivity in order to gain access to science, it deconstructed the dissidents' message of human rights violations (Dosse 1991:2.271).⁷ Now it was not clear if one could even appeal to reason in forming judgment, since language and social structure loomed so large. The term *man* began to appear in quotations marks; man was now a site, a point where various social, cultural, economic, linguistic, and psychological forces intersected. This radical antihumanism ushered in the age of deconstruction.

Deconstruction arose in response to the scientific aspirations of speculative structuralism, whose methods and categories had derived from linguistics. Derrida viewed language as a form of death and called for the radical decentering of the implicit hierarchies imbedded in language that had encouraged us to do things such as place speech above writing, author above reader, and signified above signifier. Deconstruction's task was to reveal the aporiae and paradoxes imbedded in every text. Since all texts contain ambiguities, they can be read in different ways (*la différence*) with exhaustive interpretation forever deferred (*la différance*). The end of logocentrism, the naive notion that language was a transparent medium, would bring about the end of all bad centrisms, such as (to cite Derrida himself) andro-, phalo-, phallogo- or carnophallogocentrism. Derrida's project, however, led to an obvious problem. If language cannot make unambiguous claims, how can one use language to make deconstruction's claims (Lilla 2001:172–73)? This unbreachable paradox at the heart of deconstruction was brought into full relief in the de Man disclosures of 1987,⁸ when the politics that deconstruction had playfully left suspended had to be addressed.

In the *Politiques de l'amitié* (1988–89 seminar), Derrida made an initial response: the entire Western tradition of thinking about politics was distorted by philosophy's original sin—the concept of “identity.” All natural categories and their derivative concepts of “community,” “culture,” and “nation” are dependent on language and, therefore, conventions that establish hierarchies. If political philosophy had no center, and the methods of political philosophy were suspected of logocentrism, there was not much to be done. All political ideologies were equally unacceptable because they were logocentrist. There are

no tyrants, wicked institutions, gulags, or genocides, just the tyranny of language that causes tyranny (Lilla 2001:178). Thus, it becomes futile to advocate human rights or condemn crimes against humanity. Derridean deconstruction made it difficult to distinguish between right and wrong: all such notions are infected with logocentrism.

Barbara Johnson recognized deconstruction's disregard for social injustice and general indifference to gender and ethnicity. On the eve of the de Man scandal, she published *The World of Difference* (1987), challenging text-based theory (*différance*) and advocating the social studies approach of identitarianism. The rise of American academic feminism and its valorization of the study of race, ethnicity, and gender provided a further response to the perception that agency had become irrelevant to theory. The late 1980s witnessed the emergence of African American, Latino, Native American, and Asian American studies, to be followed by postcolonial and cultural studies. The appearance of these fields announced that the age of deconstructive close readings was over. Beyond logocentrism, there was indeed agency and identity. The rhetoric of agency (Rajan 2002:37) that had been lost through Derridean deconstruction was now being reintroduced into theory.

Critics such as Fredric Jameson blamed politically counterproductive tendencies in structuralism and poststructuralism for the absence of agency. Structuralism and Marxism had clearly failed to deliver sufficiently revolutionary agents for social change. Theory now sought alternatives to the bourgeois formulation of the individual. Minorities became ideal candidates as new revolutionary agents who could live in conflict with their subject positions. We begin to find in theory, therefore, a valorization and privileging of those whose lives articulate social contradictions, people whose particular situation as subjects in society was seen as atypical or conflicted. Often these "minorities" were minority only in the loosest sense of the term. Few Puerto Ricans from the barrio or inner-city blacks were publishing discourses on their subject positions. The minorities in question were often culled from elite third-world zones. They understood the proper stance to assume as individuals of color within predominantly white academe. Figures such as Said and Gayatri Spivak appeared on the scene as emissaries of this newly valorized revolutionary hyphenated subjectivity. Significantly, revolutionary subjectivities could also be constituted in terms of sexuality and body politics. The salient point to note in the construction of such subjectivities is that the individuals themselves can construct and even alter them at will. The ability to self-identify subjectivity would become an increasingly attractive option.

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe contributed significantly to this debate. They represented the subject as an always incomplete articulation to

be deformed at any time (Laclau and Mouffe 1985:111). In a subsequent non-co-authored piece, "Hegemony and the New Political Subject," Mouffe presents a more imaginary understanding of the subject as comprising multiple possible constructions (Nelson and Grossberg 1988:90). The subject position here becomes the equivalent of social position and social relations based on received ideas of social identity such as gender, religion, nationality, and race. The subject could now be understood in terms of its social role and construction of self-identity.

The concept of "self-fashioning" also found expression in the work of Rosalind Coward and John Ellis. In *Language and Materialism: Developments in Semiology and the Theory of the Subject* (1977), they conceived the subject in terms of identity construction as opposed to any deconstruction into psychological, linguistic, or social registers. In their schema, the concept of the Other becomes crucial to social analysis. This self-fashioning involved not just willed action but also social behavior of individuals who belong to groups (men, women, immigrants, ethnic minorities) in order to situate human activities within a polemic of values and strategies (beliefs, projects, political interests). This vision of self-fashioning reappeared in the movements that would come into prominence—new historicism, cultural studies, and, as we shall see, the theories and pedagogies of alterity to be examined in this volume. New historicism drew inspiration from Foucault in its attempt to bring back agency. Its concept of the Self, as articulated by Stephen Greenblatt, was alternately both representative and performative, self-fashioned and culturally fashioned. Such a notion of the precarious and provisionally fixed subject was also pivotal to cultural studies.

In structuralism, actions were only socially significant when given meaning by a symbolic structure that was always already in place. For decades, critics had believed that meaning was semiotically mediated through symbolic forms, kinship structures, archetypes, rhetorical tropes, bureaucratic practices, and cultural texts. Language and literature scholars were now beginning to give themselves completely over to the contrary paradigm. In their formulation of cultural studies, Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler (1992) posited the primacy of social acts. Their paradigm was different from earlier paradigms of cultural studies as found in Barthes's *Mythologies* (1957) or Baudrillard's *Le système des objets* (1968) with their emphases on taxonomies of semiotics, linguistics, and rhetorical shifts from representation to performance. The battle lines had changed. Instead of the orthodox Marxist invoking class struggle as the best means to transform society, the new cultural studies critics recognize other identitarian social formations with revolutionary potential such as race, sexual orientation, and ethnicity (Rapaport 2001:104). The identity paradigm adopted

by the poststructuralist and postdeconstructive theories examined in the following pages holds the social subject accountable for the social expression not as mere representations, but as social acts having direct consequences on the lives of others.⁹ The important message of the social act paradigm is that a connection must always be made to token representation. In addition to being representative, it is also important to be singular.

Jean-Luc Nancy in *La communauté désœuvrée* (1986) theorized on the singularity of being as not generalizable, universalizable, or unifiable. Nancy's thesis utilized Heidegger's understanding of the inappropriability of being. Drucilla Cornell then applied this notion of being to women and minorities who become seen in terms of their singularity as Others (Rapaport 2001:143). Cornell's subject is marked not only as Other but also as an Other with a preestablished social identity (Jew, Gay, Latino, female). This intentional and performative vision of subjectivity can also be found in the gender analysis of Judith Butler. For these theorists, as for Foucault, the position of the social subject is both self- and culturally fashioned. Most important, it is always encountered in conflict.

In the 1990s, American academe learned to read the subject in a role of opposition and, as such, in terms of its marginality. Literature, in turn, came to be seen as a social text serving the purposes of activism. As a consequence to the political turn in theory, interpretation became less complicated for its practitioners than it had been under deconstruction. Readers now needed only to extract those social facts necessary to attain the desired politically effective agenda. The singularity of the subject, however, demanded a close identification with subalternity and this identification posed the threat of appropriation. As Peggy Kamuf noted, the politics of academe often involves a struggle for the appropriation of the Other and an attempt to coopt the singularity of subjecthood (Kamuf 1997:121). Never has this problem been more prevalent than in recent literary theory.

In the succeeding pages, we will investigate instances where a politics of appropriation informs theory and pedagogy. We will question what has been the objective of truth seeking in the various critical schools that have developed. We will also ask who benefits and who loses in such endeavors. In whose interests have notions of agency been gained or lost? Who speaks for whom and toward what purpose? We will investigate how the "isms" that succeeded structuralism examine the relationship between culture and power, representation and social equality (Chow 2002:113). Literature has become a social document or social text for the purpose of political activism within the university (Rapaport 2001:93). It serves as a vehicle for forms of social contestation (Donaghue 1987). In other words, theory has become the best

of all possible spiritual and material worlds (Chow 2002:106–07). Rather than being perceived as inhabiting an ivory tower where theorists merely study theory, academics can see and present themselves as manning the barricades. They become part of a process of changing the world for the better (Rapaport 2001:93). In fact, they assume roles similar to that of the public intellectuals of the 1930s, epitomized by Sartre. They can embody the same paradox of positionality that Camus recognized in Sartrean existentialism—its emphasis on political engagement (Judt 1998:91). It is not only the contradictions of the public intellectual and the modern critic that are similar, but also the ensuing reification of the Self, what Raymond Aron was to call their posture as “*agrégés-théologiens*” or, to cite Camus, “*juges-pénitents*” (cited in Judt 1998:180). Inconsistencies of positionality and hybris formed the legacy that Sartre bequeathed to the next generation of French thinkers. It would have a brilliant career with them and be exported abroad.