Chapter 3

From Modernity to Postmodernity: Recontextualizing Communication Theory

Alan D. DeSantis
University of Kentucky

During the last two decades, the debate between traditional Modernism and Postmodernism increasingly has become a point of contention in artistic and academic communities around the world. Andreas Huyssen (1984) believes that the reason for such contention is "precisely because there is so much more at stake than the existence or non-existence of a new artistic style, so much more also than just the 'correct' theoretical line" (p. 12). At stake is how "reality" and "truth" are to be defined and actualized.

While the battle wages over whether Postmodernity is going to be our salvation or lead us to social damnation, fervent discussion continues over the term's meanings and merits. The nation hears from political conservatives, for example, that the deterioration of traditional family values can be blamed on the destructive Postmodern values of the Left. Modern architectural critics berate Postmodern buildings for their blatant irreverence of universal truths and the natural laws of design. In our thinktanks, international economists debate the benefits of Fordist Modernity versus Flexible Postmodernity in technocratic societies, while in New York City galleries, contemporary feminist artists, like Barbara Kruger and Hillary Leone, ride the wave of popularity with their condemnation of Modern society and their inclusion of alternative epistemologies. Even within our colleges and universities, myriad disciplines, from communication to physics, either are hailing the "Postmodern turn" as a liberating presence for marginalized voices or criticizing its anarchistic and deconstructive tendencies.

With such fervent debates surrounding Postmodernity, it is not surprising that many are confused as to this movement's definition, worth, and impact on the discipline of communication. Therefore, it is the purpose of this chapter to help clarify this ambiguity by supplying readers with a lucid summary and analysis of Postmodernity. This is accomplished by 1) reviewing Modernism's basic tenants, 2) analyzing the major characteristics of Postmodernism, and 3) critiquing Postmodernism's worth and impact on communication studies.

Modernism

Just as Postmodernism can be viewed as a reactionary movement away from Modernism, Modernism can be viewed as a reactionary movement away from the late Medieval and early Renaissance epochs--200-1600 A. D. (Harvey, 1989, p. 7). The Modernist project of the late 17th and 18th centuries, referred to by contemporary scholars as the Scientific Revolution and/or the Enlightenment, emerged from a climate universally hostile towards independent, skeptical thinking. According to historians Will and Ariel Durant, Europeans of the 1600s viewed "All natural objects, all planets . . . constellations and galaxies, as helpless islands in a supernatural sea" (Durant & Durant, 1963, p. 481). European intellectuals, including Joseph Glanvill in *Philosophical Considerations Touching Witches and Witchcraft* (1666) and Ralph Cudworth in *True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678), denounced all who would deny the reality of witches. Glanvill found it a shocking wonder that "men otherwise witty and ingenious are fallen into the conceit that there is no such thing as a witch or apparition" (Lecky, 1910, p. 45).

European Churches augmented this Medieval superstition and insular thinking with censorship and intolerance. In Catholic Cologne, the Archbishop Elector censored all speech on religion while in Protestant Brandenburg, the Great Elector ordered a thorough censorship of all documents, sacred and secular. Even in England, where the western conception of liberty was born, the government, despite the *Act of Toleration* (1689), continued to imprison blasphemous authors and burn heretical books (Putman, 1906, pp. 264-65).

Slowly, however, tolerance and rational inquiry began to diffuse. Motivated primarily by commerce, countries and merchants from Holland to Venice, who once castigated alien ideas and religions, began to welcome differing perspectives. In 1670, Benedict (or Baruch) De Spinoza published his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* calling for full tolerance of heretical ideas, while the Englishman, John Locke, issued his *Letters on Toleration* (1689) viewing tolerance a virtue, rather than a vice. "Decade after decade the demand for intellectual freedom rose," asserts Durant, "and by the end of the 17th century no church would have dared to do what had been done to Bruno in 1600, or to Galileo in 1633" (Durant & Durant, 1963, p. 484).

Spinoza and Locke's treatises served as harbingers to the Enlightenment and helped propel Europe into the "Age of Reason." This new age was an effort on the part of European intellectuals to develop an objective and universal standard from which to view the world. Only through such a project, Enlightened thinkers believed, could eternal and immutable truths be discovered (Harvey, 1989, p. 12). By the turn of the 18th century, the church of science and Modern rationality was born and with it came a force of true believers: Bacon called men to labor for the advancement of knowledge through inductive, scientific experiments; Descartes married algebra to geometry to create a system of inquiry that supplied certainty; Guericke's air pump explored the possibility of the vacuum; Gregory and Newton made better telescopes; Hook improved the compound microscope to examine the cell; Amontons refined the accuracy of the thermometer; Boyal and Leibniz viewed

nature as applied mathematics; Pierre de Fermat fathered the Modern theory of numbers; Riccioli discovered the first double star; Hevelius catalogued 1,564 stars, discovered 4 comets, and observed the movement of Mercury; and the rhetorical theories of Locke, Bacon, Hobbes and Descartes advocated mathematical plainness in scientific pursuit for order and precision (Durant & Durant, 1963, pp. 480-490; Conley, 1990, pp. 151-187).

More important than the individual ideas developed and discoveries made during the Enlightenment, however, was the Modernist foundation laid by these intellectuals. Even now these thinkers of the 18th and 19th centuries continue to shape the way western industrialized countries of the 20th century view reality. The ghosts of Descartes, Kant, and Bacon are evident in our schools, factories, cities, governments, prisons, and hospitals. Because of the Enlightenment, Steven Toulmin (1990) argues, our contemporary society has shifted from the particular to the universal, from the local to the general, and from the timely to the timeless (p. 75). Seen in this light, the 17th and 18th century's quest for certainty, and the 20th century's adaptation of their epistemology, can be viewed as "an attempt to decontextualize philosophy and science" (Gill, 1994, p. 199).

Specifically, the ideals of the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment have influenced the way the 20th century conceives of 1) truth and certainty, 2) linear progress, 3) alternative epistemologies and perspectives, and 4) the function and scope of rhetoric. A review of these major characteristics will follow.

Characteristics of Modernity

The dominant characteristic of what John Searl (1992) calls the "Western Rationalistic Tradition" is the belief in absolute, universal Truths, the capitalization of which implies transcendence (pp. 55-84). The search for universal Truths became the essential goal for the Modernist society, whether seeking the indisputable laws of metaphysics, music, or medicine. The rationalist doctrine that encourages this pursuit, argues Barry Barnes (1990), emphasizes the ultimate "power of the reasoning capabilities which all individuals possess" (p. 85). While such an idea may seem obvious to 20th century readers, within its 17th century context, the belief that any sound, logical human could discover indisputable Truths was quite revolutionary. This new conception of knowledge sounded especially treasonous to the clergy and monarchs who previously enjoyed the elitist privilege of determining Truth claims through divine epiphanies.

This view of rationality is paramount to the Eurocentric quest for Truth. The Modernist account of science, for example, views its "growth as the product of individual acts of reasoning" (Barnes, 1990, p. 85). Through the use of the scientific method, researchers believe they tap into the natural codes of life and construct formulas and theories that define, explain, and predict *a priori* Truths. Similarly, Modernist philosophers, sociologists, political scientists, and social theorists have regarded morality, goodness, and beauty as "eternal objects which are located and revealed through rationality." According to Richard Rorty (1991), such thinkers

believe that there is a common moral consciousness that "contains certain intuitions concerning equality, fairness, human dignity, and the like, which need to be made explicit through the formulation of principles" ("Essay on Derrida," p. 90). Such principles, if constructed using the proper rules of Modernist reasoning, will provide an absolute and perfect insight into universal morals and ethics.

Implicit in the Modernist's faith in discoverable Truths is the belief that these Truths transcend context. As Carole Blair and associates (Blair, Marsha, Jeppeson, & Pucci, 1991) have stated, Modernists view their epistemology as "beyond cultural relativity in that their ideas and theories mirror natural laws" (p. 353). Indeed, cultural conventions only impede the search for absolute meaning and certainty. Unwanted variables, such as social pressure, political passion, context, economic interests, and personal feelings only bias the judgment of the intellect. Over time, Barnes (1990) writes, "these biases may transform thought into political ideology or religious dogma; they must be eliminated or neutralized if the understanding of nature is to be advanced or a contribution to science [and morality] made" (p. 86).

A second key aspect in the Modern worldview is teleology, or a belief in linear, systematic progress towards Truth. This theme induces the Western World to think that the study of morality, ethics, science, technology, politics, and medicine is moving with purpose and direction towards perfection. Milton in *Areopaegetica* imagined truth as a complete and finished entity that had been scattered around the earth. "Humankind gradually collected parts to truth as time went by, thereby getting closer and closer to the whole truth" (Railsback, 1983, p. 356). This concept manifests itself in the field of science, Thomas Kuhn argues, in the belief that knowledge is cumulative, "gradually increasing towards a correspondence with the reality it describes" (Barnes, 1990, pp. 85-86). The mission of the contemporary scientist, therefore, is the search for clearer and more accurate explanations, ultimately arriving at the absolute truth at the end of this process.

This teleological perspective also has invaded the way we design our communities and cities. Mary McLeod (1985) describes the principle of Modern architecture, for instance, as a "messianic faith in the new" (p. 19). Fisher (Fisher, Gleiniger-Neumann, Klotz, Schwartz, 1985) agrees, suggesting that Modernist architecture views the past not as a source, but an enemy of the new. "Modernity in the twentieth century" he claims, "has no intention of compounding the supposed error made in the past" (p. 8). Not surprisingly then, Modern architects see their designs as "something beyond style, the definitive fulfillment of a program" started by previous generations. In fact, much of the work of Modern architects is purposely void of any "traditional artistic style," reflecting their belief that their designs have teleologically evolved past aesthetic, national, and historical boundaries (Blair, et al., 1991, p. 265). Using the "box" as their prototype, blocked skyscrapers, functional factories, and uniformed housing projects proliferated throughout the industrialized west as testament to this Modernist faith in the new. Unfortunately, argue critics, this aggressive expansion too often has been at the expense of community, the extended family, and historical identity.

Even the study of morality and ethics is not exempt from the Modernist faith in progress. Teleological social theorists view their research regarding our societies, governments, cities, and values as moving towards perfection and truth. As Rorty (1991) has observed, Modernist philosophers believe that they are formulating "better and better principles, principles corresponding ever more closely to the moral law itself" ("Essay on Derrida," p. 91). Ultimately, once these absolute laws emerge, Modern philosophers, architects, government officials, scientists, and legislators believe they can design and order a social utopia that is 1) independent of cultural traditions, beliefs, religions, and values, 2) free from subjectivism and relativism, and 3) universally applicable.

A third characteristic of Modernist philosophy is an unequivocal certainty in rational/scientific Truths and a resulting intolerance towards alternative knowledge, i.e., nonrationalistic and nonscientific knowledge. For the Modernist there are iron-clad laws of rationality that must be obeyed if absolute Truths are to be discovered. Epistemologies and perspectives that break these rules by adopting a different set of assumptions, therefore, are inherently flawed. To grant legitimacy and equal status to such peripheral perspectives would be seen as subjective, relativistic, and situational. "As a matter of fact," Robert L. Scott (1967) argues, "if one can be certain, tolerating deviations from the demands of certainty may itself be deemed evil" (p. 16). Subsequently, alternative ways of knowing, religions, and cultures that fall outside the purview of western normality often are devalued and marginalized. An inventory of the hierarchical structure of American culture illustrates this Modernist bias: The physicist prized over the poet, the scientist over the mother, the western surgeon over the Native American shaman, the rationally thinking man over the emotionally feeling women, and the industrialized first-world over the tribalized third-world. American culture has become controlled by technocrats, scientists, and experts while elevating rationality and western logic to a position of preeminence. As Rorty (1991) argues, the European tradition "takes scientific truth as the center of philosophical concern and scorns the notion of incommensurable world-pictures" ("Essay on Derrida," p. 92). As a result, Modernism, ironically, has become totalitarian in its goal to liberate the world of oppression, a maneuver aptly termed by T. W. Adorno (1972) as the "Dialectic of Enlightenment."

The fourth characteristic of the Modern worldview is the insignificant and devalued role given to human communication. Rhetoric's function becomes one of communicating Truths that have been discovered by "legitimate disciplines that search for objectivity," i.e., natural science, metaphysical philosophy and, to a lesser extent, the social sciences. Since rhetoric, according to Modernism, deals only with the subjective, the relative, and the probable, it must be controlled by, and subservient to, mind-independent Truths, Truths that do not rely on the subjective mind of the knower but that exist independently of humans and language. Rhetoric should not, therefore, create reality, construct social morality, shape worldviews, or negotiate competing cultural tensions for Modernists. Robert L. Scott (1967) elaborates on the consequence of this Modernist perspective:

Accepting the [Modernists] notion that truth exists, may be known, and
communicated leads logically to the position that there should be only two
modes of discourse: a neutral presenting of data among equals and a
persuasive leading of inferiors by the capable. (p. 16)

The Modernist epistemology, therefore, greatly diminishes the scope and
function of rhetoric and communication. Either rhetoric is a tool used by other
disciplines to disseminate their research findings or it becomes a manipulative
device, used by unethical lawyers and unscrupulous used-car dealers, distorting
absolute Truths and destabilizing society. The ethical rhetorician, in the Modernist
paradigm, is one who expresses scientific and social Truths as plainly and succinctly
as possible, purging language of its ornamentational, poetic, literary, and meta-
phoric qualities.

The Modernist Project: Success or Failure?

The Modernist search for absolute Truths was not motivated solely by the drive
to accumulate knowledge for knowledge's sake. A noble political and social agenda
undergirds the work of the western rationalistic tradition. In the 19th century,
"science and rationality were already being hailed as the key to unlocking the Utopia
and saving mankind" (Durant & Durant, 1963, p. 530). According to the Modernist
project, if knowledge could be standardized and absolute Truths discovered, then
the world could be controlled and the perfect social order created. By the 20th
century, faith in Modernism intensified and "Technological progress promised to
constitute the aesthetic and provide the solution to social ills" (Blair et al., 1991, p.
535). Harvey (1989) expands:

The development of a rational form of social organizations and rational
modes of thought promised liberation from the irrationalities of myth,
religion, superstition, and release from the arbitrary use of power as well as
the dark side of our own human natures. (p. 12)

This overwhelming sense of optimism, however, was shattered under the
pressure and harsh realities of the 20th century. Instead of a Utopia, the West created
"death camps and death squads, militarism and two world wars, the threat of nuclear
annihilation and the experience of Hiroshima and Nagasaki" (Harvey, 1989, p. 13).
Instead of liberating individuals from want and the arbitrary use of power, Herbert
Marcuse (1978) critically viewed modernization as fostering increased capitalistic
exploitation, monologic rationality, bureaucracy, environmental devastation and
pollution, the loss of community and the extended family, and individual alien-
ation and isolation.

Additionally, critics claim the Modernist philosophy has become as totalitarian
and oppressive as the Medieval church it reacted against. Just as Catholicism
dogmatically insisted that Truth can come only from the authority of the church,
Modernism preached the exclusivity of rationality in the search for mind-indepen-
dent reality. The church of God was replaced by what author Robert Pirsig (1974)
called the "church of reason" (p. 153)—both, however, monopolized epistemology
while excluding and disempowering alternative voices. Such an ironic twist of

history supports what Hegel, Marx, and Dewey maintained: Ideas and movements
that were created as instruments of emancipation (Greek metaphysics, Christianity,
the rise of the bourgeoisie, science) "typically, over the course of time, turn into
instruments of repression" (Rorty, "Philosophical Presuppositions," 1994, p. 59).
Confronted with mounting condemnation, critics began reconsidering the basic
tenants of Modernity and its claims of Absolutism. While a myriad of alternative
epistemologies emerged during the Post World War II epoch, one of the most
significant threats to the Modernist world-view emerged out of France in the form
of Postmodernity. In the section that follows, an explanation of the philosophy's
history, characteristics, and shortcomings will be supplied.

Postmodernism

The term "Postmodernism" first was used in the 1930s by the literary critic,
Federico de Onis, who used the term postmodernismo to describe a "kind of
exhausted and mildly conservative modernismo." A comparable use of the term
occurs in the late 1950s in America to "lament the exhaustion of the modern
movement." However, it was not until the mid-1970s that the term began to be
widely used and clearly defined (Smart, 1993, pp. 18-19).

The harbinger to the present Postmodern movement originated during the
turbulent 1960s. America's youth, forced to confront issues of race, environmental
pollution, industrialization, worker exploitation, and the Vietnam war, began to
question the "Truths" of their Modernist society. Ideas and practices that generally
were unquestioned and blindly obeyed became rallying cries for revolution. The
traditional values that once "stabilized" previous generations were disdained while
Modernist "taboos" were embraced in acts of defiance. This counter-culture
"explored the realms of individualized self-realization through a distinctive 'new
left' politics, through the embrace of anti-authoritarian, iconoclastic habits (in
music, dress, language, and life-style) and the critique of everyday life" (Harvey,
1989, p. 38).

Initially centered in universities and supported by the leftist intelligentsia, the
movement gained momentum and impacted on all aspects of mainstream society:
Psychedelic rock and roll, vanguard jazz, sexual promiscuity, experimental drug use,
back-to-nature movements, and Marxist communes attempted to undermine
western Modernity and liberate the repressed human spirit. The culmination of this
movement crested in a "vast wave of rebelliousness in Chicago, Paris, Prague,
Mexico City, Madrid, Tokyo, and Berlin in the global turbulence of 1968" (Harvey,
1989, p. 38).

While the counter-cultural movement of the 1960s fell short of the political and
economic revolution envisioned, the rebellion, nonetheless, can be viewed as a
portent to the Postmodern turn. "Somewhere between 1968-1972, Postmodernism
emerged as a full-blown, though still an incoherent, movement out of the chrysalis
of the anti-Modern movement of the 1960s" (Harvey, 1989, p. 39). This embryonic
movement soon became a philosophical passion for many critical theorists and
social critics around the world. With the publication of such works as Thomas

Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* in 1962, the translated forms of Michel Foucault's *Folie et deraison* (*Madness and Civilization*, 1965) and *Les mots et les choses* (*The Order of Things*, 1970); Jean-Francois Lyotard's *La Condition postmoderne* (*The Postmodern Condition*, 1979); and Jacques Derrida's *De La Grammatologie* (*Of Grammatology*, 1976), the philosophy's leading spokespeople and its general premises became widely disseminated and acknowledged.

Chief among Postmodern's characteristics are 1) a general distrust of all grand systems claiming transcendent, *a priori* Truths, 2) a belief that rhetoric constructs realities, 3) a view that truth emerges through intersubjective agreement, and 4) a political agenda that advocates change, pluralism, and empowerment . These characteristics are explored in the following section.

Distrust of all Grand Systems of Thought

The dominant theme that runs through all Postmodern discourse is the view that there are NO absolute, *a priori* Truths waiting to be discovered by the objective, unbiased mind. Postmodernists assert that the Modernist belief that pure knowledge can be discerned independent of language is essentially flawed, for individuals cannot free themselves from the linguistic and social constraints imposed on reality. Indeed, Postmodernists claim, language and society create human reality and our understanding of existence. "Elements of what we call language or mind penetrate so deeply into what we call 'reality,'" argues Hilary Putnam (1990), "that the very project of representing ourselves as being 'mappers' of something 'language independent' is fatally compromised from the start" (p. 28).

Essential to Modernist thinkers who claim to have mapped absolute Truth, is the belief that their epistemology is equally absolute and untainted by context. An epistemology is a grand system of thought that defines how absolute knowledge is derived and supplies universal standards of judgment. Plato's epistemology, for example, viewed True knowledge as derived from ideas of reason intrinsic to the mind and confined to the suprasensible world of forms and ideas. In opposition, British Empiricists, like John Locke and David Hume, argued that sense experience is the primary source of our ideas, and hence of knowledge. While Platonism, Empiricism, and 20th Century Modernism emerged out of different epochs, they are all united in that they claim 1) to produce the "Absolute Truth," and 2) their epistemology to be "ahistoric and natural."[1]

From the Postmodern perspective, however, this belief in the purity of epistemologies is problematic and dangerous. Such systems of knowledge (also referred to as a metanarrative or a discursive formation) are not transcendent procedures for unlocking the mysteries of the universe, but rhetorically constructed language games for finding what may be best viewed as contextually based knowledge. Far from being untainted by human contact, such systems supply their own particular presuppositions, methods, and criteria which must be followed if the status of Truth is to be granted.

The most disturbing aspect of these grand systems of thought for Postmodernists, however, is that society is trained to believe that the dominant epistemology is ahistoric and absolute. Once individuals lose sight of the contextual nature of truth, assertions that work within an epistemology's framework can ascend to the rarefied rank of "Truth," blindly accepted and unquestioned. If, however, as Postmodernists advocate, we deconstruct our epistemologies and realize that our metanarratives are products of human interaction and language, not external products of nature, then every idea becomes open for debate and consideration.

Two of Postmodernity's leading contributors that have explicitly attacked any notion that there might be a transcendent epistemology, metanarrative, or discursive formation through which all things can be connected or represented are Jean-Francois Lyotard and Michel Foucault. A review of their major claims will further clarify Postmodern's distrust of grand-systems, specifically the Modernist system.

Jean-Francois Lyotard

In 1979, the French Philosopher, Jean-Francois Lyotard published his seminal work, *The Postmodern Condition*, defining Postmodernism as, "incredulity towards metanarratives," or skepticism of "any science [grand system] that legitimates itself with reference to a discourse [epistemology]" (1984, p. xxiii). For Lyotard, all forms of knowledge, including Modern science, are constructed by language and society. Lyotard calls these knowledge forms narratives or discourse and sees science not as "the path to truth but merely one type of discourse." Knowledge has "no permanent, fixed, or privileged status. It is shifting, fragmented and indeterminate" (Gill, 1994, p. 201). What motivates Lyotard's writings, therefore, is Modern science's ability to masquerade as stable, whole, and absolute. When this is accomplished, as it has been in the 20th century, Modernity becomes an unchallenged power for the status quo.

This ability of metanarratives to create an illusion of permanence, explains Lyotard, is essentially the ability of metanarratives to self-legitimate—that is, these metanarratives supply society with the criteria for evaluating their own competence. For example, a scientific statement, such as "the world is round," is "verified through argumentation and proof, but what counts as proof and what qualifies as a good argument are determined by standards outside science." Those standards are part of a metanarrative that is accepted as true. But for Lyotard, as Gill (1994) eloquently states, "science cannot operate without this metanarrative, which is truly ironic, as the metanarrative is, by definition, unscientific; it is unavailable for testing and not subject to proof" (p. 200). Lyotard (1984) explains:

Scientific knowledge cannot know and make known that it is the true knowledge without resorting to the other, narrative, kind of knowledge, which from its point of view is no knowledge at all. With such recourses it would be in the position of presupposing its own validity and would be stooping to what it condemns: begging the question, proceeding on

prejudice. But does it not fall into the same trap by using narrative as its authority? (p. 29)

For Lyotard then, Modern science is no different than any other form of knowledge (myths, religion, poetry, history). This conclusion, essential to most Postmodern thought, is further elaborated by the French philosopher and historian, Michel Foucault.

Michel Foucault

Perhaps the most influential force in the Postmodern movement is Michel Foucault. Throughout his prolific research career, his primary objective was to provide a critique of the way Modern societies, through claims of absolute knowledge, control and discipline their populations by "sanctioning the knowledge-claims [what is true and false, good and bad, right and wrong] and practices [who can speak and what procedures need to be met to be heard] of the human sciences: medicine, psychiatry, psychology, criminology, sociology, and so on" (Phillips, 1990, p. 65). His books range from an analysis of how Modernity defines mental stability and appropriate medical practices to a critique of the way prisoners and the "sexually deviant" are controlled and punished.[2] In each of these works, Foucault sought to demonstrate the power of metanarratives, what he labeled discursive formations, to define who and what will be valued and who and what will be marginalized. Such decisions, he argued, are based simply on whether one falls inside or outside the arbitrary boundaries of Modernity's knowledge claims. Discursive formations are so pervasive, in fact, that they penetrate every aspect of a society and impact on all its inhabitants. Mark Phillips (1990) elaborates:

> In workplaces, schoolrooms, hospitals and welfare offices; in the family and the community; and in prisons, mental institutions, and courtrooms, the human sciences have established their standards of "normality." The normal child, the healthy body, the stable mind, the good citizen, the perfect wife and the proper man—such concepts haunt our ideas about ourselves, and are reproduced and legitimated through the practices of teachers, social workers, doctors, judges, policeman. The human sciences attempt to define normality; and by establishing the normality as a rule of life for us all, they simultaneously manufacture—for investigation, surveillance, and treatment—the vast area of our deviation from this standard. (p. 66)

Thus, as Phillips (1990) eluded to, knowledge and power become inseparable for Foucault.[3] Those who define for a culture what is acceptable and appropriate (the experts and the ordained), subsequently impose order and power on the culture. "The battle for truth," writes Foucault (1980), "is not on behalf of the truth but about the status of truth." He expands:

> Each society has its regime of truth, its general politics of truth: that is the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false

> statements, and means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of whose who are changed with saying what counts as true. (*Power and Knowledge*, p. 131-132)

Consequently, while some are empowered by the metanarrative, others who do not meet the "criteria of acceptability" become oppressed and are pushed to the periphery (minorities, gays and lesbians, women, the disabled, the insane, children).[4] For this reason, Foucault explores the voices that have been silenced and denied the right of legitimacy because they have fallen outside the metanarrative. As Richard Harland (1987) claims, "Foucault identifies with the victims, not because their discourse would be more true, but because it would be no less true, and yet they are made to suffer for it." And in essential Foucault form, he is "hostile towards Modern science, not because any alternative would be more objective, but because Modern science proclaims and dismisses any alternative as less objective" (pp. 107-108).

Of course, we may still want to argue against Foucault by pointing to the life-saving "successes" (advancements in medicine) and the positive "results" (walking on the moon) that have been met in the 20th century as proof for Modernity's claim of absolutism. But Foucault surely would have reminded us that, a discourse [metanarrative] itself furnishes the very criteria by which its results are judged successful. And certainly, as Richard Harland (1987) has observed, there has been growing skepticism that the acclaimed achievements of Modern science are, by other criteria, "somehow missing the point." In the field of Modern medicine, for example, we have repeatedly heard suspicion and critique about "the long-term implication of the 'Magic bullet' approach;" the psychological implications of the 'hygienic' approach to childbirth, patient care, and the treatment of the terminally ill; the lack of serious consideration given to the human soul and spirit during recovery; and the "moral implication of the 'human vegetable' approach to maintaining bodily functions at all costs." Ironically, Modern medical science has produced its own kind of blindness along with its own kind of visibilities" (pp. 103-104).

Rhetorical Construction of Reality

A second characteristic of Postmodernity is the view that what people know, the truths they embrace, and the realities they perceive are rhetorically constructed (sometimes referred to as "socially constructed"). "Rhetoric," does not mean simply "the art of persuasion," as defined by our discipline's founders, i.e., Aristotle, Cicero, Augustine, Bacon, Campbell, and Whately. For Postmodernists, rhetoric is, "grounded not in the quest to make truth effective, but rather in the quest to evoke truth via rhetoric" (Cherwitz, 1977, p. 219). At its deepest and fundamental sense, rhetoric is the "advocate of reality" (Brummett, 1976, p. 31) and "epistemic" (Scott, 1967, p. 15).

As argued by Lyotard and Foucault, rhetoric constructs epistemologies that supply the sciences with legitimacy. But rhetoric also shapes the way people, in their

everyday lives, see their reality and existence. Language and society constructs our notions of family, love, hate, individuality, freedom, liberty, and democracy. It dictates our tastes in food, clothing, art, music, architecture, literature, and the erotic. Such ideas, therefore, are not universal, but have emerged within a particular social context, influenced by politics, economics, culture, and the Modernist metanarrative.

The Postmodernist view of reality, however, does not mean that there are no constraints placed upon our socially constructed reality; Postmodernism does not empower humans to walk through walls. Postmodernists argue, though, that discourse can create meaning and reality out of "meaningless" material. With discourse, for example, individuals can turn what has been labeled as a "wall" into something one prays to (The Wailing Wall), an object of contempt (The Berlin Wall), a sign of peace and redemption (Vietnam War Memorial), an Icon of national pride (Great Wall of China), or an object to be ignored (the walls in our homes).

An important consequence of breaking the bonds of Modernistic predetermination and viewing rhetoric as epistemic is that the possibilities for change become infinite. Since individuals no longer are committed to following absolute, *a priori* Truths, then all reality is open for debate. The philosophical alternative, argues Condit (1987), poses serious moral ramifications. "If we reify the current best principles," she writes, "we put ourselves in the position of . . . preserving an old moral order at the cost of a newer [and better contextually based code]." As Condit reminds us, "The current code may be used, as such codes historically have been used, to prevent the development of a better code" (p. 93). The Postmodern ethic demands that all codes be seen as constructs, awaiting continual reaffirmation or reform.

Intersubjectivity of Truth

If all reality is constructed by rhetoric, may one reasonably ask, is the Modernist notion of objective Truth replaced with subjective relativism? To this, Postmodernists would answer, no; societies do not operate in a state of individualized reality. Instead, objectivity, for the Postmodernist, is replaced with intersubjectivity or a collectively determined social consensus. A social consensus, for Railsback (1983), "is simply that which we no longer debate, that which we accept as a given part of our language structure, in order that we may pursue other problematic issues" (p. 363). This view of intersubjectivity, therefore, becomes diametrically opposed to the "illusion of" objectivity posited by Modernists. Thinkers like Rorty, Kuhn, and Derrida "deny that the search for objective truth is a search for correspondence to reality, and urge that it be seen instead as a search for the widest possible intersubjective agreement" (Rorty, "Philosophical Presuppositions," 1994, p. 52). "Objectivity," Rorty asserts, "is not a matter of corresponding to objects but of getting together with other subjects–there is nothing to the Modernist notion of objectivity except intersubjectivity" (p. 56). Subsequently, at any given movement, "what we know to exist in the world is a product of an evolving set of human

agreements" (Wander, 1976, p. 226). Karl Popper (1959) eloquently explains how the Modernist conception of Knowledge and Truth is reconceptualized through the Postmodern lens:

> Science does not rest upon rock-bottom. The bold structure of its theories rises, as it were, above a swamp. It is like a building erected upon piles. The piles are driven down from above into the swamp, but not down to any natural or "given" base; and when we cease our attempts to drive our piles into a deeper layer, it is not because we have reached firm ground, We simply stop when we are satisfied that they are firm enough to carry the structure, at least for the time being." (p. 111)

For Popper (1959), then, society stops searching for new scientific or moralistic answers not because objective truth has been found but, rather, because consensus has been reached. However, as Thomas Kuhn (1962) has shown, consensus will be threatened by newly constructed anomalies. If a strong enough case is made for rethinking societal agreement, consensus will erode into debate and uncertainty and, with it, the illusion of Truth.

Political Agenda

The fourth characteristic of Postmodernity is its unique political agenda. Readers should not expect, however, to find clear and precise directions on "how to build a better society"; that would be a Postmodern oxymoron. Postmodernism is concerned with dismantling order, not constructing order. To create a metanarrative out of Postmodernity would be self-defeating and philosophically inconsistent. Instead, many Postmodern Philosophers (Foucault, 1965, 1973, 1977, 1978, 1980, 1981; Derrida, 1976; Baudrillard, 1975) see their role as provocateurs, purposely inviting consternation, shock, and anger in an attempt to make society think critically about power and knowledge. Detailed policies for specific social problems are outside the scope, function, and motivation of the writings of Postmodernism. Therefore, "political goals" should be recast as "possible alternatives" to Modernity and not blueprints for a Utopia. The two predominant themes found in Postmodern writings are 1) embracing the fragmented and the contextual and 2) dismantling order.

Consistent with the Postmodern view that reality is rhetorically constructed and contingent upon context, thinkers like Foucault, Derrida, Baudrillard, and Jameson (1981) embrace the "relative plural" rather than "absolute singular." These writers argue that if all knowledge is intersubjective, then no knowledge should claim "inherent" superiority. To do so oppresses equally legitimate voices simply because they have fallen outside the arbitrary borders of the dominant paradigm. Therefore, "fragmentation, indeterminacy, and intense distrust of all universal or totaling discourse becomes the hallmark of Postmodern social thought" (PRECIS, 1987, p. 9). Foucault instructs society, for example, to "develop action, thought, and desires by proliferation, juxtaposition, and disjunction," and "to prefer what is positive and multiple, difference over uniformity, flows over unities, mobile

arrangements over systems. Believe that what is productive is not sedentary but nomadic" (Harvey, 1989, p. 44).

Ultimately, privileging heterogeneity is linked with social egalitarianism. "The idea that all groups have the right to speak for themselves, in their own voice, and have that voice accepted as authentic and legitimate is essential to the pluralistic stance of Postmodernity" (Harvey, 1989, p. 48). Even Huyssens (1984), a critic of Postmodernity, emphasizes the opening given in its philosophy for the understanding of differences and otherness, "as well as the liberatory potential it offers for a whole host of new social movements (women, gays, blacks, ecologists, regional autonomists, etc.)" (p. 23). Not surprisingly, then, Postmodernity and its emphasis on social equality has had profound effects on a myriad of disciplines seeking the empowerment of marginalized voices within the social order (African American Studies, Women's Studies, Cultural Anthropology, Social Planning and Design, Psychology, and Multiculturalism).

A second political agenda advocated in most of the Postmodern literature is iconoclasm, or the deconstruction of established social orders. By dismantling social orders (government, religious institutions, legal codes, gender roles), the delegitimated of a society are emancipated from their restrictive and stifling effects. As John McGowan (1991) argues, the goal of Postmodernism is to "disrupt the social hierarchy" and thereby "empower suppressed groups" (p. 17). But what makes Postmodernism more radical than its predecessors (Frankfort critical theory, Neo-Marxism, Existentialism) is that the deconstruction of power/knowledge relationships becomes a continuous process. There is no teleological end. Therefore, whatever metanarrative replaces Modernity ultimately will become the new target of Postmodernity's destructive eye, no matter how noble its goals. For any discourse that claims absolute propriety while excluding alternatives is tyrannical, according to Postmodern thinking. Postmodernity "attacks order," writes Allan Megill (1987), "not only the existing order but any order." Because all order oppresses—one is therefore "justified in opposing these orders" (p. 197).

Critique of Postmodernity

Postmodernism has invited its share of criticism from both the political left and right, scientists and artists, theists and atheists, capitalists and communists. The philosophy often is characterized as destroying without rebuilding, of destabilizing without restabilizing. Leading intellectual thinkers such as J. Searl ((1992) and I. Hassan (1987) echo the sentiments of most by claiming that Postmodernity is void of morals and leads to social bankruptcy. The most telling criticism, however, is that "Postmodernism cannot save itself from relativism" (Gill, 1994, p. 206). "If there is nothing outside language, then it is our history, our community, our hope that is abandoned" (O'Neil, 1990, p. 74). "The celebration of pluralism is one thing," expands Gill (1994), "abject relativism is another, particularly if it allows for the complete breakdown of society and the retribalization of the global village" (p. 206). Even Harvey (1989), a leading spokesperson for the cause, agrees that Postmodernism "takes matters too far" (pp. 116-117).

More than any other single Postmodern voice, Foucault has received the most concentrated and probing criticism.[5] Michael Walzer(1986), a leading commentator, sees dangerous consequences to the French philosopher's theories. He writes that Foucault's alternative to metanarratives is "the dismantling of the whole thing, the fall of the carceral city, not revolution but abolition" (p. 59). For this reason, Walzer argues, "Foucault is an anarchist, he is a moral as well as a political anarchist." But after he is finished dismantling, "what will be left?" For Foucault gives us no reason to expect that the new codes will be any better than the ones we now live with. "Nor, for that matter," Walzer concludes, "does he give us any way of knowing what 'better' might mean" (p. 61).[6]

In a review written shortly after the release of Foucault's *Power/Knowledge*, the philosopher Ian Hacking (1986) summarized the major critiques articulated by most critics of Postmodernism. Of these, the most recurring and problematic to Foucault and Postmodernity are 1) his anarchistic social tendencies; 2) solipsism, including a disbelief in the notion of "man"; and 3) his unwillingness to give society even the smallest anchor to stabilize itself, i.e., hope, love, democracy, freedom, etc. Hacking writes:

> "What is man?" asked Kant. "Nothing," says Foucault. "For what then may we hope?" asks Kant. Does Foucault give the same nothing in reply? To think so is to misunderstand Foucault's reply to the question about Man. Foucault said that the concept Man is a fraud, not that you and I are as nothing. Likewise the concept Hope is all wrong. The hopes attributed to Marx and Rousseau are perhaps part of that very concept Man, and they are a sorry basis for optimism. Optimism, pessimism, nihilism and the like are all concepts that make sense only within the idea of a transcendental or enduring subject. Foucault is not in the least incoherent about all this. If we're not satisfied, it should not be because he is pessimistic. It is because he has given no surrogate for whatever it is that springs eternal in the human breast (pp. 39-40)

The question must be asked, therefore, is Postmodernism only an exercise in intellectual masturbation—a chic, ephemeral philosophy with no practical use for improving the human condition?

Communication and Postmodernism

With Postmodernity's recontextualization of "t"ruth, contemporary thinkers are freed from the oppressive Modernist ideas of teleology, absolute Truths, and the predetermination of knowledge. This conceptual liberation has affected the way researchers in a myriad of disciplines approach the nature of reality, knowledge, and power relationships. Specifically, in the field of communication, Postmodernity has significantly shaped research in the areas of 1) empowerment and 2) epistemology.

For many communication researchers, concern for the empowerment of marginalized voices, previously silenced by metanarratives, has increasingly be-

come an important area of study. Whether writing on women, the poor, African-Americans, Native Americans, or the elderly, references to Postmodern literature abound. Foucault, Lyotard, and others inform our discipline's social critics and critical theorists that the ability to claim inherent superiority, to express one's self, and to have that expression valued is contingent upon metanarratives and language—not *a priori*, absolute Truths. Therefore, previously unchallenged knowledge claims, made by males, first-world countries, whites, or the rich, are now decentered, and the forgotten voices of the past are now heard.

A second related research interest influenced by Postmodernity is epistemology. In scholarly journals and in classrooms, communication is being reconceptualized—ascending from a simple tool that organizes and expresses previously existing ideas, to the force that constructs social reality. With such a radical redefinition, the study of communication no longer is dependent on, or subservient to, any other discipline, whether it be science, physics, history, logic, or philosophy. Indeed, a case is often made by Postmodern communication scholars that science, physics, history, logic, and philosophy are dependent on, and subservient to, communication. For communication, Postmodernity reminds us, ultimately is responsible for constructing reality and legitimating the methods, criteria, and presuppositions used by all disciplines.

While Postmodern theorists were not the first to question the absolute status of Truth (i.e., the Greek Sophists, Giambattista Vico, Friedrich Nietzsche), or to give voice to the marginalized (i.e., Karl Marx, Frederick Douglass, Susan B. Anthony, Frantz Fanon) they have, at the very least, intensified the study of power and knowledge. Whether or not Postmodernity will have a lasting impact on our field, we can for now, borrow a page from William James and Richard Rorty, and view Postmodernity as a pragmatic success. For its presence has helped elevate our discipline to the realm of the socially significant and the intellectually essential.

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Footnotes

[1]Besides Modernity's epistemology, other grand systems of thought that have found vast arrays of followers through time include Freudianism, Marxism, Darwinism, Islam, Judaism, Pantheism, Transcendentalism, Rationalism, New Age Faith Healing, and Plato's Idealism, to name a few.

[2]See Michel Foucault's (1965). *Madness and civilization: A history of insanity in the age of reason*. (R. Howard, Trans.). New York: Pantheon; (1973). *The birth of the clinic: An archaeology of medical perception*. (A.M. Smith, Trans.). New York: Pantheon; (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. (A. Sheridan, Trans.). New York: Patheon; and (1978). *The history of sexuality: Volume 1: An introduction*. (R. Hurley, Trans.). New York: Patheon.

[3]Foucault believed that the link between knowledge and power was so important that his later works, he combined the two into a single word to illustrate their interdependency: "knowledge/power."

[4]Foucault, a gay man who died from AIDS, was all too familiar with the social order that made him a pariah. For more on the personal aspects of his life that had an impact on his work, see: Miller, J. (1993). *The passion of Michel Foucault*, New York: Simon and Schuster.

[5]An obvious explanation for why Foucault has been the focal point of criticism is because he was the most prolific and erudite writer of the movement. He has been characterized by both friend and foe, however, as being the most influential and sagacious French philosopher since Sartre.

[6]Foucault has very rarely given us any insights into his personal goals. In the role of the writer/provocateur, we clearly see him as an iconoclast. However, in a 1981 interview, we find a different side of the philosopher—one in which an awareness of the relationship between knowledge and power is all that is wanted. He writes:

> To give some assistance in wearing away certain self-evidentness and commonplaces about madness, normality, illness, crime and punishment; to bring it about together with many others, that certain phrases can no longer be spoken so lightly, certain acts no longer, or at least no longer so unhesitatingly, performed, to contribute to changing certain things in people's ways of perceiving and doing things, to participate in this difficult displacement of forms of sensibility and thresholds to tolerance,—I hardly feel capable of attempting much more than that. (1981, p. 11-12.)