

Scott Lash
Post-Modernity and Desire
Seminar at Birmingham University 24th October 1984

Lash argued that Western social theory has been characterised by a lack of integration of the (French) structural and (German) critical elements.

The core of his presentation was that Habermas, while entitled to be opposed to the new social movements based on a neo-Nietzschean philosophy (notably Foucault, Deleuze and Lyotard) was over-reacting. Further, his own accent on rationality was extreme and inflexible.

Habermas argued that the theoretical, practical/ethical and aesthetic spheres had split from the end of the 18th Century and assumes that this split is evident in social modernism. The negative consequences of this are that aesthetics become wholly separated from everyday life, that theory and practice have deserted the aesthetic sphere. (Habermas regards the aesthetic as the least important sphere— it is intrinsically remote from rational action— aesthetic modernism, he asserts, undermines theoretical and practical reason).

Habermas' attack on post-modernism (PM) is because he claims that it privileges the aesthetic sphere, thus undermining the theoretic (and practical) base of rational knowledge.

On this latter [it was agreed in the discussion] Habermas may be overreacting because he tends to have an inflexible view of rationality. New social movements may be offering an alternative rationality that is not simply based on 'man's mastery of nature'.

Modernism and Postmodernism

Aesthetic modernism began around 1880–90 with the development of non-representational forms of art (painting, music, novels). This attitude also began to be reflected in the natural sciences (argued Foucault). Aesthetic modernity, Lash suggested, is concerned with the formalism of the sign, (notably, Joyce, Schoenberg).

Modernism, for example, sees Eliot's poem 'Wasteland' as a transcendental critique of the meaninglessness of modern capitalism (a view that may be left, right or apolitical).

Post-modernity breaks with the primacy of the signifier with a new primacy attached to the unconscious, bodily, or desire. Desire is at the root of neo-Nietzschean theories (and explicit in Lyotard who sees himself as a metaphysician of desire).

Postmodernity ends the distinction between the cultural realm and everyday life with such devices as 'living theatre', the 'theatre of the absurd', and films like *Paris-Texas*, Coppola's 1980s films and Andy Warhol's productions.

Post-modernism replaces the symbolic and attacks discourse as the focus of attention.

Theoretical post-modernism ends linguistic structuralism, attacks the primacy of the word/text/hegemony of writing. I.e. is opposed to Lacan, Barthes, Derrida and Eco, who are essentially

developments of Saussure. Postmodernism embodies a Nietzschean critique of Saussure: a 'bursting out of the prison house of language'.

The Neo-Nietzscheans

Lash suggested a certain degree of convergence between the French post-modernist and U.S. neo-conservatives such as Bell (*Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*).

Post-modernists (France)

Foucault, Deleuze, Lyotard. Deleuze, in his *Anti-Oedipus* (re-issued 1984 by Macmillan) provided a celebration of 1968. Lyotard in the *Post-Modern Condition* (1984, University of Manchester Press).

On subjugation.

Habermas is opposed to subjugation but argues from the point of view of communicative competence grounded in rationality.

The Neo-Nietzscheans are similarly opposed to subjugation but primarily via the 'freedom of the subconscious'. Habermas is afraid of the Fascist potential of this perspective.

Habermas engages in a vitriolic attack in *Telos* and *New German Critique* (1982-4 period approx), which is not particularly well done but the elements of a critique can, Lash argued, be distilled out of them).

Habermas has a core notion of natural rights that are excluded by the French theorists, which Habermas argues opens the door to subjugation.

Lyotard responds that Habermas relies too heavily on a consensus notion and that in his demotion of the aesthetic realm he also provides a basis for subjugation.

Theory of desire

For Foucault, desire TRANSGRESSES discourse
(see David Carroll - Humanities and Science)

Lyotard:

Has two theories of post-modernism:

1. Aesthetic theory in which desire is equated with Freudian libido and art is 'congealed libido'. Lyotard develops the Burkean (later Kantian) distinction between an aesthetic of beauty and an aesthetic of the sublime, the latter being the effect the work of art has on the audience. Non-representational art, he suggested, has more psychic energy embodied in it and has more effect on the audience than representational art (even if aesthetically/beauty not so pleasing).
2. Theory of knowledge. The problem here is how is knowledge legitimated. Lyotard offers two alternatives in opposition to the modernist view that, he argues, relies on metanarratives (e.g., Marx, Hegel, or the Enlightenment generally—which is very elusive!). Lyotard says that the early 20th century saw a crisis in science and a new legitimation crisis. The way out is:
 - a. performativity: legitimation in terms of how well the sciences perform—this is very functionalist. Lyotard argued that performativity destroys science.
 - b. inventivity: legitimation through invention (which he prefers).

For Lyotard, all knowledge is language games, based on statements and involve an engagement with language which is a struggle.

Science is denotative statements plus meta-prescriptive rules and competition in science is via statement production within the rules. Scientists compete via inventivity.

[NOTE]: If there is to be breaking out of the rules then these must be critically addressed. Seems Lyotard has a view not dissimilar to Feyerabend's notion of science. There appears to be an absence of critique in this. Also the lack of material grounding.]

Lyotard (derived from Benjamin) argued that postmodern aestheticism lay in the unstable and contradictory forms of art that reflect modern capitalism. He objects to the new representational forms, which he argues are an attempt at a new consensus in a riven society and this violates inventivity. In this sense, Habermas, is part of the problem not the solution.

Lyotard explicitly attacks Habermas for his consensus notion based on metanarratives. Lash argued that Habermas, however, breaks with meta-narratives, in his break with the philosophy of consciousness of Hegel as espoused by the early Frankfurt School (although Habermas still retains a social evolution theory that is metanarrative bound).

Habermas seeks the regularisation of language games and in so doing, Lyotard argues, has a practical/ethical and dictatorial thesis of value freedom. Lyotard is opposed to objectivity. The ethic of inventivity is an ethical demand for freedom. For Habermas, consciousness regulates unconsciousness. Lyotard wants the freedom of the unconscious, approachable via the aesthetic realm (unconstrained by [Habermasian type] rationality).

Habermas is opposed to the heterogeneity of language and wants a fully transparent society. (Although he claims he doesn't—rather unsuccessfully). Lyotard claims that Habermas' advocacy of transparent language (i.e. the unity of signifier and signified [!!!]) is supportive of practical power, as, for example, manifested in the socialist realism of the USSR. [NOTE: This all seems to be a rather naive debate].

Habermas's communicative rationality is too restricting for Lyotard who wants multiplicity of meaning.

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Discussion

The discussion, following the presentation, went on to Marxism as a critical force. Lee Harvey argued that its critique and material grounding are essential, rather than its rationalism. Lash agreed. He wanted concentration in Marxism on rules, symbols rather than the identification/exposure of the dichotomisation of production processes. The former more than the latter is manifestly the basis of class consciousness.

The new Neo-Nietschzian approaches must be understood not rejected, as must their appeal.

Lash pointed to the distinction between linguistic and social structuralists. Suggested links between structural functionalism (Durkheim, Parsons) and Althusserian-type structuralism.

