Postmodernism in a Global Perspective

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Can Solidarity Be a Substitute for Objectivity?*

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The Rise of Skepticism

Sociologists' understanding of what they are about has varied and vacillated considerably during the last half of the 20th century. Some have seen relatively little difference between sociology and the natural sciences—other than the specific subject matter they study (Black, 1976, 1993; Gibbs, 1972; Homans, 1967; Lundberg, 1975). According to this view we should apply the "scientific method" to social behavior, and seek to identify "laws," which are to be incorporated in broader theories. This would supposedly enable us to predict and explain social behavior the way that the natural sciences do for other empirical phenomena.

Interpretation, Hermeneutics, and Structuralism

There have long been members of the profession—not to speak of nonsociologists—who stressed that there were fundamental differences between the social sciences and the natural sciences (Furfey, 1953; MacIver, 1973; Winch, 1970).[1] The possibility of law-like positivistic knowledge of social behavior was called into question or significantly

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* This is a revision of a paper first presented as a public lecture for the Postmodernity Project at the University of Virginia in 1999.

[1] In most respects Furfey was a positivist who closely identifies social sciences with the natural sciences, with the qualification that the experimental method is much more problematic. Where he differed from many of his contemporaries was

qualified. The goal of interpreting social and cultural patterns, that is, showing the logic of the relationship of social patterns, what these mean to people, and how such meaning shapes their interactions, was proposed as an alternative (Dilthey, 1976; Weber, 1949, 1968: 4–22; Blumer, 1969; Wuthnow, 1987). Some anthropologists such as Geertz (1983) have asserted that in important respects there is only "local knowledge"—knowledge rooted in the historical experience of a particular community— just as there are only specific languages. Hence, the task of the social analyst is analogous to the translator who makes the meaning of a foreign text available to those of his own community. The goal is interpretation not explanation and this requires "thick descriptions" not abstract theories.

Sometimes this process involves treating social patterns as if they were analogous to written texts; the analytical project is to offer a credible interpretation similar to those offered by literary critics (Ricoeur, 1981, Chap. 8; Brown, 1987). Initially such efforts were modeled after the hermeneutical methods that were developed for interpretation of texts (Schleiermacher, 1986; Heidegger, 1962: 31 2, I.5; Gadamer, 1992).[2] This involved the use of the "hermeneutic circle": that is, the meaning of any given word or phrase was derived largely from the context of the whole document, while the meaning of the text as a whole was derived from the related meanings of its various elements. The initial intent of hermeneutics was to determine the meaning of a text in its own historical context and hence it was, in part, concerned with what the author had intended to communicate.

Closely related, but distinct in its origins from hermeneutical perspectives, was structuralism. What it shared with hermeneutics was an insistence that meaning emerged primarily from the relationship between the elements of a symbolic system. In contrast to hermeneutics, however, structuralism downplayed the intended and explic-

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that he insisted that sociology could not and should not be value-free in the same sense that was relevant to the natural sciences.

McIver defended the common sense notion of causation, but argued that the causal processes in the natural and the social sciences differed because social processes were mediated by psychological process, which meant that causation had to be thought of in different ways.

[2] Of course these writings on hermeneutics are concerned with much broader issues than methods in the social sciences. Gadamer is especially clear that the techniques for interpreting text are not his primary concern.

itly communicated meaning and focused on latent and unintended deep structures. The approach was first systematically articulated in Saussure's structural linguistics (1966), which focused, not on individual people speaking, but on the structure of a language as a whole. Structuralism, more broadly conceived, emphasized that all meaning systems tended to have structures comparable to those found in languages. Levi-Strauss made this approach famous by first applying it to kinship systems (1969) and later to the analysis of myths of premodern societies (1975). Barthes (1968) and others (e.g., Guiraud, 1975) developed semiology by extending this perspective to the analysis of sign systems in general, including fashions, food and dining, manners, street signs, and advertisements as well as literature. Althusser (1969 [1965]) combined structuralism with Marxism as a mode of analyzing capitalism; not only do structural factors shape the future, but the individual's consciousness is simply a reflection of the dominant ideology. All of these approaches tended to emphasize the determinative effect of latent structures and to downplay or ignore the role of individual actors. The acting subject was increasingly "de-centered."

Poststructuralism

To oversimplify things considerably: hermeneutics was primarily interested in intended meaning embodied in texts; structuralism was primarily interested in unintended meaning embodied in any system of signs. Both, however, tended to assume that there were a limited number of legitimate interpretations of a text or meaning system. If the first focused on the author (and his/her immediate context) and the second focused on the text itself, it is not surprising that before long a perspective would emerge that focused on the reader or interpreter.

According to this third perspective, any attempt to seek the true meaning of a text, whether that intended by the author or that latent in the text, is seen as an elusive goal. More generally, the very process of mutual understanding is seen as much more problematic than is usually assumed. Texts no longer have one or even a few meanings, but they have a virtually unlimited number of possible meanings and interpretations. This is not just a matter of different people seeing different things—though that, of course, happens. In addition the very process of creating meaning involves the privileging of some notions

over against others. Moreover, since all meaning comes from metaphor, even the elements that are privileged contain ambiguities that must be papered over. Therefore, the construction of symbolic order involves the creation of latent disorder, that is, the disorder of repressed meanings that stand in contradiction to what is privileged. The apparent common sense meaning in any given historic context is partial and contingent. Just as apparent order was created by social construction, the superficiality of this order can be shown through "deconstruction."

Any text reveals ambiguities and inconsistency rooted in the privileging of one term over against its alternatives. That is to say, the very creation of a text implicitly creates one or more "subtexts." The more general result is to make some human possibilities seem obvious and foreclose others. What is required, according to Derrida (1976, 1978), is a "close-reading" which puts the key terms "under erasure." These key terms are treated as unavoidable, but problematic. Such close readings demonstrate the metaphorical nature of all meaning, the figurative nature of all knowledge, and that all texts have "subtexts." Identifying the key terms that must be put under erasure is accomplished in part by the same method used by structuralism, that is, the meaning of any term derives from its difference from other terms. But in contrast to structuralism, which still sees the link between the signified and the signifier as central, post structuralism demotes or rejects the significance of this link (Baudrillard, 1988: Chap. 3). Since all meaning is metaphorical, this means that it is created by an endless linking of such metaphors. Hence, meaning is created not only by the difference between terms, but also by deferring any attempt to finalize meaning.

This is the significance of Derrida's play on the French words *difference*, to differ, and *différance*, to defer or put off. These terms are pronounced the same, but have separate meanings. Derrida's point is that the creation of meaning unavoidably involves both, that is, creating differences, but differences whose final meaning is always deferred. (There are some similarities here with the notion of indexicality used by ethnomethodologists.) Final meaning is deferred, in part, because the next reader may rely on new and different metaphors to interpret the same text. There is yet another twist in the story of creating meaning: the processes of close reading and deconstruction are themselves historic social constructions; and so deconstruction is never complete or final, but, like all human efforts, temporary and contingent.

These ideas, along with a number of related developments in literary theory came to be known as poststructuralism. It tended to reject

not only the authority of the author or the structure of the texts, but it called into question the relevance of authority itself—at least in determining meaning. It rejected the notion that any given reading or interpretation was authoritative. Hence, the process of interpretation ceased to be a technical or subsidiary intellectual activity; rather, it was an act of creation. The distinction between authors and interpreters became increasingly irrelevant. Moreover, since all knowledge and communication was mediated by language, human experience was conceptualized, at least figuratively—and all meaning is ultimately figurative and metaphorical—as a vast set of texts. Hence, all texts were seen to be about other texts. Abstract generalizations are either misleading or irrelevant. The most we can hope to do is compare and contrast particular texts. The goal is neither truth, nor even interpretation per se, for that would imply that there was some fixed meaning that had to be accurately discovered and communicated. Rather, playfulness, suggestiveness, stimulation, and originality are the goals.

Closely related to this notion of the problematic and contextual nature of meaning is skepticism about human identity. Not only does the author's intended meaning have no privileged status, but the identity of the author is enigmatic. In addition to consciousness being problematic, as Freud taught us, there is no taken-for-granted acting subject with a self-evident identity. The ego is demoted in the Freudian trinity and the id, usually re-conceptualized as "desire," becomes a central focus of psychoanalysis (Lacan, 1977). The identity of individual actors is seen as multiple and time bound; so, like all meanings, the subject is de-centered and deconstructed. Moreover, not only social order, but language, meaning, and human identity all necessarily involve the repression of alternative possibilities. Hence, free association of ideas and symbols becomes not only a technique of psychoanalysis used for therapeutic purposes, but also a more general mode of expression. This is true not only in art and literature, but in the healthy life itself, which is characterized not so much by logical consistency, but by symbolic playfulness (Barratt, 1993).

Foucault (1973b) develops a poststructuralist perspective for the "human sciences." According to Foucault, the supposed continuities of history are the result of making the rational subject of bourgeois individualism the fundamental assumption of analysis. Such an integrated subject requires that the present be logically connected to the past and the future. If this were not the case, who we are today would have no connection with who we were yesterday or will be tomorrow (Foucault,

1972). The assumption of such connections usually leads to positing some notion of "underlying" structures—an assumption characteristic of structuralism in general and Marxism in particular. It is in at least these two ways that Foucault wishes to be "poststructuralist." Abandoning the notions of the integrated subject and structured history allows us to see that it is fragmentation and discontinuities, rather than continuities, which should be the focus of analysis. Just as texts require a close reading to discern subtexts, history requires not causal analysis, but, following Nietzsche (1956), a genealogy of the past that pays attention to language. This is a kind of close reading of history that focuses on the neglected, the deviant, even the bizarre, for example, madness, sickness, crime, and sexuality, which are, of course, some of the preoccupations of Foucault (e.g., 1973a, 1979). These are the aspects of human life, which traditional history has ignored or even covered up in the process of constructing what is supposedly knowledge. Hence, what is required, according to Foucault, is an "archeology of knowledge"—the title of one of his key methodological books (1972). When such a method is used the Enlightenment story of superstition being replaced by rationality must be reconsidered. Instead of rational knowledge transforming force and prejudice into legitimate authority, blatant forms of power are replaced by more subtle forms of control rooted in knowledge. Hence the sick, the insane, and criminals are not simply shunned, restrained, or punished; they are treated and disciplined. But this requires new institutions of social control: the asylum, the modern reformatory prison, and the clinic. Instead of power being transformed by knowledge, the construction of knowledge becomes the primary means of power; or conversely, power produces its own knowledge. In the modern world the two become indistinguishable, that is, they become "power/knowledge" (Foucault, 1980).

Postmodernism

While there is no clear line between poststructuralism and postmodernism, an important strand of the latter is a critique of modernism in architecture, the arts and literature, rather than an argument about social theory per se. If modernism in art and architecture tended to emphasize the functional, the abstract, and the elegant, postmodernism is more eclectic and playful, mixing and counterpoising different styles. Modernism's abstractness and universalism—for example, the

"international style" of steel and glass in architecture—is seen as an orthodoxy which must be made fun of by, among other means, eclecticism. For example, a massive pseudo neoclassical facade is placed on the front of a steel and glass skyscraper. Before long, these themes from the arts and art history (e.g., Jencks, 1986) are articulated by philosophers and theorists.

Just as artists attack the abstractness of modernism, Lyotard (1984), and others attack modernity's "grand narratives" and general theories of history, and more specifically Marxism and structuralism. There is an emphasis on the importance of the new technologies of communication and information as now the main force of production. Moreover, consumption, with its mind-numbing advertising, rather than production is increasingly seen as the core, societal shaping activity (Baudrillard, 1988). The enormous multiplication of information and databases involves a change in the very nature of knowledge. There is a use of Wittgenstein's (1968) notion of the lack of commensurability of different language games as a critique of universal or transcendent philosophical categories and epistemological realism. This provides a philosophical basis for pluralism.

The critique has been broadened and some reject the key project of the Enlightenment: the use of reason to develop systematic, universally valid knowledge. A postmodern age has been proclaimed in which the historical relativity and contingency of even our most rational and objective processes are emphasized. Not only the interpretation of literary texts and the findings of science, but any claim to transcendent categories, universalism, objectivity, or nonpartisanship must be demystified. The concept of irony is used to express this critical attitude toward all understandings, especially ultimate values—or more accurately (following the "linguistic turn"), what Rorty would call "final vocabularies" (Rorty, 1989: 73–95). All human knowledge and values are to be placed under what Ricoeur called the "hermeneutic of suspicion" (1981: 6–7, 34).

Structural and Political Sources of Skepticism

There are, of course, important nonacademic and extraintellectual sources of poststructuralism and postmodernism. These same factors are also important sources of the skepticism about objectivity

and universalism. The end of formal political colonialism combined with a more integrated global economy, the feminist movement, and the increasing resistance of various minorities to discrimination and domination all have contributed to a questioning of the traditional categories of Western culture—which for the most part were created and sustained by Western white males (Said, 1979, 1994; Dirks, Eley, and Ortner, 1994). More specifically, some interpreters of poststructuralism and postmodernism see this questioning as arising directly from the rebellions of the late 1960s and especially the Paris uprising of 1968 (e.g., Lemert, 1992:29; Sarup, 1993). Hence politics has been at the core of these perspectives. A central concern of these politics has been to give voice to groups that had been marginalized in various ways. Often this took the form of a greater appreciation—and sometimes glorification—of cultural pluralism. Conversely, it led to criticism, and often rejection of notions of cultural and social assimilation. Ironically, this ideological appreciation of pluralism occurred at roughly the same time when the difficulties of maintaining social solidarity and peace in pluralistic societies was being made all too evident in places like Yugoslavia, Rwanda, East Timor, Sri Lanka, Lebanon, Palestine-Israel, the U.S.S.R., and even Czechoslovakia. On the intellectual level the concern to demote colonial and Euro-centric views of the world has been associated with criticisms of the traditional academic canon and calls for various kinds of multiculturalism.

At the end of the 20th century such skepticism was not restricted to those who had been excluded. It was also rooted in a reaction against the main structure of modernity that supposedly was intended to assist those who were marginal: the democratic welfare state. Those of relative privilege are resistant not only to being taxed to provide for the less fortunate, but also to the massive bureaucracies that are the core structure of the modern state. Not surprisingly, one reaction has been to revive and reinforce the centrality of the market and the ideologies associated with it. Market capitalism has become even more dominant as a mode of production throughout the world. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), The World Trade Organization (WTO), the economic and political transformation of former Communist countries, and the adoption of market mechanisms in the last sizeable Communist society, China, are only the most obvious examples of the hegemony of the market and a de facto commitment to allowing the process of the market to play the central role in allocating human resources.

So ironically the praise of pluralism and decentralized power comes both from groups that have been marginalized, and from those who see their privileges threatened by more extensive demands for universalism—though the specific content each gives to pluralism is quite different. There is a double irony. The social constituencies that were once highly resistant to universalism—when it meant equal rights for women and minorities—now become the defenders of this notion as a way of criticizing "affirmative action," i.e., compensatory programs for social categories that have suffered past discrimination. Conversely, disadvantaged groups who initially demanded universalism, often now perceive it as a mechanism for perpetuating historic patterns of inequality.

The skepticism is not limited, however, to the state's efforts to help the disadvantaged and increase egalitarianism. There is, at least in the United States, increasing cynicism about the core structures of the democratic state: the ability of the legislative branch to reach acceptable compromises and avoid stalemate, the ability of the executive to effectively implement programs and policies, and the ability of the judiciary to justly resolve disputes and punish criminals. The leaders of the first two branches of government, politicians, are looked at with suspicion, if not outright contempt. They are assumed to be pursuing their own interests or the special interests of those who give them campaign funds, rather than some notion of the general interest. The leaders of the third branch, members of the legal profession, are also held in low esteem.[3]

But the public's cynicism is not restricted to government activities. Polls show that there is also less public confidence in business. This has almost certainly been accentuated by "downsizing," the replacement of regular employees with temporary workers who receive no retirement or health care benefits, and the supplanting of well-paying manufacturing jobs with low-paying service jobs, and various financial crises. Corporate accounting scandals in which billions of dollars were wasted or appropriated by corporate officers further eroded confidence

[3] In the United States, skepticism toward the judicial system was accentuated by the O.J. Simpson case. The difference in blacks' and whites' attitudes about the case illustrates the dramatically different ways those of different social background interpret and understand "the facts." It has further been eroded by the tendency to use narrow ideological considerations in the selection of judges.

in corporations. When these are accompanied by increasing polarization in the distribution of income and wealth it is little wonder that many in the middle and working classes are not only skeptical about big government, but also about big business and the justice and objectivity attributed to the market.

In short, paralleling the skepticism that has emerged among intellectuals concerning the possibility of developing objective truth is skepticism about the ability of democratic political institutions and capitalist markets to create a just social order. Of course, there is no clear separation of the intellectual and the economic-cum-political processes that I have discussed. In fact a central theme of postmodernism is the inseparability of intellectual life and politics. Hence, we should expect this to be the case not only for societal politics, but also for academic politics.

It is not accidental that university literature departments most enthusiastically embraced the rejection of objectivity and the move toward relativism. One aspect of this is the delegitmation of the narrator or the voice of the author and the reliance on the voices of the fictional characters to tell a story. The assertion that there can only be concrete multiple stories is the literary version of the rejection of abstraction, generalization, and transcendence.

It is literature departments that were most disadvantaged in an academia dominated by science. The social sciences, including history, may have been viewed as at best poor relations and often as pretenders, but they could at least claim to share science's search for objectivity and systematic knowledge. This avenue was largely closed to those who traditionally had evaluated and criticized literature and the arts. (There have been important technical developments in the study of texts, but these developments were often seen as secondary or even antithetical to the primary task of criticism.) While there have been theories of aesthetics that claimed to have a rational bases, few, if any, ever claimed that there were objective external criteria that could determine the relative value of literary and artistic work. Rather, it was a matter of taste and sensitivity. Moreover, rhetorical skills had always played an important part in these disciplines. Therefore, it is not surprising that it is they that were most open to attempts to radically question objectivity and to embrace pluralism and postmodernism. This included the less traditional members in these rather traditional

disciplines developing a new, interdisciplinary perspective known as cultural studies. This perspective concentrated on showing the way that culture and ideas had been used as means of domination, especially of women and minorities.

This "elective affinity" (Weber, 1968) between literature departments and postmodernism is not, of course, proof that the arguments for postmodernism are false or that its supporters are only pursuing their academic self interest. It simply suggests that intellectual insights are influenced by social factors, and that this is true even of critical perspectives that claim to demystify the vested interest of past perspectives. Supposedly, this is an insight no postmodernist would deny in abstract. It is not, however, a point that they have tended to emphasize in their narratives about postmodernism.

Method, Objectivity, and Rationality

It is hardly surprising that the field that most embraced postmodernism, literary criticism, would provide the models for an intellectual methodology appropriate to a postmodern age. Hence, both philosophy (Rorty, 1989, 73–95, 1991: 78–92) and social science (Brown, 1987; Lemert, 1992; Seidman, 1991, 1994) are seen as closer to literary criticism than to mathematics or the natural sciences. The methodology is that of comparing texts and contrasting particular historical forms of life—rather than creating theorems of a universal logic or general theories that supposedly "represent" an external reality.

For theories to be powerful and useful it is necessary to be able to choose between alternative theoretical explanations. This usually assumes a more systematic form of comparison that takes the form of "testing" theories against "data." This, in turn, assumes the possibility of some type of objectivity. But the claim of objectivity is precisely what postmodernists are suspicious of. Or at the very least they reject the notion that there are external criteria such as "empirical reality" that can produce objectivity. More generally postmodernists deny that theories of knowledge or epistemologies (based on various kinds of foundational assumptions or theories of coherence) can resolve disputes; stated another way they cannot coerce a consensus by specifying

what is objective knowledge and what is not. The attempts to rely on epistemologies to define truth and produce objectivity are seen as yet another misguided attempt to transcend historical experience and the limits of language.

The resort to epistemologies is seen as a way of disguising the inherent political nature of all social knowledge. Persuasive rhetoric in the form of new useful descriptions is the intellectual version of politics. Those who are committed to different fundamental values and perspectives, that is, to different "final vocabularies," can never prove to the satisfaction of the other person that they are wrong. The best that we can do is enter into ongoing conversations, and over time the pragmatic superiority of using one vocabulary rather than another may become apparent. But such disagreements cannot be resolved by reference to transcendent foundational principles. From a postmodernist perspective the resort to such measures leads to attempts at logical coercion. This all too easily lapses into more blatant forms of coercion and cruelty—in the name of truth. The common result of rejecting the politics of rhetoric is to substitute the politics of economic and political coercion. So, according to Rorty (1991: 21–34), what we should seek is solidarity not objectivity. This involves seeking intersubjectivity and consensus through conversation. Universalism is attained not by demonstrating some kind of externally validated objectivity, but by expanding the community of conversation and consensus.

Such skepticism about the possibilities of objectivity has not been limited to the social sciences or literary criticism. Increasingly the philosophical realism that has been implicitly held by virtually all of the sciences has been seriously called into question by philosophers of science (e.g., Fuller, 1988). Philosophers have extensively debated questions of realism and representationalism and their relevance to science.[4] The conventional view of the "scientific method" has been challenged. This conventional view sees changes in scientific knowledge as involving the rational evaluation of data according to agreed-upon standards leading to the slow but systematic improvement

[4] See Rorty (1979, 1991: 1–15) for an account of the debates from an anti-representationalist point of view. See Haack (1993) for a critique of Rorty's "crude pragmatism" and an attempt to reconstruct a "foundherenism" epistemology intended to avoid the limitations of both foundationalism and coherence theory.

in knowledge about an external objective reality. This view came to be seen as at best a gross over simplification spun into what Kitcher (1993) called a "legend." The revisionist view of science portrays it as a highly competitive conflict-ridden social institution in which new paradigms gain adherents through elaborate political coalitions that are based upon much more mundane and self-interested considerations than simply "the evidence" (Kuhn, 1970; Knorr-Cetina, 1983; Latour, 1987). Significant attempts have been made to show that variations for what passes for knowledge are related to the way that intellectual disciplines are structured (Fuchs, 1992). Stated in more general terms, the Enlightenment quest for objective knowledge and universalistic norms has been called into question. More accurately, what is called into question is any claim that there are extra historical criteria such as human nature or rationality that can resolve the question of what is objective, or justify a commitment to such universalism.

There are other attempts to criticize and refine the notion of objectivity that do not necessarily imply its abandonment.[5] Megill (1994) has usefully distinguished four different senses in which objectivity is used. The first is the absolute sense that is closely related to philosophical realism and attempts to represent things "as they really are." The second refers to the sense of objectivity that is derived from the consensus that exists within a given discipline at a given point in time. The third is the dialectical; objectivity is not the distancing of the observing subject from the observed object, but the careful specification of the relationship between subject and object. The fourth is the procedural that uses an impersonal method or procedure to define objectivity. Some examples might include a carefully specified experimental protocol, the training of telephone interviewers to ask the identical question in a neutral voice, standardized procedures for reviewing and accepting articles for publication, or committees of professional associations publishing the authoritative definitions of key concepts. I want to argue that to the degree that objectivity is abandoned—as contrasted to qualified and specified—there is a tendency for the last three types to collapse into one: proceduralism.

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[5] See the essays in Megill (1994) for a sampling of the varieties of approaches and opinions on this issue.

From Value, Justice, and Truth to Proceduralism

Authority in the Postmodern World: As we have seen, Rorty (1989) has advocated that we abandon our concern with objectivity and seek, instead social solidarity. This solidarity is to be rooted in intersubjectivity arrived at through ongoing conversations with those who differ from us. The intent is to increase universality and agreement by widening the community of discourse. This is supposedly made easier by narrowing the areas about which consensus must be reached, and expanding the alternative modes of individual expression and self creation; in Rorty's terms we need a small final vocabulary for the public arena and a large one for private matters. But since an ironic attitude must be maintained about all human efforts, we must realize that any success at public consensus will, at best, be partial. Hence we must maintain openness and tolerance toward others, despite the inconclusiveness and even failure of our conversational efforts to create solidarity.

There have been various critiques of the attempt to substitute solidarity for external sources of authority, and, of course, other sociologists have responded to postmodernism.[6] Relatively little has been said, however, about the difficulties in creating solidarity.

The Sources of Social Solidarity

If the goal is solidarity rather than objectivity, it seems appropriate to ask what sociology tells us about the sources of solidarity. The classic sociological treatment of the sources of solidarity is, of course, Emile Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1965). Durkheim identifies two fundamental sources of solidarity. The first is sharing a common relationship to something that is totally other. More specifically, together people experience the sacred as something that is so totally "other" that it mutes the differences between them. Of course,

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[6] Examples of those who are opposed to or skeptical of abandoning all attempts at developing cross-cultural and trans-historical sources of authority include Diggins (1994); MacIntyre (1984); Ryan (1995); Taylor (1991).

One of the most influential attempts of sociologists to respond to postmodernism is the set of essays edited by Seidman and Wagner (1992).

there is often a continuum between the sacred and the profane. Hence, a charismatic leader or a common enemy may be the "other" that produces solidarity. The second source is participating in common rituals. These are highly stereotyped patterns of action and interaction that give people a sense of shared experience. Out of such common experience social norms and a shared sense of morality often develop. Typically these two mechanisms—otherness and ritual—are used together and hence are mutually reinforcing: we participate in common rituals that affirm our sameness in relationship to the otherness of the sacred.[7]

When one of these mechanisms of solidarity tends to become too dominant over the other, well-known heresies or pathologies tend to develop. An overemphasis on the details and extensiveness of ceremony leads to activities that get bogged down in ritualism. Formal conformity to the rituals or the norms becomes an end-in-itself. This tendency is not restricted to religious groups, but is frequently found in businesses and government agencies and their "red tape"; it is what the older literature on formal organizations called "goal displacement."

The opposite tendency is to place so much emphasis on one's connection to the other that any sense of a common social life, and a related morality, disappears. Rituals and rules are seen as a sign of inadequate faith in, and connection to, the sacred other. The characteristic results are tendencies toward antinomianism or dogmatic fanaticism. Too strong a preoccupation with the other can also be found in more profane situations where one's connection to charismatic leaders or despots becomes the sole value, overruling any sense of common norms or morality—other than following the will of the leader. Nazism, Stalinism, and Mao's Red Guards approximate this ideal-type. In short, overemphasizing only one of these mechanisms usually produces unintended negative consequences.

[7] Of course, earlier, in *The Division of Labor in Society* (1933, 1984), Durkheim suggested that new forms of organic solidarity based largely on functional interdependence were replacing the supposedly older forms of mechanical solidarity. But even in this early optimistic work, the development of this new form of solidarity was seen as dependent upon a common collective consciousness that could be easily undermined by economic injustice deriving from the inheritance of private property and ascription in the occupational structure. It seems accurate to say that Durkheim himself and sociology in general became less sanguine about the easy substitution of organic for mechanical solidarity.

The Demystification of Life

For all of postmodernism's attacks on Enlightenment rationalism, it is still vitally concerned with the demystification of social and intellectual life. Not only must God be declared dead, so must philosophy or any attempt at universalistic categories or foundational assumptions. In the Durkheimian terms discussed above, solidarity through reference to a sacred other—even a secularized other—must be abandoned. No longer can we reach consensus and agreement by the commonality we share in some relationship to something "out there"—whether the "out there" is God or "empirical reality." For the foundational assumption of postmodernism is that there is nothing out there; nothing other than what particular groups and cultures have contingently and historically produced.

Hence a key programmatic feature of postmodernism is a search for new mechanisms to produce solidarity. This is most explicit in Habermas (1987: Chaps. 2 and 3), whose emphasis on undistorted communicative action is specifically referred to as "the linguistification of the sacred," that is, the production of consensus and solidarity by rational communication rather than ritual or reference to the sacred. While Rorty does not link his concern with solidarity to the Durkheimian model, his stress on conversation and tolerance is also a search for alternative sources of solidarity.

But abandoning old sources of solidarity and substituting new ones is not cost-free. Just as attempts at solidarity through ritual alone tend to lapse into ritualism, solidarity through communication and conversation tends to lapse into proceduralism. Since it is rare that even small groups can reach complete consensus, we agree to let the majority rule—or some other rule of procedure. When all forms of transcendence—sacred and secular—have been rejected, the only legitimate basis of authority—whether political, scientific, or whatever—becomes agreed upon social procedure.[8]

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[8] There has been, of course, debate over how fair, just, and unbiased social decision-making procedures are and can be. Some have defended relatively traditional forms of democratic politics as the best alternative we have in the current historical circumstances (Rorty, 1989, esp. Chaps. 3 and 4 and 1991, 175–196), while others have suggested supposedly rational bases for notions of the just society (Rawls, 1971; Habermas, 1984, 1987; Sciulli, 1992).

That human understanding is necessarily limited by the contexts in which it develops, is, of course, a key assumption of much of postmodernism. Hence it seems appropriate to examine the move toward proceduralism as the basis of authority in its broad context.

The Rise of Proceduralism

The rejection of transcendent categories and the emphasis on historical concreteness must be seen in the context of long-term historical trends. Liberalism, in its historic sense, is at the core of these trends. A key assumption of liberalism is that procedure can be substituted for substantive agreement. Social processes can be established that produce checks and balances on partisan interest and insure that the exercise of power is publicly visible. The supposed result is a collective situation that is more tolerable for all concerned than are attempts to reach a general consensus or impose orthodoxy.

In the *economic realm* we have almost completely forsaken any notions of transcendent value or criteria. Natural law and the labor theory of value were abandoned long ago. "Value" is "price," which is determined by the complex of social procedures called "the market." In the context of the competitive market, value has no meaning other than the price resulting from the market's aggregation of the preferences of a set of historical actors in a particular time and place. Things or activities have no economic value outside of that process. If there is a truly competitive market operating, there is no economic basis for criticizing the values that are assigned commodities or the way these commodities are allocated among actors. The pursuit of self-interest, in aggregate, results in the common good. By definition we have the best of all possible economic worlds—at least at the given historical moment. Nonlibertarians would acknowledge that there are some activities that cannot be adequately provided by private entrepreneurs through the market: law and order (especially the protection of property), defense, and infrastructures such as roads are commonly mentioned examples. In a similar manner they recognize that the pursuit of private profit may require some regulation to reduce "externalities"—negative consequences for the broader community, as when factories dump pollution into rivers. The burden of proof, however, is always on those who claim that nonmarket procedures must be used, and there is the

presumption that nonmarket production is inherently less efficient. The value of such activities is thought of largely in terms of "shadow prices" that estimate the market value of such activities. In sum, our very notion of value becomes identified with the outcome of particular economic procedures: exchanges in the market.

In the *political realm*, notions of constitutional democracy and procedural justice play a parallel role. Legal procedures produce checks and balances on power. These checks and balances supposedly result in compromises that are the best possible outcome under the given historical circumstances. "Justice" is being treated according to the prescribed procedures. The concept of law itself becomes detached from any notions of natural law or ethical principles, and becomes simply the rules that are formulated by means of legitimate procedures. There is no politically legitimate basis for resisting the outcome of decision-making processes if they were conducted according to the law. In the United States, if protest movements do not accept the outcome of the political process, they must be prepared to have the police powers of the state used against them—whether it is the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, the anti-Vietnam War protest of the 1970s, the anti-abortion protest of the 1980s, the militia movements of the 1990s, or the anti-globalization protestors of the 2000s. Even these protest groups sometimes implicitly accept the legitimacy of procedure.[9]

As we have seen in the *philosophical realm*, there has been a move toward historical concreteness and a rejection of transcendent categories, metaphysics, and all foundational assumptions. The aspect of this that is most directly relevant to sociology is the postmodernist critique of philosophical realism. Social processes and procedure are given a central role in defining "reality" and "truth." Just as economic and political values are socially constructed—through the market and democratic politics, respectively—so is our understanding of the empirical world. Hence, even scientific theories are largely self referential, determined as much by the traditions, assumptions, and procedures of a particular community of scientists as they are by an external reality;

[9] For example, anti-Vietnam war protesters did not reject the legitimacy of democracy—though many rejected capitalism. Rather they claimed that insofar as there was popular support for the war, it was because the U.S. government or the corporation-dominated news media controlled information and manipulated public opinion—making authentic democratic procedures impossible.

for the very observation of that reality is rooted in the socially con-
structed categories of a particular community. Consequently, "truth,"
like "value" and "justice" has no independent basis, but is the product
of a particular set of historical social processes. As in the economic
and political realm there is a tendency to expand formal procedures
as a means of collective decision-making.

The Limits and Costs of Historical Concreteness

Stated in other terms, a key thrust of postmodernism is to demystify
reified concepts—such as value, justice and truth, time, space, God,
etc.—and to forego attempts at generalized theories. Instead, the
emphasis is on the need to re-describe human experience in relatively
concrete, historically contextualized categories.

There is much to be said for the demystification postmodernism
proposes. But, it also has its costs. In my opinion not the least of
these is lulling us into the illusion that reification and alienation can
be eliminated. This was a chief claim of the Marxian tradition. By
forsaking idealism and embracing a thoroughgoing historical ma-
terialism, humans were supposedly going to come to grips with the
concrete historical forms of domination, which were the contingent
source of reification and alienation. Most observers now think this
was an illusion. Reified notions of human nature and the fetishism
of commodities were replaced by reified notions of the proletariat
and the fetishism of the party line. These led not only to new forms
of domination and terror, but also to distorted forms of science and
aesthetics such as Lysenkoism in genetics and socialist realism in art.
Such surreptitious reification and alienation did not begin with and
is not limited to the history of Communism.

As suggested above, similar processes have occurred many times in
religious groups. The authority of a charismatic leader, proper ritual
activity, or the processes of the collectivity become the sole definers
of the sacred; deviant and eccentric understandings of the sacred are
either defined as heresy or are ignored; in other words, the church
and its ritual and governing procedures replace God as the de facto
transcendent point of reference. Whether it is the Communist party
or a religious group, when there is no basis of authority other than the

concrete traditions of a particular historical community, and when all nonhistorical transcendent visions are declared as illusions or only a narrow, orthodox version is permitted, then resistance to authority in that community becomes even more problematic. The main thrust of George Orwell's work was to warn us of the dangers of self-contained social systems—and especially when social procedures become the arbiter of legitimate language.[10]

Of course, one response to this criticism is that the solution is to build into the very traditions of the community, the legitimacy of tolerance, criticism, and countervailing forms of power that check and limit domination, whether political or intellectual. Even more fundamental is taking an ironic position toward all human endeavors. But even where such traditions exist, they offer at best a limited basis for criticism. While relatively systematic idealized counterfactual models such as those proposed by Rawls (1971) and Habermas (1984) may be a useful beginning point for social and political criticism, they too seem closely wedded to proceduralism. Moreover, more thoroughgoing postmodernists such as Derrida, Lyotard, and Rorty would reject such models as yet another form of pseudo-universalism, transcendent naivete, foundationalism, and mystification. According to them the most we can do is continually re-describe our experience in concrete terms, in the tradition of Proust; according to this viewpoint, theories, even ironic theories, imply domination.

In my opinion, this strategy leaves us open to a dangerous outcome. What seems to actually happen when we reject transcendent bases of authority—whether sacred or secular—is that we resort to various forms of proceduralism to arrive at collective decisions. There can be many things good about such an outcome. The problem is when we deny the intellectual legitimacy of any attempt to create notions that might be used to criticize such procedures. There is no more reason to be confident that intellectual authority based upon the current consensus of even the most ideal intellectual community—not to speak of the National Academies of Science, the Modern Language Association, or the American Sociological Association—is safe from dogmatic provincialism, than to assume political democracy is immune

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[10] See Rorty (1989: 169–188) for his attempt to deal with the issues that Orwell raises for his position.

from chauvinistic nationalism. Of course, transcendent categories and philosophical realism do not guarantee justice or truth, but they provide an ideological basis for resisting the outcomes of current social procedures. However great the dangers of reification, alienation, and mystification, and the persecution of others in the name of the sacred, the dangers of relativism and a provincial cultural hegemony seem at least as great.[11]

I do not mean to deny all legitimacy to capitalist markets, constitutional democracies, or perspectives that emphasize the social construction of reality and call into question any simple philosophical realism. I do want to argue that in all of these areas it is a mistake to reject the legitimacy of more abstract transcendent categories, including notions of objectivity and relatively general sociological theories. These will necessarily involve oversimplifications, historically contingent reifications, psychological projections, or ideological formulations that in turn call for critique and deconstruction. Nonetheless, we need to maintain the tension between attempts to deconstruct and demystify abstract concepts and the use of such concepts as a means of summarizing our knowledge and as a basis for calling into question the knowledge and values of the moment. To resolve the tension in either direction is likely to create more problems than it solves. Just as Durkheimian solidarity seems greatest when there is both a sacred referent (such as a god or totem) *and* ritual, I suspect that postmodern solidarity will also require analogues of each. We need both theory and concreteness; both transcendence and deconstruction. In the more specific matter concerning notions of truth, we are likely to need both a sense of how knowledge is socially and historically constructed and models and ideals of objectivity. There is a sense in which objectivity is rooted in social solidarity. But, there is also a sense in which social solidarity is

[11] Rorty's category of irony is intended as the ideological fulcrum or foundation from which to criticize any given consensus or perspective. In many respects it is parallel or functionally equivalent to the Christian concept of original sin: that is, it is a warning about the perpetual dangers of even the best and most informed of intentions producing tragic outcomes. But it seems unlikely that the doctrine of original sin would have had much power without a notion of a just and loving deity, that is a transcendent positive model. Likewise one has to be skeptical that a notion of irony, without transcendent notions with some positive content, is likely to be an effective check on provincialism and chauvinism.

rooted in transcendent notions such as objectivity. I am dubious that more mundane processes such as conversation will suffice.

Certainly all knowledge and truth is socially constructed in particular historical contexts. All are to some degree biased by asymmetries of power both during the social construction of the content of truth and in its applications in particular concrete instances. This does not mean, however, that all truth and knowledge is equally arbitrary and contingent. There are meaningful differences in different systems of determining what is true. In my opinion, there is a useful parallel between the "truth" created by legal institutions and academic/intellectual/scientific institutions. The knowledge that is created by all such institutions is, to some degree, biased by the interest of those who create and operate them and by the differences in power of those who are subject to them. There are, however, significant differences in the degree and content of such biases. Even relatively unsophisticated people who have had an opportunity to see systems of justice operate can make pretty sound judgments about which system they would rather be tried under if they are innocent and their life or freedom is at stake. In my opinion, much of the epistemological angst and rhetoric of recent years is not unlike the rhetoric of lawyers (in an adversarial system of justice) who are trying to discredit the arguments of their opponents rather than contribute what they can to clarifying matters. This parallel is not precise, of course. For one thing, most lawyers know and admit what they are up to and many academics do not.

In short, to answer the question posed in the subtitle of this chapter, as postmodernism suggests, it is a mistake to look to some abstract notion of objectivity as the sole source of solidarity and consensus—even in science. But, it is my strong suspicion that it is also a mistake to attempt to simply substitute solidarity for objectivity.

Irony is a favorite category of the postmodernist. Consequently, it is especially ironical that a thoroughgoing rejection of foundationalism (i.e., of generalizing theories and transcendent categories) attempts to accomplish exactly what poststructuralists and deconstructionists say cannot be done: create a system of ordered meaning with no remainder and no ambiguity. Of course, postmodernists acknowledge, and even glory in, the plurality of what they see as concrete cultural and historical meaning systems. But, any attempt to create categories that claim to transcend the concrete experiences of human historical experience (or, for some, even the experience of a particular culture)

is intellectually illegitimate. For according to this perspective, there can be no legitimate reference to anything other than the socially constructed meanings of a given historical context. This certainly appears to be the privileging of one understanding of human experience and the attempted intellectual repression of all others. There is a humility shown toward pluralism, but there is a not-very-well-disguised arrogance toward any attempts at generalization, not to speak of an appreciation of mystery or transcendence. This unequivocal rejection of anything other than the particular, concrete, and historical is, ironically, one of the foundational assumption of anti-foundationalism.

In sum, it is my opinion that a useful and irresolvable tension between the particular and the general, the concrete and the abstract, the local and the universal, and the historical and the transcendent is more appealing than the elimination of either pole of these contrasts. Therefore, in my judgment, a constructive postmodernism will be less dogmatic about the illegitimacy of generalizations, objectivity, grand narratives, and transcendent categories.[12] In other words, it must take its exhortations to openness and pluralism more seriously than some of its advocates intend.

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[12] In defending the legitimacy of what, for lack of a better name, I have called "transcendent categories," I have in mind religious notions of transcendence and various secularized versions of transcendental philosophy—though I would not necessarily exclude other notions of transcendence.

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