Sociology
Copyright © 2006
BSA Publications Ltd®
Volume 40(3): 529–547
DOI: 10.1177/0038038506063673
SAGE Publications
London, Thousand Oaks,
New Delhi

What Happened to Postmodernism?

Steve Matthewman
University of Auckland, New Zealand

Douglas Hoey
University of Auckland, New Zealand

ABSTRACT

Some things never made it into the 21st century. Postmodern social theory seems to be one of them. In this article we ask the all important questions: what was it and what happened to it? We argue that postmodernism existed in the plural and in many of its forms as proxy. Postmodernism was always a term of convenience for critics, and paradoxically it is they who elevated a disparate group of thinkers into a coherent intellectual project. That is not to deny the existence of either a postmodern moment or of useful theoretical legacies from this purported project. Irrespective of where the criticisms of postmodernism came from, its shared intention was the defence of perceived challenges to assured knowledge.

KEY WORDS

assured knowledge / feminism / Marxism / postmodernism / Science Wars / social theory

Introduction

Postmodernism appeared to be sociology's dominant theoretical paradigm in the latter decades of the 20th century. The term most closely attaches itself to Jean-François Lyotard. In chapter two of *The Postmodern Condition* (1984[1979]) he asks: What is Postmodernism? He then fails to answer the question he poses. Perhaps, cynics suggest, this *is* the answer. 'Like a ghost, it eludes definition,' Ihab Hassan (2003: 3) adds unhelpfully, 'I know less about postmodernism today than I did thirty years ago.' We have no

agreement as to *what* postmodernism is. The problem of negotiating through this 'mine-field of conflicting notions' (Harvey, 1989: viii) is compounded by the questions of *when* postmodernism emerges and *who* its proponents are. Did the postmodern condition come about after the Second World War, was it a product of the economic crises of the 1970s, has it always been with us or can we date it with the precision of Charles Jencks (1984) to 3.32p.m. on 15 July 1972? Attributing postmodernists is as difficult as dating postmodernism. Of those considered major postmodern theorists, most categorically reject the term.

Paradoxically, it seems that at the moment of its greatest influence postmodernism simply vanished. A survey of the literature confirms this. The word 'postmodern' drops out of academic book and conference titles at an ever-accelerating rate. Now when it does appear it is often prefixed by the word 'after' (Gendlin and Shweder, 1997; López and Potter, 2001; Shaw, 2001; Simons and Billig, 1994; Smith and Wexler, 1995). It is almost as if postmodernism never occurred. However, we argue that it is a mistake to pretend that 20 years of social theory simply never happened. Moreover, it would be equally wrong to pretend that postmodernism's legacies are not real. Critics on the Left (Harvey, 1989: 113) concede that postmodern theorizing forced a greater attention to context, geography, historical specificity, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality. While supporters championed postmodernism for 'refocusing the sociological narrative on experience, emotion, "the sensual", "identification" and other events and processes all anchored in the subject' (Bauman quoted in Yakimova, 2002).

Sokal, Bricmont and the Spectre of Postmodernism

In hindsight it appears that the postmodern moment collapsed when scientist Alan Sokal perpetrated his notorious hoax in *Social Text*. It came as a surprise to many that a journal positioned at the vanguard of postmodernism should publish an article that was 'a mélange of truths, half-truths, falsehoods, non sequiturs, and syntactically correct sentences that have no meaning whatsoever' (Sokal, 1996b: 93). The preceding words were the author's own. Sokal had submitted 'Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity' (1996c), an article in praise of postmodern science, to the Science Wars special issue of *Social Text* (1996a). It was printed without amendment. His ruse was later revealed in a confessional article for *Lingua Franca* (Sokal, 1996b), and it received wider publicity from *The New York Times*. With some mirth they noted that a physicist had 'hoodwinked a well-known journal into publishing a parody thick with gibberish as though it were serious scholarly work' (Scott, 2000: 76).

In *The Poverty of Theory* (1978) marxisant historian E.P. Thompson wrote: 'A cloud no bigger than a man's hand crosses the English Channel from Paris, and then, in an instant, the trees, the orchard, the hedgerows, the fields of wheat, are black with locusts' (Inglis, 1982: 202). The theoretical blight

Thompson warned of was Althusserian structuralism. His blistering response to Louis Althusser effectively ended the reign of dogmatic Marxist reductionism. A generation later it is tempting to see Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont's book as repeating Thompson's efforts. It is another rallying cry of the Anglophone Left to defend scholarship from Parisian excess: this time the all-embracing fog of postmodernism. This was Julia Kristeva's (1997: 122) interpretation. She felt that Sokal and Bricmont were 'Francophobes'. Bruno Latour (2000: 124) added that 'France, in their eyes, has become another Colombia, a country of dealers who produce hard drugs – Derridium and Lacanium – which American academics cannot resist any more than crack'.

An examination of Sokal and Bricmont's *Intellectual Impostures* (1999) illuminates many of the problems of the postmodern debate. Strictly speaking, their work is to be read as a broadside against the wilful misuse of scientific terminology to advance Gallic brands of social theory. Yet it has always been sold for its broader appeal. The cover of the book polemicizes it as 'The attack on French postmodernism that became a bestseller'. In fact, Sokal and Bricmont (1999: 173) exempt 'postmodernism in art, architecture [and] literature', but state quite clearly that they have the 'intellectual aspects of postmodernism that have had an impact on the humanities and the social sciences' in their sights: obscurantism; '*epistemic relativism linked to a general skepticism toward modern science*; an excessive interest in subjective beliefs independently of their truth or falsity; and an emphasis on discourse and language as opposed to the facts to which those discourses refer' [emphasis added] (Sokal and Bricmont, 1999: 173–4).

In its narrow sense Sokal and Bricmont's book succeeds. Jacques Lacan's topology is woeful, while Julia Kristeva's set theory is in the 'D' range. Nor would one rush to share a non-Euclidean space with Jean Baudrillard. Similarly, it is embarrassing to find Paul Virilio – he whose 'work is all about stating that it is of paramount importance to analyse acceleration as a major political phenomenon' (quoted in Armitage, 2000: 35) – fail to make the analytical distinction between velocity and acceleration (Sokal and Bricmont, 1999: 17–35, 37–47, 137–8, 160). In its wider sense Sokal and Bricmont's book fails. While it seems that the postmodern monster has been slain, what has passed? Surely that which is attacked is partly conjured by those who would destroy it ...

The initial problem stems from labelling thinkers. 'Postmodernism' is not properly French. The word has had an active historical and geographical life, originating in 1870s' Britain where John Watkins Chapman used it denote post-impressionism (Hassan, n.d.). It reappears in 'the Hispanic inter-world of the 1930s' leaving from Lima, Peru for Madrid, Spain in 1934 (Anderson, 1998: 4). Its first sociological usage is in 1959 in New York with C. Wright Mills' *Sociological Imagination* (1971[1959]). It does not cross the Atlantic to Paris for another two decades (Lyotard, 1984[1979]). These various locations hint at oceans of difference. A notoriously elastic category, postmodernism's meaning has been stretched from a particular artistic sensibility to a new epoch for all of

humanity. As Robert Siegle (1995: 165) notes, the postmodern condition at once names 'a period, a strategy, a mindset, a paradigm, an ambience, a style'.

A loose category of convenience can all too easily be mistaken for a concrete sociological concept. 'In discussions about modernity and postmodernity,' Thomas Osborne (1998: 7) asserts, 'there are only rarely substantive discussions about the sociological aspects of such categories; rather what occurs is a proliferation of neologisms in seemingly empty space'. Yet Sokal and Bricmont use the term unequivocally, corralling a disparate group of thinkers who would eschew close associations into a coherent intellectual cadre. Michel Foucault (1998[1983]: 448), for instance, did 'not understand what kind of problem is common to the people we call "post modern" or "poststructuralist"'. He once famously said of Derrida that he was 'the kind of philosopher who gives bullshit a bad name' (quoted in McCormack, 2001). But for Sokal and Bricmont, postmodernists are all of a piece: they don't understand science, they make glaring mistakes, and they use these fraudulent formulations to peddle politically odious theories. The world will not become a better place, just harder to understand. Whereas Marx's final thesis on Feuerbach read '[t]he philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it,' (1988: 158), the postmodernists would say that there are many worlds and changing them is pointless. Or at least this is Sokal's (1996b: 63) interpretation, for as he said in *Lingua Franca*, by losing contact with the real world you 'undermin[e] the already fragile prospects for progressive social critique'.

Significantly, despite their many differences, those brought under the banner of postmodernism by Sokal and Bricmont still share something. Their 'common problem' is that none of them identify as postmodernists. In the same article that Foucault (1998[1983]: 447) questioned the coherence of the postmodern project, he was forced to ask his interlocutor Gérard Raulet '[w]hat are we calling post-modernity? I'm not up to date'. In *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1985) Irigaray suspected postmodernism of being 'the "last ruse" of patriarchy' (Harding, 1990: 85). Baudrillard only uses the term with hostility. When '[l]abelled a postmodernist, Baudrillard insists he has "nothing to do with postmodernism"' (quoted in Gane, 1991a: 158). Indeed, Mike Gane (1991b: 55) argues that Baudrillard 'develops a coherent rejection of postmodernism'. John Lechte (1990: 209) feels that 'Kristeva's work is somewhat tangential to this postmodern experience'. When asked how he responded to the term, Felix Guattari replied: 'Very unfavourably'. He continued: '[t]he prostitution of architecture in postmodern buildings, the prostitution of art in trans-avant-garde painting, and the virtual ethical and aesthetic abdication of postmodern thought leaves a kind of black stain upon history' (1996: 116). In a similar vein Bruno Latour (1993: 47) wrote of 'the abdication of thought as well as the self-inflicted defeat of the postmodern project'. This project reveals:

> … an horrific image of the world … a nature and a technology that are absolutely sleek; a society made up solely of false consciousness, simulacra and illusions; a discourse consisting only in meaning effects detached from everything; and this whole

> world of appearances keeps afloat other disconnected elements of networks that can be combined haphazardly by collage from all places and all times. Enough, indeed, to make one contemplate jumping off a cliff. (Latour, 1993: 64–5)

During an interview with John Armitage, Paul Virilio was similarly dismissive. 'Postmodernism?', he stated, 'doesn't make any sense to me … Therefore there is no link between me and postmodernism' (quoted in Armitage, 2000: 25). Indeed, if anything, Virilio finds influence in the *pre*modern. He identifies as an 'anarcho-Christian' and his idol is St Hildegard of Bingen (Armitage, 2000: 30). Insofar as we are aware, Jacques Lacan never used the term. Clearly, all of these theorists see postmodernism as someone else's concept; they are not of *that* camp. (It would have been a more interesting and intellectually honest exercise to examine the work of people that consciously employed the term postmodernism: the straw man could have been dispensed with in favour of something of substance. Who would we have? C. Wright Mills (1971[1959]) on epochal shifts? Jean-François Lyotard (1984[1979]) on the suspicion of grand narratives? Zygmunt Bauman (1992, 1993) on ethics? Frederic Jameson (1984) on economics and aesthetics? Douglas Kellner (1995) on media effects?)

A False Consciousness of the Future

As we have noted, there is a body of work that identifies itself as postmodern. Yet critics of the postmodern tend to ignore such work and engage with enemies of their own making. This leads us to suggest that what the critics oppose is a fiction: postmodernism in their sense does not exist. In a literal sense it cannot, for the etymology of modern reveals it to mean 'in the moment', 'of now' (OED). We can never be *post*modern, that is always in the future. But who will dictate the future? Amongst social theorists, it is no coincidence that the critics and conjurers of a spectral postmodernism are Marxists. Like their counterparts in the physical sciences, they too are concerned by the challenge to orthodoxy. Contained within their theoretical armoury is a clear route map of the future (often claimed to be guided by the epistemic authority of science). Non-subscribers to the orthodoxy can be dismissed, but special venom is reserved for apostates, fellow travellers who now follow different paths. As Rosa Luxemburg (1916), reiterating Engels, put it in the *Junius Pamphlet*, there are only two paths – socialism or barbarism. How could those enlightened by the truth turn away from it? 'The discourse of postmodernism,' Callinicos (1989: 170–1) writes, 'is best seen as the product of a socially mobile intelligentsia in a climate dominated by the retreat of the Western labour movement and the "overconsumptionist" dynamic of capitalism in the Reagan-Thatcher era.' Such theorists may include Lyotard, formerly of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, then *Pouvoir ouvrier*, Foucault who fled the Communist Party in 1953 after a brief engagement, and Baudrillard who was considered a neo-marxist thinker until *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe* (1976). These thinkers are

lumped together as a solid counter-revolutionary movement, making them the Snowballs and Emmanuel Goldsteins of critical theory. Postmodernism approaches the Marxist intellectual horizon as an enemy formation, a life less Left.

Thus in order to understand this type of postmodernism, we must understand debates internal to Marxism. Marxism has always been in crisis. Even Marx was moved to state: 'I am not a Marxist' (quoted in Engels, 1890). Interpretive struggles have been ever present, but for developments in late 20th-century social theory one historical factor is worth noting. The events in Paris in May 1968 were a watershed. The notion that Marxism could provide a viable alternative to liberal capitalism was thrown deeply into question. Power and desire could not flow to the individual; a ruling caste would have to hold it on their behalf. As Félix Guattari commented in a 1995 interview: 'May 1968 was an astonishing revelation'. Leftist groups:

> … participated in the reordering business with the other repressive forces, the CGT [Communist worker's union], the PC, the CRS [riot police]. I don't say this to be provocative. Of course, the militants courageously fought the police. But if one leaves the sphere of struggle to consider the function of desire, one must recognize that certain groupuscules approached the youth in a spirit of repression: to contain liberated desire in order to re-channel it. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1995)

Guattari's commentary strikes a chord with others placed in this postmodern camp. Baudrillard believed that 1968 marked the end for Marxism. It demonstrated that it was incapable of producing revolution. 'Marxist theory,' he states, 'never stopped being on the side of capitalism.' Even though 'we no longer know where to find the salt of the earth … we do know that the Communist Party is the biggest desalinisation enterprise' (quoted in Genosko, 2001: 95, 108). In Paris, the graffiti on the walls famously enquired: 'Althusser, where are you?' While his adversary across the Channel, E.P. Thompson (1978: 309), would later write off the pan-European student revolts 'as a rich kid's revolutionary farce'. By the 1980s neither scholar was comfortable with the tag of Marxist.

The fallouts from 1968 manifest as a series of shifts in ideological persuasion, objects of study, their proper location and the appropriate theoretical orientation. We might sum these up as shifts from left to right, from politics to culture, from production to consumption, from structuralism to post-structuralism (Plant, 1992: 93–105; Seidman, 1998: 218–52). Seidman (1998: 229, 232–33) notes that Lyotard was active in the uprisings of May 1968, and that Baudrillard's 1960s and 1970s writings were 'aimed to think through the intellectual and political implications of May 1968'. John Marks (1998: 91) states that:

> French intellectuals took an important part in, and were greatly influenced by the events of May 1968, and *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* … is often considered to have emerged directly from the intellectual energies set in motion by '68. In a similar way, [he continues, Foucault was also] 'politicised' by '68,

> eventually producing *Discipline and Punish*. … At the risk of oversimplification, [Marks concludes] *Anti-Oedipus* is an attempt to theorise the new more permeable relationship between the personal and the political set in motion by 1968.

These insider narratives square with Sokal and Bricmont's (1999: 188) judgment: 'One factor driving the new social movements towards postmodernism was, undoubtedly, a dissatisfaction with the old leftist orthodoxies.' Likewise, when answering his own question – 'Where do postmodernists come from?' – Terry Eagleton (1995/6: 59) wrote: 'Imagine a radical movement that had suffered an emphatic defeat. So emphatic, in fact, that it seemed unlikely to resurface for the length of a lifetime, if at all.' In Paris, the Communist Party refused to support students (in Prague they drove tanks over them). Baudrillard (quoted in Gane, 1993: 119) was adamant that there were no children of May: 'That event disappeared without leaving a trace other than this secondary and parodic effect, this second or thirdhand product manufactured to occupy a political scene that has been utterly absorbed and destroyed: French socialism.'

Yet the Marxist debates on post-1968 trajectories show the very contradictions and paradoxes that postmodern thinkers have been accused of. For Marxists, postmodernism is simultaneously a loss of faith in Leftist scholarship, a vague spectral presence *and* a dialectical triumph for Marxism. The political return of the Right is also said to mark a shift from Left to Right in the domain of theory. Eagleton (1995/6: 69) identifies '[p]ostmodernism as the ideology of a peculiarly jaded, defeatist wing of the liberal-capitalist intelligentsia, which has mistaken its own very local difficulties for a universal human condition in exactly the manner of the universalist ideologies it denounces'. To Callinicos (1989: 165), 1968 witnessed the end of revolutionary prospects. Across Europe the far left shifted to the centre. 'In France, where hopes had been raised highest, the fall was most precipitous. The *nouveaux philosophes* helped to convert the Parisian intelligentsia – largely *marxisant* since the Popular Front and the Resistance – to liberalism.'

Contemporaneously, Anderson (1998: 66) asserts that the expropriators have been expropriated. Postmodernism may have begun as a rejection of the Left, but it has moved from enemy to ally:

> In the dominion over the term postmodernism won by Jameson, we witness the opposite achievement: a concept whose visionary origins were all but completely effaced in usages complicit with the established order, wrested away by a prodigious display of theoretical intelligence and energy for the cause of a revolutionary Left. This has been a discursive victory gained against all the political odds, in a period of neo-liberal hegemony when every familiar landmark of the Left appeared to sink beneath the waves of a tidal reaction.

Jameson's triumph was followed by Callinicos' victories in the political campaign, Harvey's economic conquest and Eagleton's ideological success (Anderson, 1998: 66).

But who were the expropriators? Who was defeated in this 'discursive victory'? *Would the real postmodernists please stand up?* We return to the

problem inherent in Sokal and Bricmont's scholarship, with one difference. Whereas those they labelled postmodern denied the appellation, Callinicos et al. furnish no names. Callinicos' (1989: 5) *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique*, exempts Deleuze, Derrida and Foucault from critical scorn, as 'they develop their ideas with considerable skill and sophistication, and offer partial insights of great insight'. Eagleton similarly chooses not to identify specific theorists. In his words, he is concerned 'less with the more *recherché* formulations of postmodern philosophy than with the culture or milieu of even sensibility of postmodernism as a whole' (quoted in Tokarczyk, 1997). This is what we mean when we refer to postmodernism as spectre, chimera, or fiction.

Postmodern Flows: Humanities to Sciences, New York to Paris, Media to Medium, Feminine to Masculine

The crisis of confidence in Marxism presented a challenge to theoretical certainty. Other challenges would follow. The increasing mediatization and computerization of social life, coupled with ongoing feminist critiques challenged notions of subjectivity. While within postcolonial studies the problematic position of the subaltern not only pointed to the constructedness of subjectivities, but unsettled perceived trajectories within the project of modernity (Bhabha, 1984; Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988). Indeed, certainty itself is forever deferred by Derrida's (1978) deconstruction. Taken together then, the postmodern moment constitutes a massive challenge to the privileges of gender, ethnicity, and knowing. This should not be read as a move to 'anything goes' nihilism (as Guattari and Latour understand postmodernism) but as a strategic shift from proscription to ethics within social theory. For, '[i]f the whole political project would be the reassuring object or the logical or theoretical consequence of assured knowledge (euphoric, without paradox, without aporia, free of contradiction, without undecidabilities to decide), that would be a machine that runs without us,' in other words it would operate 'without responsibility, without decision, at bottom without ethics, nor law, nor politics' (Derrida, 2000).

The 'machine that runs without us' serves as an apt metaphor for the self-image of science. The scientific method allows for the objective production of facts about the physical world. This runs irrespective of the issues that structure the social world: gender, ethnicity, nationality, power, prestige. Although Sokal (2000: 127) claims that his motive was 'not to defend science against the supposed barbarian hordes of sociology, but to defend the American academic Left against irrationalist tendencies', the fact remains that little attention was paid to challenges to assured knowledge so long as they remained *within* the humanities and social sciences. Thomas Kuhn (1962) initiated the paradigm shift that disrupted the positivistic view of modernity's master narrative. This had a twofold effect: it challenged positivism as the model for the social sciences (Foucault, 1973: 125) that had persisted since the social physics of Auguste Comte (1896); and it critically questioned the veracity of the positivist model

for the physical sciences themselves. It was the move to challenge the physical sciences that caused the uproar. David Bloor (1976: 42) sums it up best:

> The threat posed by the sociology of knowledge is precisely this: it appears to reverse or interfere with the outward flow of energy and inspiration which derives from contact with the basic truths and principles of science and methodology … This is the answer to the puzzle that science is most enthusiastically advocated by precisely those who welcome least its application to itself. Science is sacred, so it must be kept apart … This protects it from pollution which would destroy its efficacy, authority and strength as a source of knowledge.

STS (Science Technology Society studies) programmes like the one headed by Bloor in Edinburgh spread around the globe in the last two decades of the 20th century. The threat to science appeared to grow as increasing numbers of STS graduate programmes, professional associations and journals formed. A key moment came with the Clinton administration's cancellation of the Superconducting Super Collider, SSC (1993). In the ensuing Science Wars, leading physicists warned of the wholesale flight from reason (Shapin, 2001: 7). Again we have an expert vanguard offering the options of salvation (through them) or barbarism. An opening salvo was fired by Paul Gross and Norman Levitt's (1994) *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels with Science*. Rather than blaming budget blowouts, the lack of expected foreign funding, over-inflated claims for particle physics, or the competing demands of other types of basic research, concerned scientists isolated postmodern theorists as the catalyst for the SSC's demise. Some in the humanities saw the collapse of Cold War budgets and the end of Big Science as the ignition for the Science Wars (Latour, 2000: 124; Sturrock, 1998). But if we examine American scientific funding during the period of postmodernism we see – in constant dollars – a doubling of research and development expenditure; the National Science Foundation budget rises by 250 percent; and the National Institute of Health budget grows by 425 percent. Steven Shapin (2001: 6) concluded that American science had never had it so good. This firmly suggests that it is the loss of prestige rather than the loss of funding that rankles. 'With late-twentieth-century science so compromised, industrialized, and commodified, the militant resurgence of belief in its pristine truth claims is not hard to understand,' writes Ross (1996: 10), '[b]ut the crusaders behind the Science Wars are not about to throw the moneylenders out of the temple. Their wrath is aimed, above all, at those who show how the temple was built and how its rituals are maintained …'

Having identified something of substance in postmodernism as opposed to the straw man of Marxist theory and the bogeyman of science, we return to the points made by Bauman (quoted in Yakimova, 2002) on 'refocusing the sociological narrative on experience, emotion, "the sensual", "identification" and other events and processes all anchored in the subject'. While this happened under the banner of postmodernism – and some scholars urge we think about postmodernism as the catch-all term for 'an epochal crisis of identity' (Hassan, 2003: 5) – we restrict ourselves here to the ways in which

postmodernism served as proxy for forms of feminist theorizing and emergent electronic communications.

The first sociological usage of 'post-modern' is to be found in C. Wright Mills' classic work *The Sociological Imagination*. In it he wrote: 'The Modern Age is being succeeded by a post-modern period. Perhaps we may call it: The Fourth Epoch' (1971[1959]: 184). The grand ideologies of the 19th century had entropied. Socialism and liberalism were out of steam. Old categories and explanations no longer held. Karl Marx and J.S. Mill were long dead, and the communism and capitalism of East and West would be alien to them. Seeking guidance, Mills followed Weber. He too discovered that increased rationality did not guarantee increased freedom (Mills, 1971: 185). Instead, rising rationalization and bureaucratization are accompanied by tyranny and manipulation. Broad realization of this would be '[t]he ideological mark of The Fourth Epoch'. In short, the Enlightenment project had found its terminus. Western civilization finds itself at:

> … a most exciting confluence. It is in this area that 'the nature of human nature' – the generic image of man, inherited from the Enlightenment – has in our time been brought into question by the rise of totalitarian governments, by ethnographic relativism, by discovery of the great potential of irrationality in man, and by the very rapidity with which men and women can apparently be historically transformed. (Mills, 1971[1959]: 175)

In an earlier work, Mills highlighted a technological driver accelerating the transformation of the human subject: the mass media. The connective circuits between men and women, self and other, had reached the point of media saturation. 'We are so submerged in the pictures created by mass media that we no longer really see them,' said Mills (1956: 333), 'much less the objects they supposedly represent. The truth is, as the media are now organized, they expropriate our vision.' The media's shaping of subjectivity should not be overstated. 'The contents of mass media are now a sort of common denominator of American experience, feeling, belief, and aspiration.' The media define our very being:

> They extend across the diversified material and social environments, and, reaching lower into the age hierarchy, are received long before the age of consent, without explicit awareness. Contents of the mass media seep into our images of self, becoming that which is taken for granted, so imperceptibly and so surely that to modify them drastically, over a generation or two, would be to change profoundly modern man's experience and character. (Mills, 1956: 334)

Like Mills, Jean-François Lyotard identifies a transitional moment in Western history. For Mills, increasingly mediated experiences made subjectivity, knowledge of one's self, a hostage to media. As this process continued from media networks to computer networks, Lyotard observed a transformation in the epistemic status of knowledge itself. The processes through which knowledge is gained, traded and transformed, were all changing. While academics debated the merits of Lyotard's insights, the very processes he identified

propagated all around them. Storage, access and distribution of information and its relationship to knowledge moved from the abstract to the concrete once the internet contained more works than any university library. No matter how learned a professor is the plagiarizing student can be more than a match with only a modicum of technical sophistication.

Where Mills (1956: 334) notes the media 'change profoundly modern man's experience and character', Lyotard (1984[1979]) added '[w]e may thus expect a thorough exteriorization of knowledge with respect to the "knower"'. Therefore, the core motifs of postmodernism: dislocated subjectivities, multiple identities, and decentred selves, are all contained within electronic circuitry. Further, the types of ideas that made Sokal so irate are also found in Lyotard's (1984[1979]) work: the critical attention to science coupled with the linguistic turn in the social sciences reducing science to the level of discourse. 'And it is fair to say that for the last forty years the "leading" sciences and technologies have had to do with language':

> … phonology and theories of linguistics, problems of communication and cybernetics, modern theories of algebra and informatics, computers and their languages, problems of translation and the search for areas of compatibility among computer languages, problems of information storage and data banks, telematics and the perfection of intelligent terminals, to paradoxology. The facts speak for themselves (and this list is not exhaustive).

Sherry Turkle's (1997) points bear repetition here. Everyday experience of computing has made remote French formulations user friendly. The theories of Lacan, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari posited a decentred self, yet in practice it proved stubbornly stable. Enter technology. Online imagined communities have rendered poststructural theory intelligible.

> Thus, more than twenty years after meeting the[ir] ideas … I am meeting them again in my life on the screen. But this time, the Gallic abstractions are more concrete. In my computer-mediated worlds, the self is multiple, fluid, and constituted in interaction with machine connections; it is made and transformed by language; sexual congress is an exchange of signifiers; and understanding follows from navigation and tinkering rather than analysis. (Turkle, 1997: 15)

While we agree with the correspondence between computing and postmodern social theory, we question Turkle's causal flow. For her, technology validates theory. The computer is the test object of postmodernism. We believe that this seriously downgrades the roles of computers and computer networks. Following Stephen Pfohl's (1994: 496) reading of Mills we see postmodernism as a novel constellation of social power 'mediated by dense and high-velocity technological rituals; rituals governed by information exchange, electronic imagery, and cybernetic control mechanisms'. Or in David E. Nye's (1997: 175) terms, '[p]ostmodernism is the inverted face of a production and consumption system in transition; the hallmark of that transition is the creation of an entirely new realm: cyberspace'.

We have mentioned Mills' (1971[1959]: 175) observation of the 'very rapidity with which men and women can apparently be historically transformed'. It seems fitting to end with further discussion of the linkages between postmodernism and gender. Earlier we positioned postmodernism as the scapegoat for sciences in crisis. Here another reading is available – what we understand by postmodernism is males retelling female theories. In some accounts, feminism adds to postmodernism. Susan J. Hekman (1990: 8) writes: 'Feminists see the gendered bias of Enlightenment thought but postmodern thought expands and concretizes that vision.' She believes that feminists have much to learn from men like Nietzsche, Gadamer, Foucault and Derrida. In other accounts feminism *is* 'a type of postmodern philosophy' (Flax, 1990: 40–1). Again, we agree with the correspondence between feminism and postmodernism, but once more we question the causal flow. While computing seems to have brought new perspectives centre screen, the questioning of universal truths, of ontological essentialism (hooks, 1981; Spelman, 1988), the attack on science as a privileged way of knowing (Harding, 1990; Keller, 1980), the linguistic turn (Cixous, 1981; Irigaray, 1985) and the concentration on subjectivity and the Other (De Beauvoir, 1953) can all be found within Second Wave Feminism. As Linda Singer (1992: 466) wrote, Atlantic feminisms were devoted to 'eroding or undermining the stabilization effects of the systems of nature, essences, and patriarchy'.

Feminism was an outgrowth of the emancipatory promise of the Enlightenment project. The failure to deliver on that promise led to the critique of the Enlightenment's shortcomings. The suggestion that knowledge or even objectivity itself could be gendered is one of the biggest challenges to assured knowledge. Feminism is therefore one of the first movements to contest the legitimacy of grand narratives. Dale Spender (1985: 5) writes: 'at the core of feminist ideas is the crucial insight that there is no one truth, no one authority, no one objective method which leads to the production of pure knowledge'. Feminists argued that the trans-historical rational subject of Enlightenment discourse was white and male, and came into being at the expense of a denigrated Other (Hartsock, 1990: 160). Patricia Waugh (1992: 348–9) notes the historical conflation of feminism and postmodernism:

> … both attacked the Romantic-Modernist cultivation of the Aesthetic as an autonomous realm, both assault Enlightenment discourses which universalise white, Western, middle-class male experience. Both recognise the need for a new ethics. Fundamentally each has offered critiques of foundationalist thinking to produce the recognition that gender is not a consequence of anatomy just as social institutions do not so much reflect universal truths as construct historical and provisional ones.

But who was doing this first? Pamela Abbott and Claire Wallace (1997: 19) are in no doubt that feminist critiques 'of sociology as a discipline have been taken up by male sociologists – especially those who take postmodernist positions and those developing "male studies" – and expounded as if men were the originators of them'. Catharine MacKinnon (2000) prefers to talk of theft

rather than 'taking up'. For her, postmodernism 'steals from feminism – claiming for example that the critique of objectivity is a postmodern insight – and covering its larceny by subsuming feminism as a subprovince of postmodernism' (MacKinnon, 2000: 8). 'Indeed', observed Probyn (1990: 178) a decade before, 'it could be argued that that what has been labelled as the postmodern dilemma was precipitated not by the supposed passing of modernism but by the questions feminists brought to diverse modernist disciplines'.

A corresponding argument can be made in relation to women and computing. Women are tangential to the computing experience in popular (and sometimes academic) computing discourse (Light, 1999). Yet female theorists have been at the cutting edge. See the works of: Haraway (1991, 1997), Turkle (1984, 1997), and Plant (1997). Indeed, Sadie Plant (1997: 37) states: 'Hardware, software, wetware – before their beginnings and beyond their ends, women have been the simulators, assemblers, and programmers of the digital machines.'

Conclusions

At the close of the 20th century, social theory was suffused with millennial tensions. 'It seems probable that Western culture is in the middle of a fundamental transformation,' Flax (1990: 39) predicted. '[T]his transformation may be as radical (but as gradual) as the shift from a medieval to a modern society.' Other scholars were just as ready to attest to new times, an 'epochal shift or break from modernity involving the emergence of a new social totality with its own distinct organising principles' (Featherstone, 1988: 23). Postmodernism was the term given to these 'complex contemporary socioeconomic, cultural, political, and technological transformations,' that 'd[id] not merely represent a temporary interruption of longer-term developmental patterns but indicate[d] the emergence of distinctively different forms' (Smart, 1993: 62). Nowadays social scientists do not make such statements. Where once there was talk of disorganized capitalism (Lash and Urry, 1987), late capitalism (Jameson, 1984) and flexible accumulation (Harvey, 1989) it now appears to be business as usual. Postmodernism has gone, and as we have shown, in some senses it never was. Osborne (1998: 7) registers his objection to the terminology thus: 'Modernity and postmodernity are essentially idealist concepts and they do not work well at the level of society. To take a sociologically realist view of modernity and postmodernity is arguably to come up with the realization that neither exist.'

We agree with Osborne that there never was a coherent theoretical postmodern movement outside of Marxist and Science Warrior critiques of it. Yet we still believe that one can talk about a postmodern moment, that is to say a phase in our cultural comprehension rather than as its lasting condition, hence Frederic Jameson's (1998: 33–4) mystification at the criticism levelled at him. One is nonetheless *in* it whether one approves or not. We identify this moment as a confluence of intellectual, technological and historical factors: challenges

from Second Wave Feminism and sociologists of science, coupled with the growing dominance of electronic communication, and the theoretical fallouts from the student revolts of 1968. Even though that moment seems to have passed, and May has turned to September, all of these factors will continue to question long-cherished certainties. Arguably the technological trend, more than any other, has hastened the demise of postmodernism. Mediated identities, notions of fragmentary, fluid and destabilized selves, and the annihilation of space through time once shocked. Now they are but a login away.

As with modernity and modernities, we have postmodernity and postmodernities. Some are here, some have gone, some never were, and some are yet to arrive. This is why it is a mistake to pretend that postmodernism never happened or is now past. Terms of convenience may be disposable, but the issues they stand as proxy for persist. On this point Ihab Hassan (n.d.) is insightful: 'I believe it is a revenant, the return of the irrepressible; every time we are rid of it, its ghost rises back.' Hence the need to retrieve postmodernism from the remainder bin of social theory. We predict that many of the questions posed by postmodernism will rise again, since much of the postmodern debate engaged with perennial themes in the social sciences: agency versus structure, Enlightenment versus Romanticism, humanism versus science, relativism versus realism, who can speak and what can be said.

References

Abbott, P. and C. Wallace (1997) *An Introduction to Sociology: Feminist Perspectives*, 2nd edn. London: Routledge.

Anderson, P. (1998) *The Origins of Postmodernity*. London: Verso.

Armitage, J. (2000) 'From Modernism to Hypermodernism and Beyond: An Interview with Paul Virilio', in *Paul Virilio: From Modernism to Hypermodernism and Beyond*, pp. 25–55. London: Sage.

Baudrillard, J. (1976) *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe*. Paris: Gallimard.

Bauman, Z. (1992) *Intimations of Postmodernity*. London: Routledge.

Bauman, Z. (1993) *Postmodern Ethics*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

Bhabha, H. (1984) 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', *October* 28(Spring): 125–33.

Bloor, D. (1976) *Knowledge and Social Imagery*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Callinicos, A. (1989) *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Cixous, Hélène (1981) 'The Laugh of the Medusa', in E. Marks and I. Courtivron (eds) *New French Feminisms*, pp. 245–64. Brighton: Harvester.

Comte, A. (1896) *The Positive Philosophy of August Comte*, vol. 1, trans. Harriet Martineau. London: George Bell and Sons.

De Beauvoir, Simone (1953) *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley. London: Jonathan Cape.

Deleuze, G. and F. Guattari (1995) 'Capitalism: A Very Special Delirium. An Interview with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari', in Sylvere Lothringer (ed.) *Autonomdeia/Semiotexte*, URL (consulted Nov. 2004): http://materialire-sistenti.clarence.com/permalink/164210.html

Derrida, J. (1978) *Writing and Difference*, transl. Alan Bass. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.

Derrida, J. (2000) 'Intellectual Courage: An Interview by Thomas Assheuer', *Culture Machine* 2, URL (consulted Jan. 2006): http://culturemachine.tees.ac.uk/Cmach/Backissues/j002/Articles/art_derr.htm

Eagleton, T. (1995/6) 'Where do Postmodernists Come From?', *Monthly Review* 47(3): 59–70.

Engels, F. (1890) *Letter to Conrad Schmidt, 5th August*, URL (consulted Jan. 2006): http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1890/letters/90_08_05.htm

Featherstone, M. (1988) 'In Pursuit of the Postmodern: An Introduction', *Theory, Culture and Society* 5(2 and 3): 195–215.

Flax, J. (1990) 'Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory', in Linda J. Nicholson (ed.) *Feminism/Postmodernism*, pp. 39–62. New York: Routledge.

Foucault, M. (1973) *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Foucault, M. (1998[1983]) 'Structuralism and Post-structuralism', in James D. Faubion (ed.) *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology*, pp. 433–58. New York: The New Press.

Gane, M. (1991a) *Baudrillard's Bestiary*. London: Routledge.

Gane, M. (1991b) *Baudrillard: Critical and Fatal Theory*. London: Routledge.

Gane, M. (ed.) (1993) *Baudrillard Live: Selected Interviews*. London: Routledge.

Gendlin, E. and R.A. Shweder (1997) *Conference on After Postmodernism*, University of Chicago, November 14–16, URL (consulted Jan. 2006): http://www.focusing.org/postmod.htm

Genosko, G. (ed.) (2001) *The Uncollected Baudrillard*. London: Sage.

Gross, P. and N. Levitt (1994) *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels with Science*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Guattari, F. (1996) 'Postmodernism and Ethical Abdication', in Gary Genesko (ed.) *The Guattari* Reader, pp. 114–7. Oxford: Blackwell.

Haraway, D. (1991) *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge.

Haraway, D. (1997) *Modest-Witness@Second-Millennium. FemaleMan-Meets-OncoMouse: Feminism and Technoscience*. New York: Routledge.

Harding, S. (1990) 'Feminism, Science, and the Anti-Enlightenment Critiques', in Linda J. Nicholson (ed.) *Feminism/Postmodernism*, pp. 83–106. New York: Routledge.

Hartsock, Nancy (1990) 'Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?', in Linda J. Nicholson (ed.) *Feminism/Postmodernism*, pp. 157–75. New York: Routledge.

Harvey, D. (1989) *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Hassan, I. (n.d.) *From Postmodernism to Postmodernity: The Local/Global Context*, URL (consulted Oct. 2004): http://www.ihabhassan.com/postmodernism_to_postmodernity.htm

Hassan, I. (2003) 'Beyond Postmodernism: Toward and Aesthetic of Trust', *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 8(1): 3–11.

Hekman, S.J. (1990) *Gender and Knowledge: Elements of a Postmodern Feminism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
hooks, bell (1981) *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
Inglis, F. (1982) *Radical Englishness: English Social Theory 1880–1980*. Oxford: Martin Robertson.
Irigaray, Luce (1985) *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. C. Poerter and C. Burke. New York: Cornell University Press.
Jameson, F. (1984) 'Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review* 146(July/August): 53–92.
Jameson, F. (1998) 'Marxism and Postmodernism', in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983–1998*, pp. 33–49. London: Verso.
Jencks, C. (1984) *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, rev. edn. New York: Rizzoli.
Keller, Evelyn Fox (1980) 'Feminist Critique of Science: A Forward or Backward Move?', *Fundamenta Scientiae* 1(3/4): 341–9.
Kellner, D. (1995) *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity, and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern*. London: Routledge.
Kristeva, J. (1997) 'Une Désinformation', *Le Nouvel Observateur* 1716(25 Septembre): 122.
Kuhn, T.S. (1962) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.
Lash, S. and J. Urry (1987) *The End of Organised Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
Latour, B. (1993) *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Latour, B. (2000) 'Is there Science after the Cold War?', in Editors of *Lingua Franca* (eds) *The Sokal Hoax: The Sham That Shook the Academy*, pp. 124–6. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
Lechte, J. (1990) *Julia Kristeva*. London: Routledge.
Light, J.S. (1999) 'When Computers Were Women', *Technology and Culture* 40(3): 455–83.
López, J. and G. Potter (2001) *After Postmodernism: An Introduction to Critical Realism*. London: Athlone.
Luxemburg, R. (1916) *'The War and the Workers' – The Junius Pamphlet*, URL (consulted Nov. 2004): http://www.h-net.msu.edu/~german/gtext/kaiserreich/lux.html
Lyotard, J-F. (1984[1979]) *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. from French by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Manchester: Manchester University Press. URL (consulted Mar. 2002): http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/fr/lyotard.htm
MacKinnon, Catharine A.M. (2000) 'Points Against Postmodernism', *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 75: 687–712, URL (consulted Jan. 2005): http://lawreview.kent-law.edu/articles/75-3/mackin%20after%20macro1%206%2030%2000.pdf
McCormack, W. (2001) 'Deconstructing the Election', *The Nation* March 26, URL (consulted Apr. 2001): http://www.thenation.com/docPrint.mhtml?I=20010326ands=mccormack
Marks, J. (1998) *Gilles Deleuze: Vitalism and Multiplicity*. London: Pluto Press.

Marx, K. (1988) 'Theses on Feuerbach', in David McLellan (ed.) *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, pp. 156–8. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Mills, C.W. (1956) *White Collar: The American Middle Classes*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Mills, C.W. (1971[1959]) *The Sociological Imagination*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
Nye, D.E. (1997) *Narratives and Spaces: Technology and the Construction of American Culture*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press.
Osborne, T. (1998) *Aspects of Enlightenment: Social Theory and the Ethics of Truth*. London: UCL Press.
Pfohl, S. (1994) *Images of Deviance and Social Control: A Sociological History*, 2nd edn. New York: McGraw Hill.
Plant, S. (1992) *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age*. London: Routledge.
Plant, S. (1997) *Zeros + Ones: Digital Women + the New Technoculture*. New York: Doubleday.
Probyn, Elspeth (1990) 'Travels in the Postmodern', in Linda J. Nicholson (ed.) *Feminism/Postmodernism*, pp. 176–89. New York: Routledge.
Ross, A. (ed.) (1996) 'Introduction', in *Science Wars*, pp. 1–15. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Said, E. (1978) *Orientalism*. London: Penguin.
Scott, J. (2000) 'Postmodern Gravity Deconstructed, Slyly', in Editors of *Lingua Franca* (eds) *The Sokal Hoax: The Sham That Shook the Academy*, pp. 76–8. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
Seidman, S. (1998) *Contested Knowledge: Social Theory in the Postmodern Era*, 2nd edn. Oxford: Blackwell.
Shapin, S. (2001) 'Guests in the President's House', *London Review of Books* 23(2): 3, 6–7.
Shaw, G.D. (ed.) (2001) 'Agency After Postmodernism', *History and Theory* 40(Dec.), URL (consulted Oct. 2004): http://www.historyandtheoryorg/archives/archives8.html
Siegle, R. (1995) 'Postmodernism™', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 41(1): 165–94.
Simons, H.W. and M. Billig (1994) *After Postmodernism: Reconstructing Ideology Critique*. London: Sage.
Singer, Linda (1992) 'Feminism and Postmodernism', in Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (eds) *Feminists Theorize the Political*, pp. 464–75. New York: Routledge.
Smart, B. (1993) *Postmodernity*. London: Routledge.
Smith, R. and P. Wexler (eds) (1995) *After Postmodernism: Education, Politics and Identity*. London: Falmer Press.
Sokal, A. (1996a) 'Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity', *Social Text* 46/47: 217–52.
Sokal, A. (1996b) 'A Physicist experiments with Cultural Studies', *Lingua Franca* May/June: 62–4.
Sokal, A. (1996c) 'Transgressing the Boundaries: An Afterword', *Dissent* 43(4): 93–100.
Sokal, A. (2000) 'Why I Wrote My Parody', in Editors of *Lingua Franca* (eds) *The Sokal Hoax: The Sham That Shook the Academy*, pp. 127–9. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
Sokal, A. and J. Bricmont (1999) *Intellectual Impostures*. London: Profile Books.

Spelman, E. (1988) *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
Spender, Dale (1985) *For the Record: the Meaning and Making of Feminist Knowledge*. London: Women's Press.
Spivak, G.C. (1988) 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in Cary Nelson and Larry Grossberg (eds) *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, pp. 271–313. Basingstoke: MacMillan.
Sturrock, J. (1998) 'Le Pauvre Sokal', *London Review of Books* 20(14), URL (consulted Jan. 2006): http://www.lrb.co.uk/v20/n14/stur01_.html
Thompson, E.P. (1978) 'An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski', in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, pp. 303–402. New York: Monthly Review Press.
Tokarczyk, M. (1997) 'Postmodernism: No Longer Useful?', Review of Terry Eagleton's *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Blackwell, 1996), URL (consulted Nov. 2004): http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v001/1.4r_tokarczyk.html
Turkle, S. (1984) *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
Turkle, S. (1997) *Life on Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. New York: Touchstone.
Waugh, P. (1992) 'Stalemates? Feminists, Postmodernists and Unfinished Issues in Modern Aesthetics', in Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh (eds) *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*, 2nd edn, pp. 341–60. London: Edward Arnold.
Yakimova, M. (2002) 'Interview with Zygmunt Bauman, A Postmodern Grid of the Worldmap?', *Eurozine* 8 November, URL (consulted Nov. 2004): http://www.eurozine.com/article/2002-11-08-bauman-en.html

Steve Matthewman

Is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Sociology at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. His research interests are Social Theory, Science Technology Society (STS) studies, Cultural Studies, and the underbelly of modernity. Recent publications include *Cultural Studies in Aotearoa New Zealand: Identity, Space and Place* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2004, edited with Claudia Bell); *Almighty Auckland?* (Palmerston North: The Dunmore Press, 2004, edited with Ian Carter and David Craig).
Address: Department of Sociology, The University of Auckland, New Zealand.
E-mail: s.matthewman@auckland.ac.nz

Douglas Hoey

Is a PhD Candidate at the Department of Sociology, University of Auckland, New Zealand. Research interests are social theory, the sociology of computing, and the sociology of ethnicity. He recently published 'There will always be a Taupo: Some reflections

on Pakeha Culture', in Matthewman and Bell (eds) *Cultural Studies in Aotearoa New Zealand: Identity, Space and Place* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2004).
Address: Department of Sociology, The University of Auckland, New Zealand.
E-mail: d.hoey@auckland.ac.nz