Critical Materialism from Marx to Poststructuralism

Andrew M. Koch
Department of Government and Justice Studies
Appalachian State University
Boone, North Carolina 28608
USA

Abstract

This paper argues that Karl Marx opened-up a discourse on critical materialism that sought to identify and analyze the sources of oppression in the nineteenth century. However, the use of the scientific paradigm of knowledge by Marx, which focuses on strict causal necessity, is insufficient to assess the multiple sources of oppression found within society. This paper will assert that poststructuralism's use of an aesthetic paradigm of knowledge and a framework seeking interpretation and understanding provides a methodology that is both materialistic and able to account for the multifaceted nature of oppression. Arguing that language is metaphorical and self-referencing, the poststructuralist approach begins with the empirical acts of oppression and seeks to identify the material and cultural conditions that gave rise to the logic of oppression. Using this method, poststructuralism avoids the construction of transcendental subjectivity and eliminates the discourse on human essence as the starting point for critique.

Introduction

Even in the twenty-first century the Marxian foundation for critical social analysis remains a major influence. There are many reasons for this. Marxism identifies many of the currents within capitalist economics, explaining the tendencies of capitalist development. Marxism also explains the role of class in the distribution of political power and the form of oppression that emerged with the development of privately-owned production. Taking all of this into account, Marx's writings have provided a basis for the critique of pure capitalism and have been important in identifying many of capitalism's structural failings.

However, to what degree is the materialist framework established in the *German Ideology* a sufficient framework for the understanding of the multiple forms of oppression found in society? Marx focused on the *mode of production* as causally determinant in shaping the institutional practices of a given society. The emergence of an exchange economy generated historical conditions that gave rise to liberal capitalism. The system of wage labor, the appropriation of surplus value by the owning class, and the structural failings of capitalism to share the benefits of the increasing productivity of labor with the working class are central to Marx's indictment of capitalism. Within this framework, oppression emerges out of the conditions necessary to maintain the prevailing system of class hierarchy and profits. But is it possible that there are other forms of oppression that cannot be reduced to matters of class? Further, can such an analysis be carried out within a paradigm that is materialistic in its epistemology? This paper will assert that poststructuralism can be understood as such a framework.

In his work, *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida speaks to the importance of Marx's analysis for Derrida's method of deconstruction, arguing that it would be inconceivable without Marx's opening (Derrida, 1994, 92). But Marx formulated his analysis within a mid-nineteenth century model of science. To him, science focuses on generating laws that explain the necessary causal links among empirical reference points. This is the reason Friedrich Engels compared Marx to Darwin in the speech given at Marx's graveside. For Marx, causality begins with production, as the economic base upon which the entire superstructure of the social and political order is constructed. This approach produced a mono-causal thread for the understanding of oppression. For this reason, Derrida argues that the emancipatory spirit of Marx needs to be maintained, but that it requires the radicalization of deconstruction (Derrida, 1994, 92). Such a strategy moves away from the paradigm of science to one that is interpretive, within the framework of aesthetics.

Poststructuralism operates with an aesthetic epistemology in which the goal of social inquiry is interpretation and understanding. Causality is, therefore, understood to be part of an interpretive model of social activity rather than a direction laid out by a notion of causal necessity. It is simply not possible to reduce the analysis of history to one point of causality in order to understand the multiple forms of oppression within society.

Using the interpretive model of poststructuralism broadens the domain in which oppression may be understood by stressing the links between institutional power and the construction of human identity. Power is identified to be a component of all formal structures. It is manifested in a system of rewards and punishments which shape the formation of human identity. Thus, for the poststructuralists, power is discussed more broadly as part of a social and culture context in which power is exercised. As a result, it can identify and manifest a critique multiple sources of power and oppression, not just those that have their origins in class or state sovereignty.

After a brief critique of Marx's method and conclusions, this paper will draw on the works on Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, Niklas Luhmann, Jacques Derrida and others to describe an aesthetic model of epistemology. It will be argued that the methods of poststructuralism, genealogy and deconstruction, are materialist methodologies even though they do not follow the strict syntax of the scientific method. In these methods, analysis begins with the occurrence of empirical events. They are analyzed with reference to political, economic, and technical dynamics that produce changes in the course and direction of history. The result is an interpretive understanding that does not rely on the construction of a transcendental human identity or the use of essentialist understandings of the subject. The materialist character of the analysis is revealed in the circular relations between a contingent text and the exercise of power through hegemonic practice. Power is self-referencing. Deconstruction and genealogy make the system of self-reference transparent. Power is seen in the assignment of identity to subjects. *Subjectivity* is, therefore, the outcome of social practice rather than its precondition.

I. Science, Production, and Consciousness

A. Marx's Materialism

Discussions of power and domination are as old as the discourse on politics. Plato, Machiavelli, Saint Thomas Aquinas, Thomas Hobbes, and a host of others, discuss the role of power in social life and, in some degree or another, rationalize its use. While asserting differing prescriptions for the use of power, these authors have followed the same basic format with regard to the relationship between power and human identity. Each has begun the discourse on politics with a characterization of human identity.

This construction of a transcendental subject served as the foundation for deductively drawn implication about the role and content of power. If human nature was regarded as "rational" or "gregarious" the role of the state could be minimal. If "selfish" and "violent," a more vigorous use of power was prescribed. Human identity entered the empirical world as something transcendent, already formed.

Marx's materialism reverses the relationship between the characterization of human nature and the realm of sensation and action. It begins with the existence of human beings that live inside an historical context. That context shapes their identity as they pursue the material necessities of existence through the act of production. The organism must interact with the natural environment in order to gather the necessities for material life. Consciousness is shaped by this experience of actual life processes (Marx 1978, 154).

From this perspective, the "material origins of consciousness" has a double meaning. The material existence of human beings is a necessary condition for the possibility of human thought and consciousness. But further, Marx also asserted material origins of the thoughts and ideas that make up the content of consciousness itself. Human materiality generates biological necessity. Biological necessity drives human interaction with nature. In this process, the human contact with the environment shapes the ideas of who and what we are in the unfolding of history. Consciousness is, therefore, a social and historical product (Marx 1978, 158).

If our materiality forces the interaction with nature, and this interaction is the basis of our thoughts and ideas, then it shapes both our understanding of ourselves as subjects in the world and dictates the institutional structures we create on the basis of that understanding. Ideas, social structures, institutional practices, and politics are a necessary reflection of the materiality of existence. As human interaction with nature is conditioned by experience, there can be no fixed human nature, and no fixed understanding of morality (Engels, 1978). In short, human subjectivity is constructed historically. The character of the institutions reflects the historical conditions that shape human consciousness. Consciousness is conditioned by production, and the institutional order is its reflection.

Locating the formation of identity within the institutional order is, in itself, one of Marx's greatest achievements. Here Marx has provided the possibility for a comprehensive relativism that moves away from universal subjectivity and any teleological notion of history. However, he never quite gets there. Even leaving aside the essentialist claims regarding subjectivity found in the *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx clings to teleological claims regarding the course of history. This is supported by an assertion that history is governed by fundamental laws of development. Human history is the history of the development of human productive capacities (Marx 1978, 164). It is a law of history that all impediments to the increasing productivity of labor will be broken down (Marx 1978, 713; 1972, 121). Production is the base on which the entire superstructure of human association is constructed. Since Marx asserted that the form of productive activity, the *mode of production*, determines the ideas and institutions in a given historical period, the economic sphere is given the position as the determining factor in the course and direction of historical change. In Marx's terminology, the *mode of production* determines the *relations of production* (Marx 1976).

For Marx, revolutionary changes in human association have been tied to these material premises and dynamics. Changes in the mode of production have necessitated changes in the political and social institutions that govern society. The relations of production have been altered as human beings have developed from hunter-gatherers, to agricultural producers, into the industrial mode of production. Capitalism, as a set of social arrangements, arises with the early phase of industrialization. As capital consolidates, and as monopoly production replaces competition, capitalism becomes an impediment to the further development of human productive capacities (Marx 1972, 121). The internal logic of capitalism, the impoverishment of labor, the tension between labor and machine production, are all part of an economic logic that generates the need for a new form in the relations of production.

Relying on the empirical data in history and drawing conclusion inductivity from the arrangement of empirical data, provides the impression that Marx had "discovered" a law of historical development. This is clearly the conclusion of Friedrich Engels.

> Just as Darwin discovered the law of development of organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history: the simple fact, hitherto concealed by an overgrowth of ideology, that mankind must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing before it can pursue politics, science, art, religion, etc; that therefore the production of the immediate material means of subsistence and consequently the degree of economic development attained by a given people or during a given epoch form the foundation upon which the state institutions, the legal conceptions, art, and even the ideas on religion, of the people concerned have been evolved, and in the light of which they must, therefore, be explained, instead of vice versa, as had hitherto been the case (Engels 1978, 681).

By locating the basis for his critique within the seemingly objective character of a scientific law, Marx to avoided the criticism that there is an embedded ethical universal within his analysis. There is "ethical relativism" within Marx's work and its character is well described by Engels (Engels 1978). However, it is not consistent. The methodological strategy of seeking an "objective laws" governing historical change is insufficient for the generation of a critical social analysis on its own. Marx still begins with a conception of human essence, and it explicitly or implicitly informs his critique.

B. Science versus Interpretation

Though Marx revolutionized the thinking about the relationship between the formation of human identity and the experiences of material existence, there are still problems within his epistemological framework. Many of these have their origin in the late nineteenth conception of science and its use in the construction of social analysis. At its most basic level, some of the issues were articulated by Max Weber. To Weber, Marx failed to recognize his analysis was an *interpretation* of history rather the articulation of laws of historical necessity. To use Weber's terminology, Marx constructed an "ideal-type," which is an interpretive model, not a "law" of history (Weber 1949, 90; 1949, 103). Thus, any teleological claim, ethical criticism, and definitional content of subjectivity must also be understood in this context. To Weber, historical and cultural products in social research have a subjective element that cannot be eliminated. Therefore, Weber concluded that there can be no such thing a value-free social science (Weber 1949, 93). Marx's analysis is not an exception.

Weber further criticized the idea that history can be understood following a model of pure science. This led Marx to view the necessity in history mono-causally. Production is treated as the decisive factor in directing all social and cultural activity (Weber 1949, 68-71). Such a view suggests that the primary form of human oppression is economic, regardless of context. It also generates a unidimensional concept of reason, failing to recognize the relative and historical conditions that give rise to the content of *reason* in any age. Creating such a generalized perspective, claimed Weber, will create the impression that the fate of all societies will be the same regardless of their historical and cultural conditions.

Weber developed an interpretive framework for the analysis of society that moves away from the strict syntax of science in the conduct of social research. However, Weber does not really develop a materialist alternative to Marx. Weber's stress on the individual and the independent character of consciousness leads to the view that the scope and limit of social critique exists within the subjective nature of consciousness.

Even within the materialist tradition the problem of the scientific paradigm in the analysis of society and culture is discussed. This point underlies the critique of Marx suggested by Louis Althusser. Althusser rejects the causal dynamic between base and superstructure in Marx's methodology. For Althusser, the assertion that the economic base is always decisive in the formation of consciousness is simply too narrow and deterministic. As a result, the distinction between base and superstructure that Marx presented cannot be sustained. Base and superstructure are both part of the materiality of context that shapes the consciousness of individuals (Althusser 1988).

C. Institutions and History

Central to the materialist understanding of society is the question of what moves history. What are the forces that motivate human behavior? A materialist perspective raises questions about the relationship among ideas, the historical context, and human action. This issue is ultimately one of *sequence*.

The question of sequence is clearly addressed by Marx. The material origins of consciousness are articulated by Marx in a passage from *The German Ideology*. Ideas are formed from material practices (Marx 1978, 164). "It shows that circumstances make men just as much as men make circumstances (Marx 1978, 165)." The context for Marx's discussion here is the importance of matching revolutionary activity to the material conditions of history. The general point is an important one. Human activity, beliefs, and ideas are shaped by the totality of the conditions in which social activity occurs. Marx goes on to state that the people will "share the illusion of that epoch," that the conditions that emerge are consistent with the construction of human nature, politics, and society that dominates that particular age (Marx 1978, 165). The history of politics has shown that in any age the structures and practices within the social system are reinforced with a narrative that makes those conditions appear *natural*. This provides the foundation for the reproduction of the system of domination that exists in that historical period.

What Marx recognized as the institutional power exclusive to the mode of production can be expanded to cover the condition that maintain institutional power more generally. Institutions create narratives that assert the legitimacy of their power. This is carried out by creating a narrative, or text, that reflects the hegemonic order already existing within the society. Thus, the arena of critical materialism is at the intersection of institutional practice and the historically and contextually derived text that supports such practice.

II. Poststructuralism, Materialism, and the Aesthetic Paradigm of Knowledge

A. Poststructuralism and Historical Relativism

Science seeks out laws that identify direct causal links between two or more phenomena. In asserting causal necessity there can be no variation in the magnitude of influence in the constituent parts. There can also be no variation in the outcome resulting from the interaction of those elements. Marx's use of *production* as the singular causal force in history fits within this framework. It also serves as the basis for a critique of the economic forms of oppression that have manifested throughout history.

One of Marx's objectives in the search for scientific laws of societal change is to move away from transcendental explanations in the understanding of history. Science seeks empirical reference points to demonstrate its causal relationships. In this sense, production is used as an independent variable for a scientific outlook on history. Production is also the source of a relativistic understanding of ethics, asserting that economic changes will transform the moral and ethical codes that govern human conduct (Engels 1978, 726). Some form of relativism is a necessary component of any materialist understanding of history.

However, the framework of poststructuralism puts the discourse on society within a different relativistic context. Poststructuralism contains a position of *epistemological* relativism. This is the claim that all assertions of knowledge or truth claims must be understood as being relative, or reflective, of the system of knowledge and discourse in which the claim is created. To put the issue another way, sensation does not produce universal forms of knowledge and historical laws. Knowledge creation is a cognitive process. The human-centric nature of knowledge means that the paradigms underlying claims to knowledge are relative to the forces of history. Even what we call *reason* cannot be considered a universal construct, as its content will change depending on the dominant epistemological system at the time of its definition. Even within the framework of science, the construction of scientific theories undergoes historical reconstruction over time.

For this reason, there can be no universally valid claims to knowledge. In the natural sciences, all theoretical constructions are hypothetical in character and open to refutation. In philosophy and the inquiry into social activity the case for the interpretive understanding of knowledge seems even more evident. There is simply no singular metanarrative that can capture the array of experiences available to beings that lives inside of an ever-moving historical context. Establishing foundational premises for political and social prescriptions requires stable systems of identity that can only be closed artificially, through the use of power.

Any assertions of universality are constructed upon a priori assumptions that, themselves, lack foundational validity. Further, the construction of such systems is, in reality, a posteriori claim that reflect the historical conditions, social practices, and the distribution of power in a given age. Universal systems seek to capture the illusive essence of the human experience, but their actual affect is in reify the moment in which they are formulated.

This means that in any formulation of social and political prescriptions there will be a mix of *facts* along with contextually driven assumptions that will set the tone and direction of the analysis. History may be influenced by objective factors, but the interpretation of history is still a human enterprise. Therefore, one of the tasks of materialist analysis is to sort out what can be distinguished in these different domains.

To put it differently, there is a distinction between history, as an infinite set of historical "facts" and our consideration of history as a cognitive framework that informs our understanding. The cognitive understanding of history is not scientific, in a strict sense, because the question of what to select in the consideration of causality is infinitely complex (Weber) or infinitely substitutable (Derrida).

This means that in the consideration of social knowledge there must be a recognition that there are epistemological limitations regarding the status of that knowledge. To put it directly, our understanding of social reality is interpretive rather than scientific. This means, contrary to Weber, that our epistemological framework is aesthetic and not one that seeks to be as close to the natural sciences as possible.

This view of social knowledge also changes the objectives of inquiry. While causal relations may be suggested as part of an interpretive framework, it is with the caveat that such claims are a method to *understanding*, in a general sense, rather than the articulation of strict causal laws. Foucault makes this point in articulating the difference between connaissance and savior (Foucault 1972, 183). Connaissance is concerned with the articulation of facts.

Savior is understood to be relative to historical context, to the relative condition of knowledge construction more generally. In this sense, savior refers to the interpretive character of social knowledge generally.

The aesthetic model treats the generation of social knowledge as relative to the historical conditions in which it is generated. In this sense, it has a material base, as defined by the totality of historical relations in which people live. These relations serve as the material content that serves the construction of a narrative of human subjectivity. As the model of the subject establishes norms and expectations, these relative constructions of the subject motivate and direct human action, serving as a material force in history.

B. Aesthetics, Cognition, and the Construction of Knowledge

Thus far, we have examined the Marxian model of critical materialism and looked at the implications of the scientific epistemological model and the problems it presents for the analysis of social phenomena. Social inquiry involves subjects studying other subject within an historical context in which multiple forces may influence the direction of historical change. The model of science, which seeks strict causal laws is inappropriate to this task.

The aesthetic model of knowledge seeks the goal of understanding rather than causality. Assertions of causality within analysis are recognized as local, historical and contingent. This means that universal laws of historical development are not supported.

Further, it is impossible in the field of social inquiry to fully eliminate all subjective factors in creating a model of historical change. This is the case not only in the realm of human values, but also in terms of the unique experiences of individuals and cultures that shape their historical outlook.

The starting point for any materialist understanding of social reality is experience. Experience provides the raw elements which are formed into cognitive pictures, or narratives, of social existence. Those narratives, in turn, will be reflective of the dominant norms and epistemological paradigms within the culture. These represent the hegemonic discourse in any age. For this reason, an aesthetic epistemology is both materialistic and relativistic.

A good place to start in developing this perspective is Kant's 1781 publication of *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant is obviously not a materialist. He spends much of the *Critique* generating transcendental proofs for his claims. However, one simple idea presented by Kant continues to have force within the framework of aesthetics. This is the idea that we cannot know the essence of an object, the thing-in-itself (Kant 1958, 20). For the poststructuralist, such a claim still has resonance. It means that generating a closed identity for any object creates an epistemological error of omission. As Jacques Derrida puts it, the path of philosophy can no longer achieve closure (Derrida 1981, 353).

In terms of semiotics, this is a well-worn path for poststructuralist analysis. The sign and the referent cannot be brought to a condition of perfect correspondence. Assigning an identity to people or objects must recognize both the infinite substitutability of traits, but also incorporate the idea that identity includes *difference*, all the things the object is not. As a practical matter, there is some continuity among Kant, Weber, and the poststructuralists on this issue. Objects have a complexity that cannot be captured through the generation of text. *Essence* remains illusive in the generation of knowledge.

This position does not mean the generations of knowledge is impossible. However, it does mean that the knowledge being generated is in the realm of human *understanding*, and that it contains circumscribed limitations on its scope. It must remain relative to the context from which it is generated.

While this is an idea that goes back to the Sophists, a modern formulation of this form of inquiry can be seen in Friedrich Nietzsche's work. Nietzsche rejected the use of transcendentals within his methodological framework. He also makes it very clear that in his form of materialist methodology the creation of knowledge has a human-centric character. In, *On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense*, Nietzsche makes it clear that all knowledge created by human beings is done so in order to enhance the survivability of the species. It is also carried out within the framework of human cognitive capacities.

Language is the medium of communication and truth telling. But Nietzsche makes two things very clear. First, our language does not capture the essence of things (Nietzsche 1993, 51). Our language is metaphorical, "a moveable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding (Nietzsche 1993, 49)."

Nietzsche's second point is that our relationship to the world must be understood as a "mediated" process (Nietzsche 1993, 51). Human beings do not conceptualize the world directly. They process the information about the world that they receive according to the conceptual ordering that has already been established, much the way a bee fills the wax honeycomb that it has built to receive it (Nietzsche 1993, 50).

Such a position represents a radical form of relativity with regard to epistemology. What we call truth has a pragmatic component. It exists to increase our survivability as human beings. It does not capture the essence of objects, nor can it have universal, ahistorical, validity. Nietzsche makes it clear that the world is something we interpret. It is not something about which we have essential truth. The gap between essence and interpretations cannot be closed by science. There is only aesthetics and the realm of interpretation. "For between two absolutely different spheres, as between subject and object, there is no causality, no correctness, and no expression; there is, at most, an aesthetic relation (Nietzsche 1993, 51)."

C. Niklas Luhmann and the Materiality of Linguistic Self-reference

If words and texts cannot capture the essence of the thing described, then language has a metaphorical character. This means that *interpretation* represents the boundary of social inquiry. However, what does the *material construction of knowledge* mean? Materialism, as a method, means the construction of explanations that do not rely on either a transcendental view of subjectivity or the assumption of metaphysical essence in the explanation of social and historical acts. A central point of this position, therefore, is that it engages concrete historical reference points, but does not assert their essentialist character when used for explanations. This means that knowledge is constructed out of a circular process in which the language of explanation relies on a cultural and historical context as the empirical environment for the fabrication of knowledge.

This is the intent of Nietzsche and Foucault in their use of the genealogical method. But for Nietzsche and Foucault there is interest in the power dimension of social constructions. The epistemological nature of the material processes of knowledge is given a more detailed treatment by Niklas Luhmann and Jacques Derrida. This is not to suggest that there are not significant differences between the two, but as Luhmann admits, there are similarities between his views on systems theory and Derrida's deconstruction (Luhmann 1992).

Luhmann is identified with systems theory, a view that society is made up a variety of systems that perform social tasks. Like Derrida, Luhmann claims that all knowledge is a construction (Luhmann 1994, 9-23). The constructivist approach to epistemology means that the formulation of knowledge takes place within historical conditions that are continually shifting. Luhmann concludes that today epistemology lacks foundational certainty. It actually gives reason for uncertainty (Luhmann 1990, 81).

Luhmann's "constructivism" asserts that the creation of knowledge is a mediated activity in which there is a recursive process between observation and cognition (Luhmann 1990, 69). Cognition, however, does not mirror the world. It does not capture essences. In this regard, Luhmann seeks to go beyond the Kantian explanation regarding the limitations of knowledge in several respects. Knowledge is constructed through the process of differentiation. Differentiation, in turn, is relative to the closed system of conceptual frameworks in which raw sensation is transformed into cognition. Such closure separates the system from reality, not only the process of cognition (Luhmann 1990, 76).

Luhmann does not challenge the idea that there is an external world, only the idea that we have direct contact with it (Luhmann 1990, 65). With this formulation, not only has Luhmann rejected the notion of transcendental essences, but he has also created the conditions for a radical relativism in the construction of knowledge. The terms that have been given to such an outcome he describes as "polycontextuality," "pluralism," and "arbitrariness in discourse (Luhmann 1990, 74)." Echoing Derrida, Luhmann claims all this leads to undecidability, the inability to make a choice among competing and contrasting interpretive models (Luhmann 1990, 74).

Luhmann describes such an epistemology as a post-humanistic conception of knowledge. Human beings cannot be considered to be the guarantors of the unity of knowledge (Luhmann 1990, 78). Humans create knowledge within systems that are human constructions. Knowledge is the product of differentiation that occurs as people come in contact with reality. The differentiations, however, are contributed by the observer's imagination (Luhmann 1990, 69).

Traditionally, systems theory conceives of open systems interacting with the environment, and responding directly to changes that occur in that environment (Lumann 1992, 1419). Luhmann transforms this notion. To Luhmann, society is composed of a collection of functionally differentiated subsystems. To achieve the status of a "subsystem" operations must take place within a closed, self-referential system of codes, values, and symbols. Those codes, values, and symbols are generated by the subsystem itself. In this sense each of the subsystems is self-maintained. To this process Luhmann gives the term "autopoiesis."

The term autopoiesis is borrowed from biology and refers to the self-organization, self-referencing, and self-generating quality of all true social systems. Subsystems establish boundaries and within these boundaries the systems establish their own structures and their own mechanisms for system maintenance (Luhmann 1990, 3). Establishing closure is what allows these subsystems to function. The subsystems bring a preestablished set of concepts, tools, and methods to the subsystem's interaction with the environment. The interaction with the open, formless environment is, in a sense, mediated by the conditions of the subsystem.

Operational and communicative closure within the social system means that there can be no unmediated contact with the environment (Luhmann 1990, 5). The construction of boundaries is necessary for autopoiesis, but the boundary interrupts any direct connection to the environment (Luhmann 1995, 30). All communication within the system is relative to the symbolic language used for system maintenance. Reflecting a position similar to that of Derrida, Luhmann maintains that communication does not capture "being" or "presence," but reflects the parameters of the structures used for interpretation (Luhmann 1990, 5). Communications does not communicate the world, but divides it, differentiates it, and sets boundaries. An autopoietic systems is an artificial achievement (Luhmann 1992, 1431). Within the artificial boundary the system produces its own modes of reproduction, validity, and operations. No autopoietic system can use operations it has not itself produced (Luhmann 1996, 257-267).

The circularity in the production of knowledge manifests the materiality of this method. The world is interpreted within a framework that does not connect to essence or presence but is part of a closed cognitive framework for interpretation. Words refer to other words within the same subsystem. There is no link to the essence of the external environment, but there is materiality in the circular nature of self-reference. The words of the system, therefore, have a material force in shaping subsystem behavior.

Luhmann's focus on social subsystems constitutes one of his criticisms of poststructuralism. He asserted that poststructuralism ignores the role of subsystems, stressing instead the inequality in the distribution of power across a generalized monolithic conception of culture. This focus on power tends to make poststructuralism more "political" than Luhmann's systems theory, with Derrida describing his method of deconstruction as an "intervention." However, Derrida's deconstruction also brings another dimension to the understanding of the material construction of knowledge. Derrida's discussion of the graft and the scission also convey a means of providing validation and legitimacy for an understanding of knowledge that is not tied to foundational premises.

C. Jacques Derrida, the Graft, the Scission, and the Material Epistemology of Text

Jacques Derrida rejected the idea that language can *represent*, or capture, the essence of what is being described by text. But for Derrida, the decentering of *being*, the opening of *play*, is not simply a rhetorical device. Removing the center of being is accomplished by revealing the contingent nature of truth. Western metaphysics revolves around the *column of being* which is itself not there (Derrida 1981, 352). This is the case because all the representations of being are assumed to be closed and self-sufficient within the context of Western metaphysics. Therefore, the creation of text is a self-referencing process in which new text receives its validation from the previous text contained within it.

To demonstrate this claim, Derrida suggested a shift in thinking about the way in which objects receive their identities. Western epistemology has centered on building foundations for positive statements about being. Identity is formed through the use of a differentiating scheme for categorizing the diversity of experience. This traditional view of correspondence between text and identity suggests that being is reflecting back upon itself through making positive statements of an object's properties. However, if there is no transcendental realm of being that informs the content of identity, the link between the sign and the referent is severed. Text cannot represent the essence of being.

Text does not convey being but instead represents a chain of metaphors about being. Without the link to a transcendent system of validation, validation occurs through repetition. Text turns back on itself, eventually losing sight of its contingent origins. Born of repetition, the text reproduces the process of its own triggering (Derrida 1981, 292).

Without the column of truth around which to organize closure, there is only text. The creation of text is always the transformation of other texts. It is a *grafting*. To write is to graft onto a text that already exists (Derrida 1981, 355). There is no origin, nothing prior to text. There is only the bottomless, endless, transformation of text (Derrida 1981, 333-334). Previous texts provide the conditions and the limitations for new texts (Derrida, 1982, 189). Every text has *traces* of other texts as its presupposition. Every text is a trace of a trace (Derrida 1981, 26). There is nothing before the text, no original author, no origin that is itself not text (Derrida 1981, 333).

Derrida shares Nietzsche's view that language is metaphorical (Derrida 1982, 178). As metaphors, all terms remain ambiguous. Metaphors are open to shades of subtlety, leaving the true and proper meaning undecidable. All text is unclear, out of context, by the very nature of its becoming text. To forbid closure, to open dissemination, is to end "Meaning" and substitute "meanings," as an interpretive and contingent forms of understanding. Text emerges as the result of the grafting on the metaphor of a metaphor. Thus, text does not verify "being," but exhibits the connection to other texts about "being." *Presence* makes its appearance as the activity of the textual apparatus reflecting back upon itself (Derrida 1981, 299). This closed system of self-reference constitutes the material condition of discourse.

Derrida wants to show how the concepts, presuppositions, and structural limits of philosophy can be turned against themselves (Derrida 1981, 24). Any text can be shown to collapse through the elaboration of its possibilities for infinite substitution. Every philosophic system can be pushed until it slides to the point of exhaustion (Derrida 1981, 6).

Does this mean knowledge is impossible? That is not Derrida's point. However, it is to suggest that claims to knowledge are formed in this self-referential fashion. The investigator is confronted with an infinite array of possibilities in the creation of a cognitively meaningful statement. Interpretation will require judgement as to what is meaningful. In methodological terms, this means extracting elements from the infinite possibilities. This Derrida calls the *scission*.

The scission is a cut out of the infinity of substitutions and the plurality of contexts. When you cannot undertake the infinite commentary, then "take a cut of it (Derrida 1981, 300)." The pure present is untouchable fullness (Derrida 1981, 301). It appears in discourse only as myth (Derrida 1981, 303). The present can appear only by taking a cut of itself, giving itself a beginning and an end, limiting the space and providing closure. Unity is the myth of a reconstituted scission.

Therefore, there is only interpretation. Social inquiry cannot produce laws of concrete necessity from an epistemological realm in which the metaphors of language interact in a self-referencing pattern of regeneration. The implications of this position are particularly important in the areas of social and political life. Political practice operates from the view that human identity serves as the foundation for political practice. Power is expressed as the ability to enforce an illusory notion of ahistorical identity.

Derrida shares the view, common to the poststructuralist enterprise, that any representation of the human *subject* is speculative, metaphysical, and a reflection of the power that dominates the cultural system. The content of subjectivity is a result of the particular constellation of traces and grafts that have been accepted within the dominant discourse on the subject. Echoing Marx in *The German Ideology*, Derrida concludes that subjectivity is something that is created, not discovered. It is a cultural and historical product.

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The construction of subjectivity is part of a larger process of social reproduction. In this historical, contextual process the signs and symbols of the dominant discourse are appropriated and reapplied to emerging contexts and conditions. This is why, within modernism, the construction of subjectivity retains a continuity, even within changing constellations of events and interests.

Derrida's critique of Western epistemology challenges the notion, exemplified by Kant's *Universal History*, that there can be *one* history, *one* normative grammar, and *one* subjectivity. The deconstructive enterprise provides a means to negate the validity of any definition of subjectivity that claims a privileged status. Not only is this the case because of the historical and relative nature of ontological claims, but as discussed above, a positive assertion regarding human essence assumes epistemological closure, the stability of objects. Derrida's point is that such closure is impossible. Therefore, all assertions of human identity, or essence, must be understood as historical and contingent.

To Derrida, Western philosophy has forgotten its metaphysical origins, forgotten that it has based its truths on metaphors, signs in a cyclical process of epistemological regeneration. Representation, the result of the process of signification, is the creation of a structural illusion (Derrida 1981, 297).

Derrida's discussion of the circular nature of textual reproduction and its relation to subjectivity and political power could be read as a more sophisticated elaboration of Marx's point in *The German Ideology*. In a sense, Derrida explains the process of *how* the ruling class maintains its power through the process of cultural reproduction. But it is also evident that Derrida does not see Marx as having developed a fully materialist epistemology. Despite his praise for the emancipatory spirit in Marx's work, Derrida makes it clear that Marx still relies on a construction of transcendental subjectivity as the basis for his critique (Derrida 1994, 170).

D. Foucault, Genealogy, and the Materiality of Power

In the tradition of political thought, power is exercised in the gap between the construction of human subjectivity and the dictates of the institutional order. This can be witnessed in the narratives that have sought to reconcile political prescriptions with a fabrication of *human nature*. For Plato, this meant that the unequal distribution of reason required an institution that would sort out those who had the talents to rule from those who did not. For Thomas Hobbes, the selfish and aggressive nature of the human being required a strong authoritarian state. For Kropotkin, the benign character of the individual directs our attention to the corrupting nature of institutions as the source of human oppression and strife.

All of these perspectives treat subjectivity as a transcendental, ahistorical phenomenon that serves as the foundation for political prescription. Power seeks to bring the institutional order into correspondence with the conditions of subjectivity. But this understanding of the relationship between subjectivity and institutional power is essentially metaphysical in character. The political project outlined by this approach suggests that the institutional order is to be adjusted to the conditions of a preexistent transcendental subject.

The materialism reflected in the poststructuralism position has the effect of altering the relationship between the nature of subjectivity and the institutions that exercise power in the society. As has been mentioned above, poststructuralism eliminates the idea that language is able to capture the essence of any object. The creation of statements about an object, in this case the human being, takes place within a domain of metaphorical self-reference. It is an aesthetic act of interpretation. Therefore, the domain of self-reference has an empirical link to the contextual conditions in which it is framed; the historical forces, the institutional configurations, and the cultural norms and values. To put this in the language of Michel Foucault, the human being is made into a subject by those forces (Foucault 1983, 208). Therefore, the traditional view is reversed. Foucault argued that subjectivity results from a material process in which rewards and punishments manifest themselves in the activities of institutional self-maintenance.

The subject is *created* by this process. Forms of power attach individuals to institutions (Foucault 1983, 212). Therefore, there is a circular relationship between institutions and subjects (Foucault 1983, 212). Institutions attach identities to subjects that are consistent with their own functioning and maintenance. In that sense, institutions are self-referencing systems of power that have the material effect of directing human behavior. Power may be exercised over individuals through seduction or violence, but the effect is the same (Foucault 1983, 220). Institutional power seeks to make subjects in its image in order to reinforce the idea of institutional legitimacy. The result is that each exercise of institution power serves to legitimate and reinforce the criteria of subjectivity it has generated.

This process has its roots within the materiality of power. Power is exercised through the material processes of social and cultural reproduction. This means that the construction of the subject must take place historically. Therefore, to understand the forces that shape the construction of subjectivity in any epoch requires a detailed analysis of the economic system, the culture norms, the institutional structures, the distribution of power, and other dynamics that are part of the historical context in any age. It is from that configuration of forces that subjects are created (Foucault 1983, 223).

To study this phenomenon Foucault employs the genealogical method. To Foucault, the genealogical method is defined as the construction of social and political knowledge without reference to a transcendental subject (Foucault 1977, 117). In fact, the genealogical method seeks to eliminate metaphysical components in all social analysis. (This is not fully possible due to the metaphysical nature of language, but it is, nevertheless, the direction of poststructuralist analysis.) This results from the historicizing and contextualizing of all claims to social and political knowledge. As a practical matter, genealogy means beginning analysis with the event and then tracing the material and ideological components that make the event appear rational in the present (Foucault 1981, 5). In Foucault's research, this meant asking about the technologies that made the appearance of various forms of institutionalization appear as rational parts of modern society.

An example of this approach can be found in the way in which Foucault treats the notion of sovereignty. The modern notion of sovereignty is tied to the emergence of the modern nation-state (Foucault 1983, 213). Only if we understand the historical origins of sovereignty, are we in a position to challenge the nation-state's claims on human bodies. This is why Foucault claimed we need a political philosophy not centered around sovereignty in order to generate a critical challenge to its power (Foucault 1977, 121). Unfortunately, political philosophy since the seventeenth century has tended to ignore the historical roots of sovereignty.

Foucault's point is that with sovereignty, penal law, mental health, education, media, and other technologies of socialization, the dominant culture is represented, reinforced, and codified within the power structure. The individual subject is constructed by this process, securing conformity to the norms and practices of the dominant culture. To act outside the norms is to invite a disciplinary response.

If all institutions generate an accompanying narrative that both shapes human identity and asserts the legitimate exercises power, and if the exercise of that power has its origins in a body of knowledge that is both historical and contextual rather than fixed and essential, then a critical analysis of those institutions is possible even without an alternative construction subjectivity. Institutions seek to create modes of individuation consistent with their functioning. Resistance takes the form of resisting the form of definitional content attached to subjectivity by institutions of power.

Thus, there is a feature that all liberation movements share. They all struggle against a narrative that seeks to silence their voices through an institutional order that diminishes the value of their speech by undermining the legitimacy of their claims as subjects. The struggle of workers, conscripted soldiers, gays, lesbian, and transgendered people are all struggling for the right to their identity. Each resists the encroachment of a totalizing discourse that defines their subjectivity (Foucault, 1983, 214). To Foucault, this means that liberation requires that the discourse on truth must be detached from forms of hegemony in social, political, and economic domains (Foucault 1977, 133).

In an essay entitled "The Genealogy of Ethics," Foucault explores the ethics of resistance in the late twentieth century. He argues that liberation has tended to connect to one of two paths. The basis for resistance has either taken the form of a religious ethic that serves as the foundation for resistance to the economic structures and actions of sovereign states, or it has taken the form of a scientific approach to define an *objective* content of human subjectivity (Foucault 1983, 231). The scientific approach assumes that from defining the objective content of subjectivity, a truly rational order can be constructed. One can only imagine the totalitarian nightmare that would result from such a project.

However, the basis for a Foucauldian critique differs from both alternatives. If knowledge is contextual and relativistic than neither of these paths to liberation is viable. Religious metaphysics does not have empirical reference points. Science uses empirical facts but fails to appreciate the subjective and historical factors in their arrangement.

Foucault had something else in mind. In "The Genealogy of Ethics," Foucault discussed aesthetics. Referring to the Greek notion of aesthetics, he stated that the aesthetic understanding of life considers subjectivity as something that is constructed (Foucault 1983, 231). The ethics of critique have this epistemological perspective at its core. Without fixed foundations, a teleology in history, or a stable definition of human identity, there is only a field open to discourse among an array of power structures. The measure of our humanness will be in the extent to which we allow for each life to be considered a work of art in progress (Foucault 1983, 236).

Conclusion

Marx opens up a discussion on the relationship between human identity and the exercise of power.   The idea that power has the ability to shape human identity alters the understanding of how the institutional order maintains and legitimates itself. This is, arguably, the most powerful and lasting legacy of Marx.

But Marx is attempting to do two things simultaneously that are difficult to reconcile within the scientific epistemology he espoused. First, he is attempting to give a materialist account of history, and historical change, by elaborating a set of empirical reference points that he asserted were directed by historical necessity. Second, he is trying to show that the logic of the capitalist form of economics contains principles and actions that are contrary to the essence of the human being.   The problem is that the more successful he was with the first, the less epistemologically consistent he was with the second. To paraphrase Hume, the *is* does not translate to the *ought*. Therefore, it is necessary to rethink the conditions for a critical materialism.

Essential to this task is a move away from the paradigm of science in the analysis of oppression. A materialistic understanding of history must be relativistic. It must be dynamic and contextual in its understanding of the formation of institutions and human identity. Science focuses on necessary relationships with elements that, by their very definition, must be recurring, stable, and fixed. However, this is contrary to an understanding of history as dynamic.

For this reason, critique requires a different epistemological framework. Within an aesthetic, interpretive framework the goal of an investigation is *understanding*, not a generalizable causal *law*. There can be no laws in history because of the dynamic nature of history itself. Infinite substitutability prevents epistemological closure. Concepts and identities are unstable. Any form of materialist analysis must take epistemological conditions into account.

Poststructuralism expresses this epistemological situation. Identity is not formed transcendentally. It is a product of institutional practice. It is formed out of the power relations that are required for institutional self-maintenance.

Therefore, critique does not have its origins in the comparison of one model of human essence against another. Critique stems from the deconstruction of the center. It comes from the absence of space for the construction of essentialist claims. Any such claim is reduced to historically and contextually driven rhetoric. All reflect the distribution of power rather than the expression of truth.

Such a perspective returns to the spirit of Marx identified by Derrida. The matter is one of prioritization. The issue is about the individual in the process of life's journey. It is a matter of priorities that can be expressed as a question. Should self-creation be sacrificed on the alter of systemic stability or should the institutional order generate an understanding of structural regularity that can accommodate beings that continue to adapt, change, and grow as part of their experience? To the poststructuralists, recognition of this condition is the first step in reducing the role of the arbitrary exercise of power in human relations.

To open the aesthetic paradigm is to broaden materialism's emancipatory potential. It is now possible to explore the multiple forms of oppression that manifest themselves in contemporary society by examining the institutional narratives that contain expression of human identity. It is then possible to create counter-narratives to the arbitrary imposition norms that limit that role of self-creation in human affairs.

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