

## Notes on Lyotard's *Postmodern Condition*: Introduction, Sections 1 and 2

This book enquires on the condition of knowledge today in highly developed societies (xxiii).

It is also situated in the crisis of narratives (xxiii).

Philosophy legitimates the rules of science's language games (xxiii).

'Modern' designates any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse in relation to certain grand narratives (such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth) (xxiii).

'Postmodern' designates incredulity toward metanarratives (xxiv).

We do not necessarily establish stable language combinations, and the properties of the ones we do establish are not necessarily communicable (xxiv).

This is not a structuralism or a systems theory but a pragmatics of language particles (xxiv).

The legitimation of the power of the system is based on optimizing its performance—efficiency (xxiv).

The logic of maximum performance is contradictory: it demands both less work (to lower production costs) and more (to lessen social burden of idle population). We have lost faith in salvation from these inconsistencies [Debord and the logic of automation as that which has the ability to abolish labor itself c.f. thesis 45 in *The Society of the Spectacle*] (xxiv).

Lyotard's main target is presumably Jurgen Habermas:

Still, the postmodern condition is as much a stranger to disenchantment as it is to the blind positivity of deligitimation. Where, after the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside? The operativity criterion is technological; it has no relevance for judging what is true or just. Is legitimacy to be found in consensus obtained through discussion, as Jurgen Habermas thinks? Such consensus does violence to the heterogeneity of language games. And invention is always born of dissension. Postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable. Its principle is not the expert's homology, but the inventor's paralogy. Here is the question: is a legitimation of the social bond, a just society, feasible in terms of a paradox analogous to that of scientific activity? What would such a paradox be? (xxiv-xxv).

### The Field: Knowledge in Computerized Societies

The status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age (3).

Scientific knowledge is a kind of discourse [Foucault, anyone?] (3).

In the past 40 years (1930-) the leading sciences on technologies have had to deal with language: phonology, linguistics, cybernetics, compatibility among computer languages, etc. (3-4).

These technological transformations have an impact on research and the transmission of acquired learning (4).

The nature of knowledge cannot survive unchanged within this context of general transformation (4).

Knowledge ceases to be an end in itself; it now loses its use-value and takes on a new logic in the way in which it takes on an aspect of commodity fetishism in its own right (4-5).

Lyotard:

In the postindustrial and postmodern age, science will maintain and no doubt strengthen its preeminence

in the arsenal of productive capacities of nation-states. Indeed, this situation is one of the reasons leading to the conclusion that the gap between developed and developing countries will grow ever wider in the future...Knowledge in the form of an informational commodity indispensable to productive power is already, and will continue to be, a major—perhaps the major—stake in the worldwide competition for power...A new field is opened for industrial and commercial strategies on the one hand, and political and military strategies on the other (5).

Learning no longer can be believed to fall within the purview of the State. This occurs only if the messages within society are rich in information and easy to decode. Habermas's ideology of communicational 'transparency' treats the State as a factor of opacity and 'noise' (5).

This new form of knowledge-commodity literally deterritorializes the nation-state in the sense that multinational corporations assert the influx of investments that are beyond the control of the nation-state. This question becomes more threatening when multi-national corporations can decide who gets access to certain knowledges (5-6).

This transformation in knowledge will have repercussions on the existing public powers which will force them to reconsider their relations (both de jure and de facto) with the large corporations and, more generally, civil society (6).

The real distinction is not between knowledge and ignorance but between payment knowledge and investment knowledge—in other words, between units of knowledge exchanged in a daily maintenance framework versus funds of knowledge dedicated to optimizing the performance of a project (6).

Habermasian communicational transparency is similar to liberalism:

Liberalism does not preclude an organization of the flow of money in which some channels are used in decision making while others are only good for the payment of debts. One could similarly imagine flows of knowledge traveling along identical channels of identical nature, some of which would be reserved for the 'decision makers,' while the others would be used to repay each person's perpetual debt with respect to the social bond (6).

The Problem: Legitimation

Computerization of society—these hypotheses have a strategic (and not predicative) value in relation to the question (7).

What other direction, besides computerization, could technology take (7)?

The cumulative nature of knowledge is acknowledged, but in what form does the accumulation take (7)?

Scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of knowledge—scientific knowledge in competition and conflict with another kind of knowledge—narrative knowledge (7).

Not that narrative knowledge can prevail over science, but its model is related to ideas of internal equilibrium and conviviality—since knowledge becomes exteriorized from the 'knower' and alienated more and more from the user (7).

Demoralization of scientists attests to the central problem of legitimation:

I use the word in a broader sense than do contemporary German theorists in their discussions of the question of authority [Habermas]. Take any civil law as an example: it states that a given category of citizens must perform a specific kind of action. Legitimation is the process by which a legislator is authorized to promulgate such a law as a norm. Now take the example of a scientific statement: it is

subject to the rule that a statement must fulfill a given set of conditions in order to be accepted as scientific. In this case, legitimation is the process by which a 'legislator' dealing with scientific discourse is authorized to prescribe the stated conditions (in general, conditions of internal consistency and experimental verification) determining whether a statement is to be included in that discourse for consideration by the scientific community [Authorization of discourses—Foucault—the inclusivity of a discourse and the paradigms and arborescent hierarchies of canons] (8).

The question of the legitimacy of science has been linked to the legislators since Plato (8).

The right to decide what is true is not independent of the right to decide what is just (8).

There is a strict interlinkage between the kind of language called science and the kind called ethics and politics (8).

Thus it has to do with double legitimation—who decides what knowledge is and who knows what needs to be decided? In the computer age, the question of knowledge is more and more a question of government (8-9).

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