

P G Semester-II; CC-08, Unit-V

The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge

How do we define 'knowledge' in a post-industrial society equipped with new media, instantaneous communication technologies and universal access to information? Who controls its transmission? How can scientific knowledge be legitimated?

These are the questions Lyotard asks in *The Postmodern Condition*. He believes that the method of legitimation traditionally used by science, a philosophical discourse that references a metanarrative, becomes obsolete in a postmodern society. Instead, he explores whether paralogy may be the new path to legitimation.

I. The Field: Knowledge in Computerized Societies

The nature of knowledge itself is shifting from being an end in itself to a commodity meant to be repackaged and redistributed. In order to be valuable, learning must be able to be reformatted into these packets of information in computer language, so that they can be sent through that channel of communication. Today, we increasingly hear the words "knowledge economy" and "information society" to describe the era we are entering. As was always the case, knowledge is power. Now, in an increasingly complex world, those with the ability to sort through the vast amounts of information and repackage it to give it meaning will be the winners. Technologies continue to solve problems that were formerly the source of power struggles between

nations (i.e. the need for cheap labor is diminished by the mechanization of industry, the need for raw materials is reduced by advances in alternative energy solutions), and so control of information is most likely to become the 21st century's definition of power.

2. The Problem: Legitimation

The definition of knowledge is determined by intertwining forces of power, authority, and government. Lyotard draws a parallel between the process of legitimation in politics and of those in science: both require an authority figure or “legislator” to determine whether a statement is acceptable to enter the round of discourse for consideration. In an increasingly transparent society, this leads to new questions: Who is authorizing the authority figure? Who is watching the watchers?

The manner in which communication unfolds is like a dance. Or a battlefield. Those patterns that define our social interactions are identified here as language games, and put us in constantly changing positions and roles based on the type of discourse.

3. The Nature of the Social Bond: The Modern Alternative

Lyotard says that to understand the nature of knowledge in modern times, one must be able to understand how the society operates. In this case, postmodern society it is either a whole, or split in two. Is it an optimistic model that views society as a cohesive, unified whole,

or a model based in dissonance, where the needs of the people and functions of the system are incompatible? Either way, society is a machine, and knowledge is a cog in the system that keeps it running.

4. The Nature of the Social Bond: The Postmodern Perspective

The social bond is itself a language game, each of us nodes on a communication net, intercepting and resending messages throughout the system. These messages affect the nodes in the language game, causing “moves,” “displacements,” and “countermoves,” all which potentially enhance and enrich the system by creating innovation and novelty. This method of communication differs greatly from the modern institutional approach at language games, which limit the kinds of ‘moves’ able to be made by creating rigid boundaries and rules.

5. The Pragmatics of Narrative Knowledge

Science is not the same as knowledge. Whereas science is made up of denotative statements, and must be observable, repeatable, and verifiable by experts, knowledge casts a wider net, being composed of a competence that encompasses concepts of truth, justice, efficiency, and beauty. Knowledge is not limited to a specific class of statements; it is characterized by a fluidity and flexibility that can identify the relationships across subjects in order to make “good” utterances.

Narratives then decide the criteria of the competence of knowledge – in traditional knowledge this would be “know-how,” “knowing how to speak,” and “knowing how to hear.” A narrator attains legitimation

simply by being the narrator; the information is transmitted to the listener, who then attains the knowledge, and through meter and repetition pass of the criteria of competence and the acceptable rules of a culture.

6. The Pragmatics of Scientific Knowledge

Scientific knowledge is characterized by the ability to provide proof supporting a statement, and ability to refute opposing statements. The combination of these two conditions do not prove a statement 'true,' but rather as being likely to be true based on our understanding of reality. The competence needed in the formulation of scientific knowledge does not require a social bond; it is one-sided, only requiring a sender's competence, and is composed only of the language game of the denotative utterance.

In postmodern society, we have two types of knowledge: *narrative* and *scientific*. Neither can be judged as right or true or better in comparison to the other, because their criterion of competence is difference.

7. The Narrative Function and the Legitimation of Knowledge

Narrative knowledge is looked at disdainfully by advocates of scientific knowledge because it doesn't put legitimation as its foremost priority when forming statements. Ironically, scientific knowledge must resort to narratives in order to legitimate itself, as arguments and proofs are merely dialectics. The new function of

narrative knowledge is characterized by both denotative utterances concerning truth, and prescriptive utterances concerning justice. “The people” decide that what is needed to determine the legitimacy of truth or justice is simply their debate and consensus.

8. Narratives of the Legitimation of Knowledge

The two predominant versions of the narrative of legitimation. The first is “humanity as the hero of liberty.” Humanity becomes the validator of knowledge: laws that are created are just because the citizens who create them desire them to be just, and so it follows that they must be just. Knowledge is valuable insofar as it serves to meet the goals of the collective. The second positions science as a path to morality, ethical action, and spirituality. Legitimation then becomes the subject of the philosophical, of the spirit.

9. Delegitimation

In the post-industrial society, the grand narrative is dead. A process of deligitimation was inherent in terms of positive science, as its version of ‘knowledge’ was legitimated by itself “by citing its own statements in a second-level discourse,” and is therefore not true knowledge at all. Instead, science can be seen as a speculative game that is defined by a certain set of rules. As the rules are being bent, fields of science are converging, and areas of inquiry are applicable to a greater range of disciplines. No one can master all the languages, and in the absence of a metalanguage, legitimation leaves the realm of being based on

performativity and is accepted to be based on the social bond, consensus and communications.

10. Research and Its Legitimation through Performativity

New methods of argumentation and establishing proof are changing the pragmatics of research. It is accepted that there are a variety of methods to arguing truth, not just a universal metalanguage. New moves, new rules, and new games are all pathways of progress in scientific knowledge. Proof is increasingly established through technology, because the technical apparatus can make observations more efficiently than human senses. The problem is that technology costs money, and so truth can most often only be established by the wealthy. This interweaving of efficiency and wealth has meant that research is typically conducted not to establish truth, but to turn a profit and gain power. If those with wealth are running the game, they continue establishing proof by funding more research, which then increases efficiency or ‘performance improvement,’ which allows more ‘proof’ to be produced, which as an end in itself becomes a type of legitimation. So in the postmodern world, power is the knowledge of how to increase the efficiency of the system, which is accomplished by having, creating, and reformatting the most information and data.

11. Education and Its Legitimation through Performativity

What defines learning and education when knowledge becomes the equivalent of performativity of the social system? Education ceases to

end with young people at the university level – instead members of society will need to continually absorb new information in order to be able to function in an ever-evolving system. The role of professor as transmitter of learning may decrease, as computer-based learning opportunities increase. When information becomes universally accessible and ubiquitous, learning becomes a matter of knowing how to harvest the information out of a vast pool of data, how to ‘create’ knowledge by reassembling available information in meaningful ways.

12. Postmodern Science as the Search for Instabilities

Lyotard says that postmodern scientific knowledge cannot be based on performativity, because efficiency must be calculated based on a stable system. Nature and society are not stable systems, it is impossible to define all the variables of those systems, and so they can never be perfectly controlled. Their success and progress are based on inconsistencies and innovations, or “new moves.” As is demonstrated by tyrannical governments or authorities, control does not increase performativity, but rather stifles the system. So knowledge in the postmodern world is about change, adapting to it, and generating new ideas, not on an established rigid scientific method.

13. Legitimation by Paralogy

Postmodern thought accepts that there cannot be a fixed, static paradigm for legitimation in a system that is fluid, organic, and

constantly in flux in its process of growth. It is more apparent now that at any other previous point in history that we are living in a world of accelerating technological change, and flexibility of the players to create new moves and rules will be crucial to society's functioning. Permanence has always been an illusion, and aligning our interactions and interpretations of society and knowledge more with the notion of transience and ephemerality will only service in our favour.

It can be a useful exercise to remove philosophical texts from their heritage and create new ownership of concepts and language, reapplying these concepts heuristically out of context to new and different times and places. While the author wishes some accuracy in terms of the general translation of this model, she is less concerned with the original application/ontological trappings and as such the following essay should read as her extrapolated contemporary reading of this theorist as applies to this time and place”.