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The Poststructuralist Subject

Review of Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory, Chris Weedon, 1987

Foucault insists that 'points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network' and revolt or revolution have likewise no one reference point. [p. 125]
Subjectivity is most obviously the site of the consensual regulation of individuals. This occurs through the identification by the individual with particular subject positions within discourses. [p. 112]

The purpose of reviewing this popular exposition of poststructuralist feminism is solely to clarify my own conception of the subject and distinguish it from the concept of the subject used by poststructuralism.

According to Chris Weedon, poststructuralism differs from Althusser's structuralism by broadening its concerns beyond the "capital-labour relation" to other forms of power. Its aim is to "conceptualise the relationship between language, social institutions and individual consciousness." [p. 19] By understanding the multiplicity of routes by means of which power is articulated, it seeks to disclose the numerous sites at which resistance is possible.

For Weedon, "subjectivity" refers to that aspect of an individual's psyche by means of which the person identifies themselves and their place in the world. This entails the person "inserting" themselves into a particular "subject position" within a chosen "discourse." Subjectivity is therefore liable to change and to change radically in the event of a new discourse becoming available, changes in power relations between rival discourses, or by different subject positions becoming available within one and the same discourse.

Weedon claims that this radically differs from the "liberal humanist" account of subjectivity, but so far as I can see it is an unproven theory of social psychology which shares with "liberal humanism" the commonsense conception of subjectivity as a formation within the individual psyche, which responds to social pressures. Nevertheless, as a theory of social psychology it is very interesting.

feminist poststructuralism makes the primary assumption that it is language which enables us to think, speak and give meaning to the world around us. [p. 32]

Insertion into language begins at an early age. [p. 97]

However, psychological research by the Vygotsky School has demonstrated that thinking and speaking both separately pre-exist their intersection in the meaningful use of words, and this is possible because children are "inserted into" families and other systems of activity before they enter into language and discourse. So the primary position given to language needs qualification.

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The key concepts are **subject position**, **discourse** and the relationship between **language**, **social institutions** and **individual consciousness**. From there we can make clear what Weedon means by "**subjectivity**."

Discourse and systems of activity

Discourses exist both in written and oral forms and in the social practices of everyday life. They inhere in the very physical layout of our institutions ... To be effective, they require activation through the agency of the individuals whom they constitute and govern, in particular ways, as embodies subjects. ... [p. 112]

... Nor is it to imply that the material structures such as the family, education and the work process, which constitute and discipline our sense of ourselves both conscious and unconscious, can be changed merely at the level of language. Discursive practices are embedded in material power relations which also require transformation for change to be realised. [p. 106]

To begin with, poststructuralism renders the relationship between language (or discourse) and social institutions *upside-down* and it is this which makes the theory counter-intuitive and potentially oppressive.

The meaning of the existing structure of social institutions, as much as the structures themselves and the subject positions which they offer their subjects, is a site of political struggle waged mainly, though not exclusively, in *language*. [p. 38]

Granted that meaning *is* attached to institutions and systems of activity by means of language; that is what language does above all, and without the use of language of *some* kind, it would be impossible for any form of practice to be meaningful for people. This observation is of indisputable value when deployed in relation to natural objects, or as part of the exposure of institutions as *human products* rather than things given by nature.

But surely when we are talking about institutions and forms of social practice, it needs to be recognised that it is a form of *human activity* that is being given meaning? And that without people first acting in such-and-such a way (or at least social conditions existing for people to act in such-and-such a way), there would be nothing to give meaning to.

Somewhat later, Weedon notes:

In order to be effective and powerful, a discourse needs a material base in established social institutions and practices. [p. 100]

Power is a relation. ... a dynamic of control and lack of control between discourses and the subjects, constituted by discourses, who are their agents ... exercised within discourses in the ways in which they constitute and govern individual subjects. [p. 113]

Thus the picture we are presented with is a human society that lives and breaths "discourse", but these "discourses" (not the people uttering them) need a material base (though one has to read 100 pages before coming across this observation). So, in the hierarchy of existence, discourse is the active factor which is at the root, both forming consciousness *and* establishing systems of practical activity, where it finds a "material base." This is like an army or a political leader who looks around and finds a base from which to operate, to supply troops and provisions or votes as the case may be, but the active force logically and historically precedes its "material base."

Now this way of looking at things is very powerful; it is a very strong constructivism.

Social practices are inconceivable without linguistic and discursive interaction; but on the other hand, equally, conversation without any implications for social activity, is meaningless, it's "just talk."

Discourse and institutions are inseparable and almost co-extensive, but only the professional discourses would think of discourse as *primary* to social practice. Some biologists think they can explain social behaviour by DNA; some literary critics think they can explain all of social life by discourse. Both are anti-humanist and mistaken.

How can we understand the relation of priority between social practice and discourse? Once an institution is established, its existence is maintained by means of discourse, and indeed, some institutions are invisible other than by means of their characteristic discourse.

However, when we look at emergent institutions or practices, changes in social relations and activity will inevitably open the door to changes in language being objectified in "discourse" (inclusive of built environment, etc., which can be taken as included in "discourse" in a broader sense of the concept.) New words for example, enter the language in response to the need to name some new form of activity or social formation, product, etc. On the other hand, changes in discourse can precede changes in systems of activity, only if the conditions for changes in practice are already present. For example, the coining of a new word can catalyse a new social movement or practice - but only under certain conditions.

New forms of practice can be brought into being by appropriate use of language *if the time is right*, and under certain conditions, institutions can be destroyed by attacking the discourse which sustains them.

In my writing I talk about "systems of activity" rather than discourses. In fact the two concepts are almost co-extensive. A system of activity could not even be perceived other than through a distinctive discourse of some kind. But *in the last instance* a system of activity depends on the capacity to feed and clothe people, keep them healthy and *meet people's needs in some way*; on the other hand, it is not clear what the material conditions of existence are for a "discourse" *other than* social institutions in which they are reproduced.

Nevertheless, the approach of poststructuralism which sees "systems of activity" as constituted by discourse, has much to offer by its emphasis on discourse.

Subject Position and Discourse

At any moment particular discourses and the institutions and social practices which support them determine appropriate modes of constituting individuals as subjects, drawing on a range of ways of addressing the listener, ... [p. 101]

The way ideology functions for the individual, according to Althusser, is by interpellating her as a subject, that is, constituting her subjectivity for her in language. Whereas subjectivity appears obvious to the individual, it is an effect of ideology. [p. 30]

To speak is to assume a subject position within discourse and to become *subjected* to the power and regulation of the discourse. [p. 119]

A "discourse" is a system of concepts and signs which share common points of reference ("facts"), authorities and procedures for validation. A single discourse can include *rival* theories, alternatively asserting or denying any

given proposition, but “in the same terms.” A “discourse” is similar to a “paradigm.” It is a “symbolic register,” like a genre of literature in which it is possible to tell more than one story, but nevertheless excludes some heroes and heroines while preferring others.

A discourse offers “the reader” a multiplicity of what Weedon calls “subject positions.” But the discourse of natural science, for example, requires a subject who is the *speaker* of scientific discourse, a person who observes, records, weighs evidence, etc.. That is what I would call the *subject* of scientific discourse. For poststructuralism it is not the do-er but the *done-to* who is called “subject:” the *object* of science, the person as experimental object or “model,” and in fact, a multiplicity of objects: the biological person, the linguistic person, the social person, etc., according to the fragmentation of sciences into “branches” of science.

But these latter are “object positions,” not “subject positions.” Other discourses render human beings as objects as well; by presenting some picture of human life, with its different characters, discourses (symbol-producing institutions) offer the opportunity for readers to identify with the characters portrayed as well as with the writer and the roles adopted by the writer.

Semiology

These products of the symbolic register are “icons” in the Peircean sense. For example, in the production of hysteria, there is both Freud (symbol) and Dora (icon). Literature can reproduce both a Freud and a Dora, and by means of intertextuality, make the author seemingly invisible; in fact, the optimum ideologist *is* anonymous and invisible.

The author (or scientist or journalist or judge) stands *outside* the system of activity, seemingly immune to personal pressures and motivation, and therefore is able to authorise and authenticate the character portrayed, according to the procedures for authentication characteristic of the discourse. The character is of course, ultimately fictitious or at least hypothetical, experimental or idealised; it is an archetype. But unless the character exists within a real community it is a dead letter. So, there is a third person position, which is the person who sees the character and identifies themselves with it, that is, in Weedon’s terms, the person who takes on that “subject position.” This is the Peircean Index. This *lived form of practical activity* has to be lived in a real community, and is therefore subject not just to the laws of discourse, but to the actually existing systems of activity in the community.

However, most importantly, institutions offer “subject positions” to people as participants in *their own story*. So science, for example, offers the “environmental warrior,” the “discoverer of the secret of space-time,” “the discoverer of the cure for cancer” as subjects in a very real way. People that go to work in these institutions can aspire to develop a specific range of virtues - as subjects, taking the work of an institution (science, sport, their family, philosophy, ...) forward, to the best of their ability.

It seems to me that the “subject position” referred to by Weedon is a specific coordination of all three signs: - Icon, Symbol and Index, but it is talked of only in terms of the Icon, as a locus of the discourse. However, instead of recognising that these relations are actually constructed in a material social

world, poststructuralism ascribes the construction of the “subject position” to “discourse” leaving the person only the option of “inserting” themselves into the subject position. Once inserted, “subjectivity” becomes a property of the individual brain, rather than a social relation. But surely real subjectivity rests on the real participation of a person in some institution (such as the young scientist who join a team looking for the cure for cancer, ...).

Poststructuralism sees that “subject position” is an aspect of a person’s mental state which is very crucial to their social activity, but of course, is not determined autonomously by a person, but rather they are *subjected* to it, not by the institutions and social practices in which they are participating *via* discourse, but subject to it *by* discourse. This is descriptive of the life of a reader, or television-watcher, a *consumer* of the symbol-producing industry; we have the philosophy of consumerism here.

And what is more, as we have seen, what is called “subject position” is at a more fundamental level actually an “object position.” In the example given above it is Freud not Dora who is the author of the Dora identity. Only to the extent that a person at least *co-authors* their own subject position, can it be called a subject position in the sense in which I use the word.

We are neither the authors of the ways in which we understand our lives, nor are we unified rational beings. For feminist poststructuralists, it is language in the form of conflicting discourses which constitutes us as *conscious thinking subjects* and enables us to give meaning to the world and to act to transform it.
[my italics. p. 32]

But can we justify referring to people as “conscious thinking subjects” here? Indeed, Weedon more often uses the passive form - “to be a subject of” and “to be subjected to.” In this sense “poststructuralism” is more structuralist than “post,” remaining true to its anti-humanist roots.

For me, the conscious adoption of a “subject position” is an indispensable element of ethical politics. In order to have an ethics one must identify oneself, not just mentally but *practically* in some way, with a particular, really-existing subject position. Otherwise, ethics is merely utopianism or moralism. Since one consciously does that in one’s own life, one *is* also the *author* of that subject position. Of course, in general, you cannot do that alone; there must at the very least be others already acting or prepared to act together with you, or as Weedon says, the subjectivity must “be in circulation.”

Ethics and Poststructuralism

Not all discourses have the social power and authority which comes from a secure institutional location. Yet, in order to have a social effect, a discourse must at least be in circulation. ... [p. 110]

The degree to which marginal discourses can increase their social power is governed by the wider context of social interests and power within which challenges to the dominant are made. It may well take extreme and brave actions on the part of the agents of challenge to achieve even small shifts in the balance of power. [p. 111]

Although the subject in poststructuralism is socially constructed in discursive practices, she none the less exists as a thinking, feeling subject and social agent, capable of resistance and innovations produced out of the clash between contradictory subject positions and practices.

She is also a subject able to reflect upon the discursive relations which constitute her and the society in which she lives, and able to choose from the options available. [p. 125]

The “technical” standpoint of poststructuralism generally and Foucault in particular, the intention to avoid taking *any* ethical standpoint contrasts with this. The insistent relativism of poststructuralism aggravates its amorality:

[Discourses] fail to acknowledge that they are but possible versions of meaning rather than ‘truth’ itself and that they represent particular interests. [p. 98]

In the battle for gendered subjectivity, reasoned argument has little role to play. At best it acts as a back up and guarantee of assumptions and beliefs. From the perspective of the individual acquiring gender subjectivity, discursive authority is paramount. [p. 98]

One of the lessons the communist movement had to learn the hard way is that it is *not true* that class interests underlie every dispute, and insistence to the contrary is in fact an expression of *bureaucratic* interest, a means of *manipulating* discussion! Insistence on absolute relativism and the sovereignty of discourse is a bid for hegemony by *those best-equipped in management of discourse*, and it’s *dangerous*.

For example, there *could be* something about the female physiology which was *not* a social construct, and under certain circumstances, some medical emergency for example, counter-factual insistence to the contrary could lead to someone dying due to a wrong medical intervention. Not every action is either motivated or structurally deployed as an exercise of power, and to insist that it is, asserting a relativist epistemology in support, is *dangerous*.

It is also oppressive. Those whose social position has not equipped them for discursive practice are oppressed by the dogma that any discourse has as much claim to truth as any other. Poststructuralist theory would be therefore a means of *subordinating* those with an inferior formal education.

I am a humanist. That is, I take the human being as the central value and category of my view of the world. But I recognise that human beings are not active as individuals. At its current stage of development at any rate, the sovereign individual subject is a myth. But I reject structuralist anti-humanism according to which persons are powerless and ignorant subjects of structural forces beyond their control (except for educated experts in discourse, with degrees in poststructuralist literary criticism).

It is not, as I see it, a question of accepting the common sense illusion of an individual mind locked up inside the head and operating according to the laws of neuroscience, but “conditioned by” outside forces. These “outside forces” are collectives of human beings which exist only in and through the thinking, feeling and acting persons that make them up. Our ideas and feelings are themselves relations between human organisms, not effects on humans of non-human beings. Subjectivity is a social relation, not the *effect* of a social relation or structure.

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