

**Introduction to Political Ideologies Contexts, Ideas, and Practices**  
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**Poststructuralism; Derrida and Foucault; Background and Explanation Political engagement**

Well, hello everyone and welcome again to our NPTEL Ideologies course 2019-20. We are starting our eighth topic today, that is poststructuralism and postmodernism. I should actually take them in that, in the opposite order that is, well, we'll do poststructuralism first, and then postmodernism.

Now, these are terms which, both of them poststructuralism and postmodernism, have had very widespread use in the last half century or so. But - this has happened also in the case of Marxism - as has happened in the case of Marxism. These terms are very often used without much knowledge of their origins, their specific details, and their implications. I shall focus on the main figures in both. We'll start with Poststructuralism and go on to postmodernism, and I'll try to show what the work of the thinkers involved might mean for us.

Well, the first thing to do is, I'll talk through the subheadings, here we are, and we shall include these for you on the page. We'll start with poststructuralism and that'll involve deconstruction, a very widely used word; we'll then look at problems in poststructuralism, we'll go on to look at Michel Foucault, and we'll look at problems in Foucault's work, we'll then talk about power and political activity in particular the connection between different forms of poststructuralism and political activity.

Right, after that we'll go on to postmodernism, we'll look at the etymological origins of the term, we'll look at it as a challenge or a counter to modernism, we'll look at examples of postmodernism in architecture and music, and we'll look at criticisms of postmodernism, and perhaps at a condition in which meaning has collapsed; the collapse of meaning or the possibility of it will be our concluding topic.

We'll then go on to have a worked exercise, there's a lot of very fine material around this, and that'll will help us to, I hope that'll help us to explore further the specifics and see what implications they have for the kinds of sense we make of our world today. Well, we're going to start by looking at poststructuralism, in particular poststructuralism and deconstruction.

Now between poststructuralism and postmodernism, poststructuralism may well be the more accessible of the two, of these two outlooks. It rose primarily in France in the late 1950s in response to certain methods which were then widely used in social sciences such as anthropology and sociology, and which were often called structuralist. For example, between 1947 and 1950, the American sociologist G. P. Murdock investigated 250 different cultures around the world. And he was trying to show, he did this with a view to showing, that all societies had families as part of their social structure, and therefore perhaps that the family was a structural element in society.

Marxism for its part has its own structuralist forms, and those are particularly associated with the work of Louis Althusser, the French philosopher. Althusser's latest, later work, we must remember showed significant departures from his earlier thinking - because that had been based, that was based on the principle that all societies are decisively shaped by their respective economic structures. It was, it was a very substantial, almost determinist, form of Marxist structuralism.

Now among the other social scientist who did not conduct empirical studies, that is such as Althusser, who is primarily a philosopher. Well, forms of structuralism were common for several decades in the twentieth-century. For example, the American sociologist Talcott Parsons has written in largely structuralist work. One of his major works, published in 1937 is called *The Structure of Social Action*. So we see that structuralism takes many forms, it was certainly very current in I suppose from the 1930s onwards till the late 1950s.

And the term structuralism or poststructuralism arose in a, in a certain kind of challenge to it. I've cited particularly obvious examples - G. P. Murdock, Louis Althusser, who did diverge, he did move away from his early structuralist concerns in his later work, and of course Talcott Parsons. Now, of the three, Murdock was the one who, who actually did empirical work, Althusser and Parsons much less so. Parsons would have said that his work was not intended to be empirical. If I'm not mistaken that's what he said.

Now, a challenge to structuralism did arise in the last half century or so. The strongest challenge perhaps was, what is perhaps the strongest challenge, was launched in 1966 by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. He gave a lecture at Johns Hopkins University in 1966. It had the title, 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences'. It's, is if I'm not mistaken relatively freely available on the net. And it really set off quite a chain reaction when he

had, after he had delivered it. The lecture was a direct critique of the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss and Lévi-Strauss's work was in ethnology, it was world famous and he had written several books written based on a structuralist method. One of those was on what Lévi-Strauss saw as a taboo on incest. Now Lévi-Strauss considered incest a ban common to all societies and therefore he saw it as structural element in all societies.

Today, well, following the publication of large numbers of research studies on child sexual abuse all around the world, with much of the evidence, I understand, being that this occurs mainly within the family. Today we would probably contest Lévi-Strauss' conclusions much more rigorously. But his book *Elementary Studies of Kinship*, published in 1949 was a typical structuralist study of its time. Therefore, Derrida's lecture in 1966 had a great impact on the humanities and, later, the social sciences.

Derrida's main argument is that structural explanations are incoherent. According to him, what he calls the centre of any structure - by that he seems to mean the organizing principle or organizing idea of a structural explanation - this center of any structure or the organizing principle of it is not itself part of the structure. Derrida goes on to say that philosophers have replaced one such structure by another as they've created one system of ideas after another, with the centre taking different names and different explanatory systems.

Derrida uses the examples of essence, existence, substance, consciousness, God, and so on. But the argument goes even further. Derrida concludes that the centre of an explanatory system is what he calls therefore a non-presence. It's not a thing, or a place, a locus, but instead it's a function which takes different names in different systems. Here, Derrida uses concepts drawn from a French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who lived across the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century if I am not mistaken, and Saussure called names signifiers. And that meant that objects or things were the signified. So names are signifiers, objects or things are the signified. So if this central idea of an explanatory system cannot be signified, that is if there is nothing to be named, nothing that we can point to and name, excuse me; then the term signifier also ceases to have any use. The result is that all explanations become systems not of signs but of discourse.

And by that Derrida seems to mean social or cultural fields. If we can't signify the explanatory principle or organizing principle of an explanatory system, then there is nothing to signify. We can't point to the signified thing, but it also means that the term 'signifier' also drops out of, loses

all its meaning, well it ceases to have any use. And therefore the result is that explanations become not systems of signs, but systems of relations between one another - and that's what Derrida seems to mean is constituted by, constituted by social or cultural fields.

But this clearly undermines all structural explanations in the humanities and social sciences. Derrida does point out that Lévi-Strauss shows some recognition of this. For example, in a book called *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Lévi-Strauss sees nature as universal and even spontaneous and he sees social structures as varying from one culture to another. But he acknowledges that the prohibition of incest is both cultural and universal, because according to him, that prohibition occurs in all cultures.

So, Derrida notes that Lévi-Strauss lives in a, Lévi-Strauss's work involves a somewhat more complex relationship to the idea of structure, or involves more complex conceptions of structure and explanatory principle than Derrida seem to say at the start. But Lévi-Strauss does not abandon the distinction between nature and culture. He uses it instead as a heuristic device, an aid to investigation even while he's aware that this distinction between nature and culture may be incoherent.

He even goes on to say, Lévi-Strauss even goes onto say that founding myths or foundational myths in any culture are themselves transformations of other myths in the same societies. And in addition, this seems not to matter to Lévi-Strauss. He likens the resulting ethnographic or anthropological analysis to the work of a linguist who can work out the grammar of a language without needing a complete record of all the words that have ever been used in that particular language.

In effect Lévi-Strauss seems to say we don't need a complete if you like historical or as Foucault might say archaeological account of all the organizational myths or founding myths in any society. We can look at a society today and work out, so to speak, a complete social grammar of it. But, if the idea of an identifiable central idea within any structure collapses - that is something we can point to and signify - if that idea collapses, then so does the idea of that or indeed any structure of ideas.

This is quite a difficult point to get used to. What Derrida, Derrida's work implies is that, if we cannot point to a central idea within any explanatory structure, if you like a founding idea, even a founding myth in societies or founding principle, if we can't point to this, then is it possible for

us to identify the part played by this explanatory, by this founding idea in any structure of ideas, in any system of ideas?

Now that need not stop our investigations in the humanities or social sciences - but it does mean that what we say in our investigations has a very different status, is a very different kind of thing, from the one we thought it had or was. Now according to Derrida, what we say does not have to refer to things which are, so to speak, present. The signifier does not have to refer to a signified. This certainly is a very radical departure from Saussure. The signifier does not have to refer to a signified, to a thing signified, and therefore meaning becomes a matter of the position of what we say in relation to other utterances in a field of discourse.

This kind of step is radical enough even though Derrida's response is in part to response to empiricist, empiricist theories of knowledge, according to which all knowledge is ultimately gained from experience, we get that from David Hume in particular, the strongest of the empiricist philosophers. So Derrida's argument is in part a response to empiricist theories which say all knowledge is only gained ultimately from sensory experience and therefore ideas are copies of some sensory experience we have had in the past, whether recent or further back.

But Derrida is certainly responding to empiricist theories of knowledge, and he's going further because from this time on, from his 1966 lecture on, he held that the humanities had to proceed by identifying the internal divisions and fragmentations in all texts. Texts therefore themselves have no identifiable centre or core. Well what then is a text to be? It seems that for Derrida, yes, literary texts are texts that we can identify, but could societies themselves be conceived, histories, archaeologies, could these be conceived as texts in the sense that Derrida seems to imply?

That's one significant possibility, and Derrida's work has led to a much wider currency for the term 'textuality' or 'text' than it seems to have had earlier. But what are we supposed to do, what are we supposed to do if we conduct a non-structuralist investigation or analysis? Now according to Derrida, the move away from structuralism had already taken place by the time he lectured on it in 1966. We're moving into the topic of deconstruction here, a very tricky word in Derrida's thinking. Derrida says the move away from structuralism had already taken place by the time lectured on it in 1966. He calls this move a rupture or an event. And one example would be decolonization, another would be civil rights movements, another would be a new wave of feminism and the like.

These are significant ruptures or events which lead us to reconceive society, lead to significant historical changes in societies. And according to Derrida, these moves constituted a move away from structuralism, these developments constituted a move away from structuralism. But Derrida considers that there is an approach which replaces structuralism. He calls it deconstruction. This does not mean dismantling something or destroying it. Instead it means identifying the multiple themes and elements and inheritances within a text. And therefore, by identifying these multiple themes and the elements in inheritances, we attain a richer sense of the text.

That can also mean learning about what has been left out of a text. For example, William Shakespeare's play *Julius Caesar* makes no mention of the possibility that Brutus was Caesar's illegitimate son. Now, we would have to conduct our own enquiries to follow this up - but it has been hinted at and occasionally explicitly said. So, what about the play, it makes no mention [of Julius] of the possibility that Brutus was Caesar's illegitimate son.

The play remains a great work anyway, but we might see it very differently if we conclude, if we take seriously the possibility, that Caesar might have been Brutus's father. Now, the point there is - Derrida would say, well, when we recognize what didn't go into the text, or take it seriously, we see the text very differently and gain a richer, more complex, perhaps more troubled sense of it, we might revise our sense of the text altogether.

But Derrida's point is that we must do this. So deconstructing a text does not mean deconstructing it in the way we might dismantle a machine - take a screwdriver around the back, and take the lid off, and take the back off, and get the bits out, and all the rest of it. Deconstruction is not dismantling. It does mean identifying the potentially indefinite range of things that went into the creation of a text.

These may be biographical details of the writer's life, things they experienced, other texts or works which their own works resemble or which they seem to evoke. And they might have done, done all this. The creators of a text or texts might have done all this, possibly without even realizing themselves that they were, that these additional factors influenced the work itself. It could have been events in the world at the time they were writing, and so on.

Now, Derrida's argument here has two main consequences, at least two. The two main ones we shall look at are these, are these: First, the reader is in a sense creating the text by engaging closely with it. The second is that almost anything can be relevant to the reader's engagement with the text - that is, to their reading of the text. So no final or definitive reading of the text is possible.

In the stronger version of poststructuralism this means that reality itself is textual. No reading of the text can transcend the text by moving towards something outside, something towards something what the, that Saussure would have called a signified thing outside the text. Derrida says famously and bafflingly, there is nothing outside of the text. In his original French text he writes, 'Il n'y a pas de hors-texte.' That is in a, in a book called *The Grammatology*, in French *De la Grammatologie*, of Grammatology.

Now for a long time, Derrida's writings were much more favourably regarded in English-speaking literary studies than in philosophy. That need not surprise us. It may well have been because scholars of literature are usually very accustomed to analysing literary works by making appropriate reference to biographical detail, to historical or political events or other works or genres of work, to biographical events in the author's, author's lives or the creator's lives, to political context and so on, nothing unusual about that. Scholars of literature are also very accustomed to showing that particular words or passages or whole works can of course be read in different ways. In effect, scholars of literature are very accustomed to showing and working with this all the time, [That] showing that the meanings of text are not fixed or frozen.

Secondly, analyses of works of literature or other aesthetic creations are not usually themselves works of literature. They may be very influential but, very influential indeed, but, they are not usually themselves works of literature. In philosophy on the other hand, when we analyse a work, we create another philosophic work. One implication is something I have sometimes said to students - there is no such thing as a primary or secondary text in philosophy. Yes there are commentaries on great philosophers or other philosophers and so on, but these are themselves works of philosophy; that marks a significant difference, I suggest, between philosophy and literature.

But, what are the problems in poststructuralism. It's easy to forget that Derrida's main target is Saussure's theory of linguistics and the work derived from it, particularly Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology or ethnology. Secondly, Derrida writes throughout in language which is

both highly abstract and rarely settled. It is often, as Barry says in a commentary written in 2002, Derrida's language is often fluid and elusive if not elusive. And this makes Derrida and most of his followers difficult to read.

But that in turn can cause us to forget another and much more serious problem in Derrida's work. What is that much more serious problem? Yes, his writing is difficult but great works often are very difficult to read. What is the more serious problem of Derrida's work? It is that nobody has ever seriously claimed that any text is a self-sealed entity, or that we must exclude other factors, such as biographical or other issues from our reading of a literary text or any other aesthetic work. Indeed scholars of literature have almost always included such factors in their analyses of particular works or bodies of work. Secondly, structuralist theories themselves have never been immune to modification, revision, or even abandonment. Thirdly, Derrida seems not to recognize that we need to show the pertinence or relevance of any wider factors that we adduce in our analyses of a text. We need to show what effect, say an event in the author's life, or a political or a social event, or the weather or anything else, had on the text.

We need to show that, we need to show how it, how this other factor is pertinent to the text or our reading of it, and we have to convince people with it, we've got to show the relevance of the factors we adduce. Well, that is one major problem, right? [The,] in effect Derrida leaves us without a criterion for relevance as to what we include in our reading of a text or include in our sense of how a system was evolved or was developed.

Well in addition to that, the political implications of Derrida's form of poststructuralism are also far reaching. He may well be right that in the mid-1950s the world was abandoning or had abandoned many permanent certainties. European imperial dominance had been ended, and the post war exposure of the Nazi programme of genocide, which we have already looked at in, already covered in our topic Fascism. The exposure of the Nazi programme of genocide had already undermined the European sense of cultural and racial superiority that had developed during the age of empire.

In addition, in the arts and architecture, challenges to establish conventions or systems had already had an impact, from atonal music through modern visual art to architecture. Atonal music word was devised, oh in the mid nineteenth-century and, and had been used even earlier, and amounted to a rejection of the standard conventions of western music which is diatonic where each key has a dominant key, I think based on, on the fifth note in the scale, and in order



to maintain consonants for each, for each key certain notes are flattened or sharpened in a twelve note scale but the point is that in order to write any key we have to keep to the conventions and rules of which notes are sharpened and flattened and so on in our particular key. Atonal music used all twelve notes and hence 'atonal' where it rejects the tonic distinction in western music.

But what are the changes that Derrida talked about? The radical changes, the civil rights movements, the, the various civil rights movements around the world, the anti-colonialist movements around the world - truly global - the anti-imperialist movements and so on. Women's entirely justified and entirely right demands for a radically different society, for an end to patriarchy, what about all these? Many of these were driven by demands for inclusion in many of the systems which characterize modernity - political independence for example, equal rights for men and women, an end to racism and racial discrimination.

The relevant movements were not movements for the abolition of political, and social systems and structures but for their expansion and even radical improvement. Yes, there might well have been systems that we needed to abolish, and patriarchy may well be one of them if we are to create a better society, right? But, on the whole, the relevant movements historically were not moving for the abolition of the political and social systems but for their vast improvement and expansion to include and adapt to utterly justifiable demands for inclusion participation.

Well, Derrida did respond to this kind of criticism, and he expressed some commitment to a broadly leftist politics of emancipation. But it is not clear how such a commitment can demonstrably follow from his major writings. So we are left with continuing problems - in particular, the fact that Derrida seems not to show a recognition that we need to demonstrate the relevance and pertinence of criteria which seem to be outside the text, whether the author's life, the political situation, major events - Derrida seems not to realize that we need criteria for pertinence, we need ways of distinguishing what is pertinent to an explanation, to an analysis of a text, to the writing of the text or creation of one, a painting even or whatever, we need to, we need criteria for pertinence. Derrida seems not too sure that we need that. Secondly, it's not clear therefore from his major writings how we can justify a commitment to any particular politics given that, any particular politics even a politics of emancipation is, involves substantive commitments, and does, almost inevitably, involve explanatory systems as part of its critiques and forms of justification. So we are left with major problems in Derrida, we'll come back to these later on.

Well, another major figure in post-structuralist thought is Michel Foucault, and he made his name with his three volume *History of Sexuality*. Three volumes in English, I think it's, um some six volumes in French, in the original language. And in *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argued against the idea that sex is a natural phenomenon, and he argues against the idea that this is a phenomenon which modern people have liberated, or that we can claim to have liberated from periods of repression. Instead, according to Foucault, reducing sex to a single such concept obscures its great complexity - that is the combination of biological and anatomical elements, cultural practices and meanings, psychological factors, and so on, all of which are involved.

So this kind of reductionist attitude also obscures the great variety in sexual practices and orientations among humans, not only around the world but within what we might think of as single cultures. Foucault claimed to have been analysing the historical development of the idea of sexuality, but in doing that he also showed why we need to be cautious or even suspicious when things are presented to us as natural phenomena or as simply given.

This was a decisive moment in the development of Foucault's thinking. He came to see that what had been presented to us as a dichotomy or opposition between natural sexuality and social controls - that is, I'll say that again - what had been presented to us as a dichotomy or opposition between natural sexuality and social controls was instead a matter of complicity. Well according to Foucault, social forces have even created the phenomenon they seek to control, namely human sexuality.

This also means there are apparent acts of rebellion, such as free sex movements or relaxations in, changes in sexual mores and so on, such apparent acts of rebellion are therefore nevertheless still working within the terms set by the existing social forces. Foucault goes on to argue in his later work that the whole history of ideas is [as] a search for, is a search for knowledge as a form of power.

Now this is quite a shift. Apparent acts of rebellion such as free-sex movements and so on, according to Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* are still working within the terms set by the existing social forces. He does make quite a departure when he moves on to talk about power. He goes on to argue in his later work that the whole of the history of ideas is a search for knowledge as a form of power. In 1970 he published a book, *The Order of Things*, in French

*Les mots et les choses*, that is [the] literally Words And Things, the English title is *The Order of Things*.

He says, Foucault says, he cannot give an account of the transition between different historical periods and their respective systems of knowledge, such as the eighteenth-century move from classical thought to modern thought. So instead he focuses on the period he knows best, namely the modern one. So here Foucault is looking at systems of knowledge much more closely and not just at, he is not just putting the argument that what we consider natural is often created, and what we consider as given is often itself socially and historically created. So here, he's arguing that, well, he cannot give an account of the transition between different historical periods and their systems of knowledge - and therefore he is going to focus on the one he knows best, namely the modern system of knowledge. Now, Foucault uses the term *episteme* to mean a system of knowledge, it's the Greek word for knowledge. And according to Foucault, the system of thought, the *episteme* of the modern period gives humanity the central position.

But he adds that this centrality is illusory and he says that when the *current episteme* gives way to the next one, the modern idea of humanity will disappear, I quote, "Like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea." He says that I think in the introduction or the preface to *The Order of Things*. Foucault says this also applies to history and the history of knowledge. As humans we in our modern form are constituted by our *episteme*, by our field of discourse; even though we might think of modern knowledge as being made up of permanent universal structures and systems, Foucault tries to show that this way of thinking about knowledge is also illusory. Now, that means that Foucault is very severely critical of our convictions, or repeated convictions in different historical period, that we have achieved universal knowledge and possess permanent universal truths, or have identified those.

Foucault reserves his strongest criticism for the period he calls the Enlightenment. By that he seems to mean a modern or modernist project in which we subject everything to reason, and we attempt to ground the whole of human life on knowledge gained by rational inquiry. He puts this much more strongly in his later work, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, the French title is *L'archéologie du savoir*, literally The Archaeology of Knowledge.

And in that book Foucault says, the main result of our attempt to ground the whole of human life on rationally gained knowledge, the main result of that is that we come to think of the Enlightenment, the historical period the Enlightenment, as the progressive spread of ideas of

universal validity. For Foucault, the key issue is therefore that of power, because he sees that as the informing principle of all human thought and action.

Therefore according to Foucault, everything we do is an expression for the search for power. This is a very, an immensely convincing, highly influential, and even very powerful set of arguments. It's, it has had very great effect in the study of the humanities and often outside the humanities as well, in the social sciences, the humanities and a great many other areas of thought, but what are the problems in Foucault's work?

Well, to many scholars in the humanities and social sciences Foucault's conception of power, power as the informing principle of all human conduct seems to be as much of a comprehensive explanation or explanatory system as Marx's insight into the way social structures are shaped by class seen in terms of production relations. Foucault's work nevertheless shows its own wide range of problems.

One obvious problem is that of the implied claim that a book or any other artistic creation is a self-contained entity. Now it is true that in the 1920s, critics such as I. A. Richards used to present texts to students without the author's names in an attempt to free the students of preconceptions about the texts. But as a general method of literary evaluation this was fiercely disputed even when it was introduced. That was in, if I am not mistaken in the 1920s. Richards and others like F. R. Leavis were the founders of what came to be called New Criticism, this type of criticism, this type of analysis. And they encouraged and inculcated the practice of reading text very closely, and their methods have of course never been the sole approach to any aesthetic work.

It's not clear how important a target those methods need have been for Foucault, because the idea, that a work is a self-contained entity has never really had that much currency. It's barely intelligible. When do we actually read works like that, in that way? And nobody's ever made the claim. I will come back to this that, that books are books, work of art, music, architecture, and so on are self-contained entities. So it's not clear that Foucault needs to be so disturbed about, about that claim.

The second problem in Foucault is that of the tranquillity with which - he says - we occupy our existing fields of discourse, our current lives. It is simply not credible that people lived in or occupied all previous states of affairs or our present world with no disquiet or disturbance at all. That simply is not credible. Even in the realm of philosophy and political thought, Foucault

seems to have forgotten that Socrates so disturbed the Athenian order, or rather the minds of those who held power in that time, that he was condemned to death and accepted the punishment. As for our own time, the claim that we're untroubled about our world is barely credible. It is nonsense.

Now Foucault's comparative neglect of the history of philosophy has further consequences. He explicitly states, he explicitly takes the German philosopher Immanuel Kant to be the crowning or emblematic figure of the Enlightenment spread of reason as the universal method of the acquisition of knowledge. But Foucault seems to be unaware that Kant himself equally explicitly places clear limits on the scope of reason. Foucault also seems to be unaware that Kant does so in order to make room for faith. Kant actually says that in his astoundingly great work *The Critique of Pure Reason*. And that, that kind of thinking, Kant's thinking is one of Foucault's main targets. But Foucault seems unaware that Kant explicitly limits reason and the scope of reason to make room for faith. In addition Foucault, apparently without realizing it, reenacts a much earlier series of exchanges between Kant and Hume, the great empiricist David Hume.

And Foucault therefore also fails to see that Kant himself clearly denies the possibility of a human self which transcends the particularity of time, space, and sense experience. Now this maybe because Foucault never specifies sufficiently what he actually means by a transcendental self which goes beyond our time and place or any other kinds of boundaries. And yet the transcendental self seems to be one of his main targets in his critique of, of Enlightenment reasoning.

Now, we'll come back to this, but I've drawn the identification of the connection between, between, of the point that Foucault seems only to reenact an earlier series of exchanges between Kant and Hume, I've drawn that from very fine work by Christopher Norris from about 30 years ago on postmodernism.

Well, what then about power? Foucault seems to offer the idea of power as a universally explanatory concept. He argues that the search for knowledge is an expression of the search for power. This can be very persuasive. We've gained an enormous amount of knowledge in the course of our attempts to control the world. Medical advances constitute an obvious example. So do advances in applied sciences. But Foucault takes power to be an all-pervading principle or motivation. And that means that we can't tell if an action is motivated by the search for power or not. Even Foucault's account of power as a universal principle, therefore becomes not an

illuminating or liberating explanation but instead an attempt to exert power over us, that is, over his readers or listeners. Now this too shows Foucault's lack of attention to a very substantial indeed enormous amount of previous work. Foucault criticizes our Enlightenment-derived thought for taking the given at face value. But he neglects the fact that colossal advances in the sciences and enormous changes in society have occurred precisely because we have, so to speak, looked beneath the surface of things. And we have questioned established orders and practices, we questioned established knowledge, how it was gained, what it stands for, the methods by which it was gained, and so on. Foucault seems completely to neglect this.

Secondly, Foucault makes no mention of Hegel, who is perhaps the greatest critic of Kant and a philosopher who argues in detail that the given is itself a created or constructed entity. In sum, Foucault never shows why our existing uncertainties, our existing methods of enquiry, and existing critics are inadequate or insufficient. Perhaps above all, like Derrida, he seems to be unaware that he reasons at great length and in great detail in his attempts to convince us to abdicate reason and reasoning. But we cannot reasonably abdicate reasoning.

Well, how does this connect with political activity? Like Derrida, Foucault came to see that his thinking could well imply that we must abdicate all political activity. But he was a committed political activist and he is, later in his life, he recognized that political activity requires a commitment to some form of publicly identifiable and binding truth, or at least a commitment to a space in which we can argue freely towards agreement on what to do and how to organize our societies.

Foucault also recognized that the search for truth might result in political commitments of various kinds. But he never reconciled his various suggestions that politics as a matter of class or class conflict with his other arguments against any conscious formulations of aims and plans. I draw that point partly from a very fine book by Peter Dews called *Logics of Disintegration*.

Well, Foucault's philosophic work then is riddled with gaps and incoherencies. It is possible if not likely that he attained his intellectual status in the 1980s because his work, like Derrida's, was very warmly received in English-speaking department of literary studies and later in English-speaking anthropology and sociology. So we've concluded our exposition of poststructuralism. We'll come back to wider, more general criticisms of both poststructuralism and postmodernism later. We'll move on in, our next lecture, to postmodernism. So we'll stop here before we go on to postmodernism.