

# Taking off the safety catch: communication and culture in the Anglosphere and Continental Europe

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# Chapter Twenty-One

## Taking Off the Safety Catch: Communication and Culture in the Anglosphere and Continental Europe

Will Barton and Andrew Beck

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### Introduction

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or some time now we have been investigating a number of related areas of communication, including the use of war as mass communication and entertainment, the replacement of politics by spectacle, and the increasing salience of conspiracy theories.

At the same time we have been unwilling conscripts in the universal research project that is the bureaucratisation and managerialisation of Higher Education, with its rhetorics of goal orientation, strategy, and aims and objectives. These disparate strands of scholarship have led us to propose a vigorous and aggressive postmodernism, grounded in Jencks more than in Jameson. This is that impossible chimera: *a postmodernism taken seriously*.

Such a position is not a vain and inane attempt to 'go beyond' postmodernism, in the manner of that most old fashioned notion, the avant-garde, but rather an attempt to deal sensibly with the inescapable critiques of modernism that the last half of the twentieth century threw up.

For the purposes of the current paper, these can be classified under these headings:

- the futility of strategy
- the downgrading of science
- the resurrection of religion
- coming to terms with the Death of Man
- opposition to culture and especially cultural studies.

Our position is informed by a reading of the sociology of science of Bruno Latour and the philosophy of science of Paul Feyerabend, of Foucault's arguments against the human (particularly as glossed by Levy), of Negri and Hart's postmarxist (sic) analysis of global capitalism and of Peter Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason*.

However the work that most centrally encapsulates our overall approach is the fiction of Michel Houellebecq, particularly the novel *Atomised*. This is founded on the notion that a change in the way we understand our world has occurred, with far reaching and irrevocable consequences for our metaphysic, or weltanschauung, and our epistemology.

For us, this is that the basic substance of our world is not that of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. During that period, the high water mark of modernity, the world consisted primarily of matter: the brute, solid physicality of the real. This is no longer the case. Our world is primarily constituted not of matter but of information. Information does not obey the same scientific laws as matter. It is not subject to such constraints as the laws of thermodynamics, gravity or relativity. Information can, for example, be created or destroyed.

The consequences of this are wide ranging. A non-material world, freed from the constraints of the laws of physics, is investigated not by the disciplines of hard science or even of social science but by the informational and human sciences - informatics, art history, literary criticism, and Communication Studies.

This brings us to the central contention of this paper, which is that the Cultural Studies project is inescapably trapped in an outdated materialism and so is irrelevant to the investigation of the world in which we now live. It has, after all, always characterised itself as the study of material culture.

It is perhaps because of this that Cultural Studies has been driven into a psychological position of denial. Specifically, it has spectacularly sought to rewrite its own history.

### **The Futility of Strategy**

Strategy has a number of related definitions. It derives from the Greek *stratēgia*, referring to military leadership and generalship. It signifies variously a method or *techne* for achieving long term goals, planning, military and business operations, the science or art of planning and conducting a war or a military campaign, or the biological adaptation important to evolutionary success.

In everyday life and in our immediate environment, we can observe the ubiquity of strategies for sales and marketing, social control (health, smoking, drinking), teaching and learning, and research. Yet we also have to acknowledge that these are rarely achieved or implemented. Usually they serve for a while as devotional or exemplary rhetorical devices and are then forgotten and replaced with a new and different strategy. (Often because they don't conform to the proofs of the science that their rhetorics aspire to.)

It is our central contention that, in the postmodern condition, long term planning is futile. This is because it is based on modernist and scientific presumptions, namely that the world is constant and knowable and therefore that it is predictable. Such assumptions, grounded in the paradigms of natural

science and social science, seem to apply to a more innocent, perhaps even prelapsarian, world. These days we regard them with a more cynical eye.

Perhaps the greatest example of the futility of planning is the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. When the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, it was an unforeseen event – potentially more embarrassing and destabilising to US than USSR policies and ambitions. A system and regime that was the object of intense scrutiny and study, that was watched more closely and critically than any in history, that was infiltrated and spied upon, and was modelled and monitored, behaved in an utterly unforeseen way. No more dramatic illustration could be imagined to demonstrate that the laws of history are entirely unlike those of natural science.

It is our contention that a profound change in human metaphysics underlies this, the sort of change discussed in Michel Houellebecq's novel, *Atomised*:

*Metaphysical mutations – that is to say radical, global transformations in the values to which the majority subscribe – are rare in the history of humanity. The rise of Christianity might be cited as an example. Once a metaphysical mutation has arisen, it tends to move inexorably towards its logical conclusion. Heedlessly, it sweeps away economic and political systems, ethical considerations and social structures. No human agency can halt its progress – nothing, but another metaphysical mutation.*

*It is a fallacy that such metaphysical mutations gain ground only in weakened societies or those in decline. When Christianity appeared, the Roman Empire was at the height of its powers: supremely organised, it dominated the known world. Its technical and military prowess had no rival; nonetheless, it had no chance. When modern science appeared, medieval Christianity was a complete, comprehensive system which explained man and the universe; it was the basis for the government of peoples, the inspiration for knowledge and art, the arbiter of war as of peace and the power behind the production and distribution of wealth; none of these was sufficient to prevent its downfall.  
(Houellebecq 2001: 4)*

If the notion of a postmodern *condition* (Lyotard 1984) is taken seriously we have to realise that most of what has so far passed for postmodernism has, in fact been closet modernism. Most soi-dissant postmodernists have, in fact, clung to the tenets of materialism, monism, scientific thought and even Marxism. Yet postmodernism is a heresy of modernism and not a branch of it. If it means anything at all, it has to challenge and undermine these notions. Unless and until it does so it is the merest frivolity, but when it does, it becomes radically and profoundly dangerous. It dizzyingly dissolves all certainties and the ground beneath our feet vanishes:

*Postmodernism is a symptom, not a fresh solution. It lives under the modern Constitution, but it no longer believes in the guarantees the Constitution offers. It senses that something has gone awry in the modern critique, but it is not able to do anything but prolong that critique, though without believing in its foundations (Lyotard 1979). Instead of moving on to empirical studies of the networks that give meaning to the work of purification it denounces, postmodernism rejects all empirical work as illusory and deceptively scientific (Baudrillard, 1992). Disappointed rationalists, its adepts indeed sense that modernism is done for, but they continue to accept its way of dividing up time; thus they can divide up eras only in terms of successive revolutions. They feel that they come 'after' the moderns, but with the disagreeable sentiment that there is no more 'after'. 'No future': this is the slogan added to the moderns' motto 'No past'. What remains? (Latour 1993: 46)*

### **The Downgrading of Science**

This radical postmodernism implies that science will have to be put in its place. And where is science's place? What is it good for? It's good at controlling and explaining the material world, not at describing or prescribing human actions. The lumpy and lumbering attempts by the new pseudoscience of Evolutionary Psychology to reduce us to genetically programmed reproductive machines ultimately comes down to that most hackneyed of right-wing slogans "You can't change human nature". Ever since Feyerabend published *Against Method* (1978), the science wars have raged. Outraged materialists like Dawkins are aghast and uncomprehending as the sea of faith that ebbed from Dover Beach has turned its tide and irrationalism, religion, and magical thinking return to the mainstream of human discursive traffic.

The core of our critique is that the world can no longer be understood primarily as a material object but only as an informational one. Information operates under different constraints from physical matter and obeys different laws. Areas of human activity and experience that are highly problematised within a crudely materialist or physicalist metaphysics seem to be inadmissible to academic investigation within an informational paradigm:

*The Post-Modern Age is a time of incessant choosing. It's an era when no orthodoxy can be adopted without self-consciousness and irony, because all traditions seem to have some validity. This is partly a consequence of what is called the information explosion, the advent of organised knowledge, world communication and cybernetics. It is not only the rich who become collectors, eclectic travellers in time with a superabundance of choice, but almost every urban dweller. Pluralism, the 'ism' of our time, is both the great problem and the great opportunity: where Everyman becomes a Cosmopolite and Everywoman*

*a Liberated Individual, confusion and anxiety become ruling states of mind and ersatz a common form of mass-culture. This is the price we pay for a Post-Modern Age, as heavy in its way as the monotony, dogmatism and poverty of the Modern epoch. But, in spite of many attempts in Iran and elsewhere, it is impossible to return to a previous culture and industrial form, impose a fundamentalist religion or even a Modernist orthodoxy. Once a world communication system and form of cybernetic production have emerged they create their own necessities and they are, barring a nuclear war, irreversible.*  
(Jencks 1986: 7)

### **The Resurrection of Religion**

The most obvious of these is religion. We contend it is no accident that as the information economies have begun to displace the rustbelt industries and as economic and cultural life has become increasingly sited within virtual and electronic/informational spaces, the significance in public discourse of spiritual figures, organisations, and paradigms has blossomed.

Perhaps the most obvious example of this is the significance of Islam in contemporary politics and moral discourse, but we would also cite such manifestations as the New Age movement, the unprecedented international media interest in the Papacy (exemplified by coverage of the recent death of John-Paul II and election of a new Holy Father) and even religiously themed conspiracy theory texts like *The Da Vinci Code*.

This is not to say that all recent manifestations of religious or spiritual discourse should be considered postmodernist. We would, for example, specifically exclude those phenomena generally described as 'fundamentalist', whether in Islam or in Christianity. Literalism in the interpretation of holy texts is really the misapplication of them to the explanation of the material world. In other words it's not, properly considered, religion - just bad science.

### **Coming to Terms with the Death of Man**

Consider Bernard Henri Levy:

*I won't discuss here what Foucault really meant when he claimed that 'man' was not 'the oldest problem' or even 'the most persistent' in the history of mankind. But I do remember his critique of the concept of 'power', his notion of 'knowledge-as-power', and the fresh attention he paid to what he called 'the infinitely small elements of political power'. I also remember the way he elaborated the concept of the 'physical nature of power' from book to book. I remember the picture he drew of the social body as a scattered constellation of forces which confronted each other and of monads which balanced each other. Today, I am*

*aware there was no better or newer method of confounding and then eliminating the old Marxist notion of power viewed as a gigantic macro-structure with its intricacies and procedures. It isn't a question of determining whether Foucault's system stands up or whether his objection to Marxist politics was the 'right' one. As you will recall, Foucault urged those who read his books to use them as if they were boxes of tools. That's what we did and our reason for doing so was that they were the appropriate tools for dismantling a system we no longer needed. If you compare Aron's methodology with that of Foucault, you realise how old and worn out it is, having conveyed an overwhelming sense of rightness for several decades. You'll become aware that it doesn't work and never did. Surveiller et punir offered an alternative philosophy with which to demolish other systems.*

*(Levy 1995: 345-6)*

Or, consider another passage from Houellebecq's *Atomised*:

*"I'd like to believe that the self is an illusion," said Bruno quietly, "but if it is, it's a pretty painful one". Michel, who knew nothing about Buddhism, couldn't answer.*  
*(Houellebecq 2001: 76-77)*

## **Opposition to Culture and to Cultural Studies**

A key feature of culturalist notions of postmodernism is that it is perfectly legitimate to play fast and loose with history (Stevens' *Supreme Fiction*). Another key feature has been its effecting its entry into wider acceptance and credibility by entering Communication Studies in the body of an intellectual Trojan Horse. This has resulted in the reproduction of Communication Studies' history where its theoretical underpinnings are not always chronologically presented. We argue this more thoroughly elsewhere (Barton and Beck 2005) but what we can do here is to offer a flavour of this ahistorical argumentation.

Key to the construction of Cultural Studies as a discipline has been the way that it has concerned itself, almost obsessively, with its status and its history, and how it has worried, equally obsessively, over the moments of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University. Like a petulant child wanting to eat its cake and have it Cultural Studies has argued that it has no methodology and no set of key beliefs, that it is at once outside disciplinarity and yet constitutes a discipline in its own right. Over twenty years ago Stuart Hall remarked that 'there is as yet no detailed or accredited history of the Centre's inauguration and development' (Hall 1984a: 277). And whilst it is still the case that the history of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies' history is still the subject of dispute it is remarkable how a

relatively stable version of the Centre's achievements, impact, and influence has been produced and circulated.

It is a commonplace for Cultural Studies to argue that, in terms of the history of the study of communication, it offered significant rebuttals to established orthodoxies. This is key to Stuart Hall's 'Introduction to media studies at the Centre' (Hall 1984b). As summarised by Norma Schulman, Hall claimed that Cultural Studies broke with what was characterised as the 'behaviouristic emphases of previous research responses' which had viewed the media influencing people in a 'direct, stimulus-response' fashion (Schulman 1993: 55). Whatever credibility the Stimulus-Organism-Response model (the hypodermic model) had within Communication Studies the claim that Cultural Studies overturned the soft assumptions of the hypodermic approach is undermined by the fact that Melvin DeFleur had significantly critiqued that position some 24 years before Hall asserted Cultural Studies had made the very same achievement. First published in 1960 DeFleur's Psychodynamic Model suggested that, at the very least, the stimulus would have to be very powerful, the organism would have to be susceptible, and the degree of response would be slight and not fundamental. Cultural Studies ignores or erases Communication Studies' capacity for auto-critique to make the greater case for its achievements.

Time is similarly bent out of shape with the coming to the UK of semiotics and structuralism. Although the theorisations that informed the second wave of Communication thought were formulated before the publication of those process models which informed the second wave of Communication thought, their impact on thinking about Communication appeared to be critical rather than fundamental. Semiotic ideas were first devised over fifty years before the first process models but they weren't known or discussed outside the world of academic linguistics. Ferdinand de Saussure's ideas about general linguistics, first aired in his lectures at the end of the nineteenth century, did not achieve significant recognition until the late 1950s – and then only in France and then only through the work of Roland Barthes. And it took until the 1970s for those ideas to make the journey into the world of Anglophone theory in the form of a heady mixture of de Saussure's general linguistics, Marx and Engels' historical materialism, and Freud's psychoanalysis.

In his 1988 novel *Nice Work* David Lodge neatly summarised the impact of the arrival of this heady mixture of perspectives and analytical methods on UK higher education. He lists those perspectives and methods and atomises their disruptive impact: 'structuralism and poststructuralism, semiotics and deconstruction, new mutations and graftings of psychoanalysis and Marxism, linguistics and literary criticism. The more conservative dons viewed these ideas and their proponents with alarm, seeing in them a threat to the traditional values and methods of literary scholarship' (Lodge 1988: 46). But Lodge seems to have taken at face value the histories that his colleagues in Birmingham University presented him with in their various histories of the



Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and presented the whole Left Bank package as a late-coming challenge to process orthodoxy.

In this vein an easy and self-serving narrative is endlessly reproduced: in the UK (at the very least) Communication Studies' move from being studied from a process perspective to being studied from a semiotic perspective marked a significant shift. The narrative continues: the 1980s and the 1990s were an historical era characterised by a loss of belief in science (or, at the very least, *hard* science) and by loss of consensus (who is the 'we' in so much of contemporary rhetoric?). Ultimately, Cultural Studies sought to supplant Communication Studies, arguing that the hard science had to be turned away from and the search for consensus abandoned. The stronger discipline was stronger because it regarded itself as more hesitant, partial, and tentative. (To try to be consensual now would be to commit oneself to being out of step with the spirit of the times.) In seeking to propose a post-Marxism (what Hall once characterised as a 'complex Marxism' (Hall 1984a: 25) we can only find a pre-Marxism (in the same way that Sartre once argued that to be anti-Marxist was to be pre-Marxist). And in seeking to embrace an unscientific, pre-Marxist fluidity the history of Communication Studies is traduced.

## **Conclusion**

The implication of Foucault's famous denunciation of the concept of the Human as a transcendent concept, free of history and unconstructed, is that as we move deeper into the postmodern condition we expect the Human to shift from the material to the informational world. The notion of individual identity is persistent and difficult to submit to critique but it needs to be done. Much of what has so far passed for postmodern scholarship has been in the area of material culture; indeed this is central to the discipline of Cultural Studies. In a postmaterialist, informationalist world, the discipline that studies the Human will be Communication Studies.

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