

Approaches to Human Geography

10 Poststructuralist Theories

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Like all 'isms', 'poststructuralism' is an awkward term and one which continues to generate more confusion, frustration, argument and outright anger than most. One of the main reasons for this is that it is often very unclear quite to whom or what the term refers. Unlike the positivists of the Vienna Circle, for example (see Chapter 2), or indeed the vast majority of Marxists (Chapter 5), feminists (Chapter 4) and realists (Chapter 8), the figures, works and views gathered under the title 'poststructuralism' are for the most part *not* self-selecting; they did not and have not signed up to a manifesto and do not share a credo. Indeed – and as we shall see below – considered at its broadest, the term 'poststructuralism' simply describes the state of contemporary continental philosophy, a lineage of philosophical figures and texts stretching back approximately 220 years. In this context the term 'poststructuralism' refers to a more or less loosely grouped collection of texts and philosophers which came to prominence in France during the 1960s.

Clearly 50 years of vibrant and challenging theory and thought cannot be summed up in a chapter such as this, nor should one rush to attribute one view to what is a diverse and still developing body of thought. Having said this, at the outset of this chapter I want to suggest three things which give poststructuralism its unique place within the continental tradition. First, there has been a revival of ontological questioning; poststructuralism marks a return to and a revitalization of 'first philosophy' – of basic foundational questions of being – though more often than not by treating such foundational questions as contingent historical issues. Second, and following on, poststructuralism is radically anti-essentialist; for poststructuralism, meaning and identity are effects rather than causes. Third, and following on again, it has become increasingly clear over the past two decades that poststructuralism has a major ethical aspect, particularly in its concern for radical otherness and difference. If these points sound somewhat obscure, hopefully this chapter will go some way to clarifying them; however, I cannot recommend strongly enough that anybody who is interested should engage with the primary literature itself.

The chapter is divided into four main sections. The first of these gives a brief introduction to poststructuralism's anti-essentialism via reflecting on the method of genealogy. The second section moves on to give a somewhat schematic history of poststructuralism, situating it in the wider continental tradition. The third section looks briefly to the future and to the political and ethical demands on poststructuralism.

The final section considers a number of further readings, and reviews two key poststructuralist geography works. Running throughout the chapter is a rather blunt critique of positivist approaches and of the traditional philosophical and theoretical attempt to escape from history and situation – from the ‘original difficulty of life’, as the American philosopher John Caputo (2000) puts it – the main purpose of which is to simply raise questions concerning the nature of certain assumptions about verification, representation and truth.

The Cold Truth of Genealogy

Talking about the giving of definitions, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) claimed that only that which has never had a history can be defined with any certainty. What does this mean? Nietzsche is suggesting that if someone, a philosopher perhaps, thinks that all we need for understanding are clear definitions – that one can get to the essence, identity or meaning of something by summing it up in abstract or logical terms – they are badly mistaken:

There is their lack of historical sense, their hatred even of the idea of becoming, their Egyptianism. They think they are doing a thing an *honour* when they dehistoricize it, *sub specie aeterni* [from the viewpoint of eternity] – when they make a mummy of it. All that philosophers have handled for millennia has been conceptual mummies; nothing actual has escaped from their hands alive. They kill, they stuff, they worship, these conceptual idolaters – they become a mortal danger to everything when they worship. (1990: 45)

According to Nietzsche, when we think we are talking about essences, facts or things-in-themselves – anything that seems or should be simple, obvious, unproblematic or clear – we forget that everything has a history. Nietzsche is suggesting that those who believe Truth is something that, like money or salvation, can be gained or possessed, those who believe, ‘even to the point of despair, in that which is’ (1990: 45), fail to grasp the shifting, *becoming*, nature of existence. While a concept seems to identify something certain and immutable, something common, like ‘good’ and ‘evil’ perhaps, or ‘human’ and ‘animal’, or ‘truth’ and ‘error’, or simply ‘positivism’ and ‘poststructuralism’, it is rather the sedimentation of a history of mutations and conflicts over definition, the strata of which outline attempts to wrestle control of the term’s meaning. A concept has all the unity of a mole’s burrow and, like the needle vibrating on a speedometer, a word or a sign marks an ongoing relationship between forces. Nietzsche is warning us to be particularly wary of *transcendental* claims, be they religious or philosophical–scientific: of claims which whisper the reassuring salvation of ‘now and forever’ – *sub specie aeterni* – under their breath; of claims which would direct you to Truth with a capital T, Reality with a capital R, the Good with a capital G. When you hear claims like this Nietzsche advises you to start sniffing around, as for all this sweetness something is rotten somewhere; a moral lesson is being instructed as identity is confirmed and contingency disavowed: ‘This workshop where *ideals are manufactured* seems to me to stink of so many lies’ (1998: 47). As Caputo writes:

Whatever is called 'Truth' and adorned with capital letters masks its own contingency and untruth, even as it masks the capacity for being-otherwise. For our being human spins off into an indefinite future about which we know little or nothing, which fills us with little hope and not a little anxiety, a future to come for which there is no program, no preparation, no prognostication. (2000: 36)

This is the 'cold truth' of genealogy and of poststructuralism: its truth without Truth: its secret which is not a secret; its foundation which is an abyss.

The French historian of ideas Michel Foucault (1926–1984), perhaps the most well known of poststructuralists, was deeply influenced by Nietzsche's work and by the insights that could be gained by genealogy in particular. Foucault practised genealogy as a historical–philosophical method, producing studies of prisons and punishment (1977a) and of human sexuality and subjectivity (1978; 1988; 1990). These studies were detailed genealogies of the various ways in which bodies and minds were and are historically constituted. In his 1971 essay 'Nietzsche, genealogy, history' Foucault writes that:

Genealogy is grey, meticulous, and patiently documentary. It operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times. (1977b: 139)

We tend to think that the purpose of historical investigation is to trace the development of a phenomenon, be it morality, sexuality or punishment, by working back towards its hidden source or origin in order to discern the underlying principle or cause – be it climate change, human nature, the civilizing urge of a people, a crisis in the mode of production, the will to power of an individual or their troubled relationship with their mother. And indeed this is how much historical research has been and is conducted. However, such research both assumes and sets out to discover some extrahistorical or transcendental structure or mechanism standing behind, guiding and shaping phenomena, some mechanism which allows words to keep their meaning, desires to always point in one direction and ideas to retain their logic. Genealogy does not seek to discover such a source or secret; rather 'the genealogist needs history to dispel the chimeras of the origin' (1977b: 144). The aim is not recovery or restitution but dispersion. The aim of genealogy is not to institute a despotic aspatial and ahistorical *sub specie aeterni* in our thought and methods but to catch a glimpse of life as it takes flight and to be obligated by this movement; to understand history as a productive, differential field. Thus for Foucault:

it is no longer an *identity* that we need to recover ... but a *difference*. It is no longer a positive ideal that needs to be restored but simply a certain capacity to resist identities that are imposed upon us just to set free our capacity to invent such new identities for ourselves as circumstances allow. (Caputo, 2000: 34)

If Foucault refuses to posit transcendental or metaphysical causes to events, to give a simple narrative to history and an explanation to the present, how does he construct his accounts? Again Foucault follows Nietzsche, stepping back from reason and

towards sensation, from theory to practice, from brain to nose. For Foucault, all we have to hold onto is the body in all its unforeseeable mutability:

The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated Self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration. Genealogy ... is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body. (1977b: 148)

Thus in his studies of disciplinary techniques and confessional practices Foucault traces the linking of networks of *biopower* across the west: the articulation of technoscientific discourses and practices which call forth, shape, identify, classify, regulate and judge bodies. In particular he focuses upon the creation of docile and productive bodies which underlies the rise of capitalism: bodies trained and sorted through the emergent network of schools, workshops, prisons, barracks and hospitals in order to fit into the new machinery of production.

Yet if Foucault argues that nothing is fundamental, if his argument is radically anti-essentialist and if knowledge and truth are themselves inseparable from power, how can he make the historical claims he does and how are we to judge his work? Surely there is a performative contradiction here or, as the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1929–) (1991) puts it, a 'crypto-normativism': in offering a philosophical–historical critique, surely Foucault must be appealing to some external critical standards as well as to some standard of truth and reason, if only implicitly. For many, Foucault's writing demonstrates a double gesture common to most if not all poststructuralist thought: the denial of any external standard of reason and truth on the one hand while attempting to critique and convince on the other. And hence the accusations of irrationalism and nihilism which so often accompany post-structuralism. Foucault's work is certainly problematic in a number of respects; however, on this key issue of the status of critique – and looking ahead to our third section – it is worth focusing briefly on his essay 'What is Enlightenment?', in which he writes of the situation of his own work and of wider tasks of modern philosophy and theory.

Foucault opens by commenting: 'Modern philosophy is the philosophy that is attempting to answer the question raised so imprudently two centuries ago: *Was ist Aufklärung?* [*What is Enlightenment?*]' (1984: 32). It was the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) who first asked this question, in an essay written in 1784. Foucault notes what could be called the standard interpretation of Kant's essay: that Kant understood the Enlightenment as an exit from our self-imposed immaturity, from our willing acceptance of 'someone else's authority to lead us in areas where the use of reason is called for' (1984: 34), examples being submission to military discipline, political power or religious authority. In place of such orders to 'obey without thinking', Kant suggests the alternative 'Obey, and you will be able to reason as much as you like'; as an example he suggests paying one's taxes while being able to argue as much as one likes about the system of taxation (1984: 36). Foucault notes that Kant is actually proposing some sort of contract, that this is an

issue of politics as much as of science: ‘what might be called the contract of rational despotism with free reason’ (1984: 37), wherein there is the free use of reason but only within certain prescribed limits. Foucault breaks off from his reading of Kant’s essay at this point and begins to focus less on what it *says* and more on what it *shows*. For Foucault, the crucial and radical point in the essay is how Kant takes the *present moment* as the object of his critical reflections. Against the contract or settlement of reason within the limits of an arbitrary reasonableness, in this instant the critical questioning is incessant: ‘What difference does today introduce in respect to yesterday?’ (1984: 34). Here the Enlightenment is understood not as a threshold over which we pass once moving from subservience to freedom within certain limits, as one would graduate from school to work, but rather as a process of continual questioning of such thresholds. In particular for Foucault it is a questioning of the geohistorical constitution of ideas, concepts and values which underpin the most apparently unquestionable and normal of attitudes and assumptions; ‘maturity’ is the unending process of the *production* of autonomy and freedom, not another settlement into another despotism. Thus Foucault’s is a ‘practical critique ... a *critical ontology of ourselves*, which opens the possibility of being otherwise by calling into question through reflecting on how we have become what we are’ (Owen, 1999: 602). In this sense poststructuralism produces *immanent* critiques, critiques in the absence of an overarching explanatory schema. For Foucault the Enlightenment is ‘a set of political, economic, social, institutional and cultural events’ that linked the ‘progress of truth and the history of liberty in a bond of direct relation’ and formulated ‘a philosophical question that remains for us to consider’ (1984: 43): *What is Enlightenment? How have we become what we are? What are the uses of reason today?* The problem and question of reason is to be treated historically and not metaphysically. In this way Foucault rejects the “‘black-mail” of the Enlightenment’ (1984: 43) found in critiques of his work such as those given by Habermas; one does not have to be ‘for’ or ‘against’ the Enlightenment, as if some clash of cultures or civilizations were in the offing. Foucault’s analysis suggests ‘that one has to refuse everything that might present itself in the form of such a simplistic and authoritarian alternative’ (1984: 43).

What is Poststructuralism?

What of poststructuralism, then? As noted above, the term ‘poststructuralism’ names one of the most recent phases of continental philosophy. Following Foucault’s lead we can say that the history of continental philosophy extends for roughly 220 years, beginning with the publication of Kant’s critical philosophy in the 1780s. The British philosopher Simon Critchley (2001: 13) provides a useful provisional rundown of the phases and figures since that time, by highlighting German idealism and romanticism; the critique of metaphysics; German phenomenology and existential philosophy; French phenomenology, Hegelianism and anti-Hegelianism; Hermeneutics; Western Marxism and the Frankfurt School, and; French structuralism, poststructuralism and postmodernism.

Like Foucault, Critchley argues that it is the reaction to Kant’s philosophy which continues to inform current debate over (and misunderstandings of) poststructuralism.

As we saw in the previous section, Kant's philosophy crystallized the Enlightenment by claiming the sovereignty of reason. One route from this point to the present is via what has become known as the 'analytic tradition' in philosophy – which gave rise to logical positivism and its offspring. On the reading of analytic philosophy, Kant's contribution means that the focus of thinking and theory should be first and foremost on *epistemological* questions, i.e. questions concerning validity, verification and evidence, at the service of reason. As the Viennese positivist Otto Neurath put it:

The representatives of the scientific world-conception stand on the ground of simple human experience. They confidently approach the task of removing the metaphysical and theological debris. (quoted in Critchley, 2001: 96–7)

However this is not the only route from the Enlightenment to the present. As Critchley describes, for many the entire project of the German Enlightenment suffered an 'internal collapse' soon after it was proposed:

The problem can be simply described: the sovereignty of reason consists in the claim that reason can criticize all our beliefs. ... But if this is true – if reason can criticize all things – then surely it must also criticize itself. Therefore there has to be a *meta-critique* if the critique is to be effective. (2001: 19–20)

And yet Kant's philosophy was unable to provide such a metacritique; in particular, it could not link up theory and practice, reason and experience, understanding and sensibility, nature and freedom, the pure and the practical. Taking this last dualism – the pure and the practical – we can return to Nietzsche's comments near the start of this chapter. As we have seen, Nietzsche takes the reified air of purity to task for its disavowal of the contingent, the sensible, the mutable and the becoming; its disavowal of the 'original difficulty of life' with which we started. Rather than taking the high road to pure forms and essences, continental thought took the low path, becoming, *pace* Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), a radical *onto-hermeneutics*. Cutting lower perhaps than Neurath thought possible, to the layer where most spades are turned, this tradition asked about:

the *a priori* conditions not only for the possibility of sciences which examine entities as entities of such and such a type ... but also for the possibility of those ontologies themselves which are prior to the ontical sciences and which provide their foundations. (Heidegger, 1962: 31)

Of course for many – in particular, many within the analytic tradition – such questioning is pointless, either having been answered or being unanswerable. As Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) commented in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* – a work which was and often still is taken as a programme for logical positivism – 'The world is all that is the case' (1961: #1), meaning that we can answer all our speculative questions and propositions by verifying them against the world, all other propositions being either analytic, in that they are self-referential and logical, or nonsense. Hence the final line of Wittgenstein's great work, perhaps one of the most famous in recent philosophy: 'What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence' (1961: 7).

Any proposition or claim that is not analytic or cannot be verified is not strictly speaking a proposition or a claim at all, but an opinion and, as such, something which you should perhaps keep to yourself. And yet it is precisely the danger contained in this view which motivates so much continental philosophy: the danger of the reduction and limitation of truth to questions of representation, calculation, measurement and correspondence, outside which everything else is condemned as mere opinion. However, doesn't this mean that continental philosophy and poststructuralism in particular are simply bad psychology dressed up as philosophy – that *bête noire* of the US culture wars, pseudoscience?

Not all of these worries are misplaced; certainly there are works labelled poststructuralist which are awry in their arguments and convictions. Yet just because poststructuralism engages explicitly with the contexts, conditions of possibility, *a priori* and *aporias* of phenomena such as truth and error, presence and absence, subjectivity and objectivity, testimony and fiction, representation and the sublime, correspondence and communication, that does not make it pseudoscience. The founder of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), saw philosophy's role as investigation into the nature and being of the lifeworld (*Umwelt*) from which theoretical and scientific thought emerges and within which it finds its significance and meaning. The phenomena, being or givenness of the lifeworld is the condition of possibility for subjectivity and objectivity alike, being presupposed in any definition of either; quite simply, there is nothing outside (this) context. As Adriaan Peperzak writes:

reason cannot prove its own beginnings. At least some beliefs, perceptions, feelings must be accepted before we can begin arguing. In order to avoid all arbitrariness, we must find out which basics, instead of being 'subjective' in the subjectivist sense of the word, are so fundamental that they deserve our respect and even trust. (2003: 3)

While for many poststructuralism is the epitome of contemporary nihilism, such a view is a serious failure to engage with its context and history for, with Nietzsche, poststructuralism is dedicated to *resisting* nihilism. Nothing evacuates potential meaning faster and in a more underhand manner than a simple presentation of the facts as if this were all that could or needs to be said. Nihilism is not a result of being irrational or somehow 'against' the Enlightenment; rather, it stems from the valuation of a purely calculative understanding of truth irreversibly cut off from context – ideals separated from their workshop. This is to say not that truth is *purely* contextual or that it is 'situated', 'local' or 'relative', but simply that reason finds its rationale only in the 'original difficulty of life'. If we forget to critically question our onto-hermeneutic situation we cannot begin to answer meaningfully the questions "“*why* in this way and not otherwise?“, “*why* this and not that?“, “*why* something rather than nothing?“” (Heidegger, 1998: 134): *sub specie aeterni* is the herald of an unresponsive and irresponsible despotism.

The Promise of Poststructuralism

Poststructuralism is often characterized as being an overly *negative* critical stance. In its radical anti-essentialism and anti-foundationalism, poststructuralism seems unable to offer any recognizably progressive programme, be it in terms of knowledge or politics.

It is for this reason that many accuse poststructuralists of both epistemological and political relativism. To counter such views, in this section I want to bring out the *affirmative* nature of poststructuralism and to do so by turning briefly to the writing of French-Algerian philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) and to the mode of thought with which his name has become synonymous: deconstruction.

We saw above how, through his use of genealogy, Foucault attempted to bring to the fore the extreme historical and geographic contingency of apparently transcendental forces, entities and concepts. Derrida employs a similar technique, though his investigations tend to focus upon key concepts within the philosophical, religious and political traditions of the west. For example, his book *Politics of Friendship* (1997) considers various articulations of the concept of politics and the political, from Plato (427–347 BCE) through to Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995). Derrida shows how throughout this history the concept of politics, and of democracy in particular,

rarely announces itself without some sort of adherence of the state to the family, without what we could call some sort of *schematic* of filiation: stock, genus or species, sex ... blood, birth, nature, nation. (1997: x)

Democracy's great force and claim is that it treats all individuals singularly and without prejudice; however, Derrida's analysis claims that in being always defined in terms of masculine friendship, democratic thought and practice consistently fall short of and indeed systematically withdraw from such obligations. Derrida demonstrates how the political imagination of the west has great difficulty in imagining ways of being together and the social relationship *per se* otherwise than as a reciprocal relationship between similar men. On the last page of the book Derrida asks the question which has motivated the study:

is it possible to think and to implement democracy, that which would keep the old name 'democracy', while uprooting from it all those figures from friendship (philosophical and religious) which prescribe fraternity: the family and the androcentric ethic group? Is it possible, in assuming a certain faithful memory of democratic reason and reason *tout court* ... not to found, where it is no longer a matter of *founding*, but to open to a future, or rather to the 'to come', of a certain democracy? (1997: 306)

From this quote it should be clear that Derrida's conceptual investigation is not a simple nihilistic assault on the concept of democracy; rather, and like all deconstructive readings, it is an attempt to open the concept up to the possibility of being thought otherwise. Derrida is suggesting that we do not need a new foundation of the political – a new programme or blueprint – as such foundations unavoidably put to work transcendental or metaphysical presuppositions. Rather, we need an opening of the concept of the political beyond its current imagination and conceptualization:

The idea of such [deconstructive] analysis is not to level democratic institutions to the ground but to open them to a democracy to come, to turn them around from what they are at present, which is the pre-vention of the other ... Preparing for the in-coming of the other, which is what constitutes radical democracy – that is what deconstruction *is*. (Caputo, 1997: 44)

Since the early 1990s the deeply ethical nature of poststructuralist theory, and of deconstruction in particular, has come to the fore. In Derrida's writing this ethical impulse often revolves around the idea of the 'to come' (*l'à-venir*). For Derrida, and for poststructuralism *per se*, there 'can be no future as such without radical otherness, and respect for this radical otherness' (Derrida in Derrida and Ferraris, 2001: 21). Importantly, 'radical otherness' is not otherness considered in terms of an identity, but rather that which 'defies anticipation, reappropriation, calculation – any form of pre-determination' (2001: 21). While we cannot but anticipate the future, prepare, make plans, analyse, reckon and strategize, and we would be highly irresponsible not to do so, Derrida suggests that the rationale for such rationalization can only lie in our 'relationship' to the incalculable 'to come' of the future. We calculate because of the incalculable; a future is possible for us because of our relation to a future always to come but never present. In this sense our plans, calculations and rationalizations have the form first and foremost not of grounded propositions, of proofs or certitudes, but of pledges and promises. As Derrida comments: 'From the moment I open my mouth I promise' (1987a: 14) – even if, like Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*, it is to say that there is nothing else to say – for all thought and thinking 'requires a *yes* more "ancient" than the question "what is?" since this question presupposes it, a *yes* more ancient than knowledge' (1992a: 296). Without a 'relationship' to the unknown in the form of an affirmation and a promise, knowledge is not possible. Hence, and to return to the example of *Politics of Friendship*, Derrida comments that:

democracy remains to come; this is its essence in so far as it remains: not only will it remain indefinitely perfectible, hence always insufficient and future, but, belonging to the time of the promise, it will always remain in each of its future times, to come: even when there is democracy, it never exists, it is never present. (1997: 306)

Hence deconstruction is already pledged, already engaged, already obligated and, at the same time, always to come, always promised, always possible.

Poststructuralism and Geography

Throughout this chapter I have been keen to stress that the term 'poststructuralism' covers a complex and diverse set of writings and ideas, and as such it has had many routes into human geography. In the companion chapter to this one, John Wylie (Chapter 30) provides a concise and well-informed overview of poststructuralism's influence in geography; rather than replicate this account, I want to focus on just a few selected and, I believe, indicative texts which the reader interested in poststructuralism and geography may want to consider.

To begin with, it is worth noting a number of texts by (mainly) non-geographers which either come from or can serve to inform a poststructuralist understanding of and approach to space. Edward S. Casey's *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (1997) is particularly useful for its long view of thinking on place and space. In a similar vein, Jeff Malpas' *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topology* (1999) is an interesting attempt by a contemporary philosopher to engage in issues around space. While both Casey and Malpas have a distinctive phenomenological tenor to

their discussions, David Farrell Krell's *Architecture: Ecstasies of Space, Time and the Human Body* (1997) is more influenced by Derrida's post-phenomenological deconstructive approach, though it is perhaps less successful than his other works. Covering similar topics, though at a less frenetic pace, are Robert Mugerauer's *Interpreting Environments: Tradition, Deconstruction and Hermeneutics* (1995), Karsten Harris' *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (1998) and John Rajchman's *Constructions* (1998). In many ways Derrida's key contribution for geographers is the idea of *spacing*, and as such, Derrida's own writing on the topics of space and place is minimal and somewhat oblique, to say the least. However, his substantive writing on the concepts of cosmopolitanism and hospitality are significant (1992b; 2000; 2001; 2002), as are his reflections on language, translation, exile and distance (1987b; 1998). An excellent example of deconstruction in a context relevant to geography is David Campbell's *National Deconstruction: Violence, Identity and Justice in Bosnia* (1997). As for Foucault, a great deal of his work can be understood at least in part as an endeavour of 'spatial history'; along with those primary texts noted previously, see in particular Stuart Elden's *Mapping the Present: Heidegger, Foucault and the Project of Spatial History* (2001), the geographer Chris Philo's (1992) important paper, and the essays collected in Joanne P. Sharpe et al.'s *Entanglements of Power: Geographies of Domination/Resistance* (2000). Some of the best writing in poststructuralism and space has come from a feminist perspective; of particular note in this context is the work of Elizabeth Grosz, including her books *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Body* (1995), *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space* (2001) and her influential *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporal Feminism* (1994). Of import for geographers is Donna Haraway's work on rethinking human-nature relations; see in particular her landmark collection of essays *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991). Finally, while not explicitly on the topics of space and place, of interest to many geographers in recent years have been Brian Massumi's *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (2002), William E. Connolly's *Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, Speed* (2002) and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's radical poststructuralist manifesto for the twenty-first century, *Empire* (2001), and its sequel, *Multitude* (2004). While all the texts listed here will help any would-be poststructuralist in gaining a feel for the broad contours of discussion and debate, it should come as no surprise that these texts can be quite detached from and seemingly lacking a context in current geographical thought. Again I would refer the interested reader to Wylie's overview for a more extensive context. Here I want to concentrate on two contributions by geographers which attempt to bridge this gap: Marcus Doel's *Poststructuralist Geographies: The Diabolical Art of Spatial Science* (1999) and Sarah Whatmore's *Hybrid Geographies: Natures Cultures Spaces* (2002).

While certainly not the first to enquire into poststructuralism and geography or to be avowedly poststructuralist in outlook, Doel's book *Poststructuralist Geographies* nonetheless in many ways represents the culmination of a 'first wave' of explicitly poststructural theorization from *within* human geography. Doel's central claim is that poststructuralism is already a thought about the nature of space, in particular about the nature of space as an *event*. According to Doel, geography has suffered from 'pointillism', an overly sure (and metaphysical) belief in the common-sense substantiality of 'what is' – of the kind critiqued by Nietzsche above – and this has led to a failure to think about the nature and work of difference and differentiation or *becoming*.

For Doel the realization that everything must take place, must – as Doel puts it after Henri Lefebvre – ‘undergo trial by space’, demonstrates that space is not so much a stage or thing but a happening, an event. Things do not simply sit in space but rather are spaced out in various ways and constitutively so; however, at the same time, this ‘spacing’ or ‘(s)playing’ disturbs and disrupts any claim or semblance of solidity, permanence, identity or transcendence. These insights, developed and explored through readings of Baudrillard, Deleuze, Derrida, Irigaray and Lyotard, lead to a critique of both humanist and Marxist approaches within the discipline, both of which are taken to task for their overly ‘sedentary’ modes of thought, their unfounded belief in the foundations of place and thereby their failure to ‘let space take place’. Played out across a wide range of references and through a proliferation of quotes, jokes and neologisms, what emerges from Doel’s account is an ambitious and provocative attempt to rethink and rephrase our basic apprehension of space, and so of geography itself. *Poststructuralist Geographies* has been critiqued on a number of fronts, both by those broadly sympathetic to its arguments and by those opposed. There can be little doubt that Doel’s book is a challenging read; it is densely written and presupposes some prior knowledge of the writers of whom he makes use. For some this is symptomatic of elitist and exclusionary tendencies within poststructuralism; however, perhaps a more pointed criticism here is that Doel’s book is indicative of ‘the central failing of post-structuralism ... that the only thing it is capable of saying anything about is itself’ (Bancroft, 2000: 122). Less rhetorically, the geographer Jeffery E. Popke makes a similar criticism of Doel’s brand of poststructuralism in his article ‘Poststructuralist ethics: subjectivity, responsibility and the space of community’ (2003). While sympathetic to and welcoming of Doel’s rethinking of space in terms of difference, Popke argues that Doel ‘fails to offer us any means for thinking this opening in relation to responsibility and justice’ (2003: 309).

Rather than being a poststructural meditation on the nature of space *per se* – or at least, not being overtly so – Whatmore’s *Hybrid Geographies* takes as its central task a rethinking and exploration of the distinction and relationships between nature and culture. Through a series of investigations Whatmore explores the vitalistic ‘topologies of wildlife’ which emerge as this binary is deconstructed. Like Doel, Whatmore wishes to demonstrate the heterogeneous, processual and emergent complexity of the world which underlies and is hidden in our inherited representations and assumptions. Hence the word ‘hybrid’ in the title: for Whatmore it is relations which are important and not essences, again a shift from being to becoming. This approach leads to a ‘mapping’ of various decentred or networked phenomena, exploring how various ‘things’ – from elephants to genetically modified crops – are constituted through diverse encounters, processes and performances and as such are always partial, provisional and incomplete. As much as it embodies the affirmative anti-essentialism and anti-foundationalism of poststructural thought, Whatmore’s writing also draws on distinctive feminist and environmentalist traditions, and it is perhaps the combination of these three strands which leads to a more explicit thinking of the ethical than that found in Doel. For Whatmore the exposure of the relational and open nature of existence demonstrates the need for a ‘relational ethics’ concerned with ways of living, folding and becoming with ‘more-than-human’ others. In many ways – and not unlike Doel – Whatmore’s text performs this commitment, attempting to embody the vital and polyvalent ethos of which she speaks. A consequence of this joining of saying and doing is that *Hybrid Geographies* is another challenging read which, like Doel’s work, can be

disorienting; however, this is a productive disorientation, aimed at dispelling arbitrary or divisive conceptual formulations and naive methodological and empirical strategies. Arguably, Whatmore's relational ethics – while more explicit than Doel's – remain somewhat ambiguous, perhaps indicative less of a lack of thinking about otherness than of the conflict between an ontological monism and a passionate commitment to difference. Despite these comments, *Hybrid Geographies* is at the cutting edge of geographical thought, combining the theoretical and the empirical seamlessly in an incisive and affirmative immanent critique.

Summary

The aim of this chapter has not been so much to give an overview of poststructuralism as to give a brief indication of some of its directions and concerns. In so doing many bodies of works have been passed over, not least those of Giorgio Agamben (1942–), Judith Butler (1956–), Maurice Blanchot (1907–2003), Jean Baudrillard (1929–), Hélène Cixous (1937–), Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995), Félix Guattari (1930–1992), Luce Irigaray (1932–), Julia Kristeva (1941–), Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-François Lyotard (1925–1998) and Jean-Luc Nancy (1940–), to name only the most prominent – all of whom could be classified as poststructuralist, at least at some stage in their work. The point here is not to try to overwhelm, but rather to highlight again that 'poststructuralism' is an awkward term, and often one of limited value. Still, within this diversity of works I wish to reaffirm and add to the three points raised in the introduction. In reviving onto-hermeneutic questioning (if only to reject it), poststructuralism critically affirms our uncanny lack of foundations and essence. In this radical anti-essentialism, poststructuralism denies any short cuts to simple truths and the construction of accounts which would seek to reduce the phenomena under investigation to either ahistorical or aspatial causes *or* to simply the effect of context. In so doing, poststructuralism presents a relational and open movement of thought, one which is permanently under revision, undergoing 'trial by space'.

The chapter has sought to engage a number of the main criticisms of poststructural thought. Most generally, I have tried to show how the apparent obscurity of what is named by the term 'poststructuralism' stems from the fact that poststructuralism is the tip of the iceberg of continental philosophy. Once this is understood, it should be clear that poststructuralism is not simply the 'latest fashion' or 'elitist jargon'; indeed, the attempt to engage the term without respect for or in ignorance – wilful or otherwise – of this context is responsible for the vast majority of such misunderstandings and misrepresentations. A more telling criticism of poststructuralist thought is that it can become overburdened by its historical self-consciousness such that all that is produced in its name are commentaries on its own canonical and marginal texts. More specifically the chapter has engaged with claims that poststructuralism is nihilistic, anti-Enlightenment, irrational, pseudoscience nonsense, and epistemologically and politically relativistic. Taken together, these criticisms claim that due to its anti-essentialism and anti-foundationalism, poststructuralist work is incapable of producing insightful analysis or socially progressive and morally informed critique. Indeed, many take poststructuralism as an extreme and frivolous form of linguistic scepticism, preoccupied with splitting etymological hairs and bewitched by undecidability and obscurantism. In this understanding, poststructuralism's apparent obsession with concepts

and language betrays its apathy in the face of real-world problems. And yet this is to ignore the incessant *urgency* which pulls poststructuralism along, its unfounded commitment to difference; to the singular, the marginal, the exceptional, the ‘to come’. While thinking under the influence of poststructuralism does not *guarantee* insightful analysis or progressive critique – how could any philosophy, ontology or epistemology? – neither does it rule them out in advance. Indeed if any philosophy, ontology or epistemology claimed such a *guarantee* it would be the *least* insightful and progressive thought, being itself nothing more than an efficiency, a programmability, a calculability or an automation of thinking.

In the end it is perhaps poststructuralism’s general refusal to provide ‘simple truths’ and options which condemns it in the eyes of many; and yet, as Derrida writes, ‘There is no moral or political responsibility without this trial and this passage by way of the undecidable’ (1988: 116). Only a thought and a thinking which seeks to prepare and maintain a relationship with the unknown can be called thinking. As Nietzsche wrote:

I mistrust all systematizers and avoid them. The will to system is a lack of integrity. (1990: 35)

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