
THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE: THE POSTMODERN PERSPECTIVE OF LYOTARD

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ABSTRACT

This paper demonstrates Jean-Francois Lyotard's theory of knowledge in postmodern societies. Lyotard explores the nature of knowledge, including how it is generated, structured, and used in contemporary society. He questions who has access to knowledge, how it is utilized, who controls it, and how it influences our lives and perceptions of the world. He rejects meta-narrative theories that posit knowledge as serving universal human goals and instead argues that knowledge in contemporary societies is primarily organized in terms of efficiency, profitability, commodity, and power. Furthermore, he contends that the nations with the most advanced technology, communications, and information are the most powerful. He equates the state of knowledge with the systems of domination that undermine our understanding of truth, value, and justice. Finally, Lyotard argues that postmodern societies are experiencing a reduction of knowledge to efficiency and a dehumanizing culture due to the emergence of machine-led computer-controlled systems.

KEYWORDS

Lyotard, Postmodern, Knowledge, Technology, Power

INTRODUCTION

Jean-Francois Lyotard (1925-98) was a prominent critic of the second half of the twentieth century, best known for his influential studies of postmodernism. In 1979, he published a book called *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, which has been highly debated by critics and is frequently assigned as a fundamental source in various philosophical, social, and cultural institutions around the world. Lyotard's work is considered one of the foundations of postmodern thought and has remained influential for years.

Postmodern Philosophy has developed from the tenets of modern philosophy. Modernism has made an excellent contribution to human intellect through its emphasis on reason and scientific revolutions. Modern philosophy was a departure from

medieval philosophy, which was influenced by Christianity. Descartes was the first French philosopher who established the epistemological ground for truth, rationality, and certainty through his clear and distinct ideas. However, every era and school of thought will eventually be replaced by another in relation to subjectivity, objectivity, rationality, truth, and science.

Thus, the tenets of postmodern philosophy have developed after the Second World War, as an intellectual trend against the epistemological, political, and linguistic foundations of modernism. Postmodern philosophy asserts a variety of reasons and a pluralistic approach to knowing. The philosophical trend of postmodernism is more appealing than postmodern art and literature. The philosophical approach of postmodernism is seen through the works of French thinkers such as Foucault, Derrida, Baudrillard, and Lyotard. Postmodern Philosophy is concerned with the revolt against the absoluteness, essentialism, foundationalism, and meta-narratives of the enlightened modernism. It attempts to deconstruct the notions of truth, language, power, knowledge, and emphasizes the variety of reasons, pluralism, difference, deconstruction, and contextualizing knowledge. Philosophy in the postmodern period has attempted to introduce new meanings of subjectivity and gender in contrast to the modern philosophical approach.

In addition, postmodernism is closely connected with post-structuralism. Post-structuralism is a rejection of the structure and methods of linguistic, psychoanalytic, and Marxist thought. Deconstructionism of Derrida and Anti-Oedipus of Deleuze are the best examples of the philosophy of post-structuralism. The intermingling of philosophical and political thoughts of Deleuze led him to write several books. It is also noticeable that his books are reflections of his political actions as an immediate experience of events. Lyotard maintained the legacy of postmodernism in the face of technologically advanced societies. Knowledge has been involved in a competition of power in contemporary societies. The most powerful nations are those who have the best resources to accumulate knowledge-based technology. This shows that science and knowledge are not separate from politics and ethics. The status of knowledge had changed as societies altered after the Second World War. He aimed to investigate how life and identities of people are constructed by contemporary structures of knowledge. He also argued that meta-narrative theories no longer appeal in postmodern society, because knowledge is organized differently and does not serve universal human goals. From the suspicion of standard meta-narratives, he drew new methods to examine and analyze society and culture. The new methods of inquiry are based on the conception of differend, just gaming, inhuman, and contextual knowledge.

LITRATURE REVIEW

There are several authors who have written on Lyotard and the philosophical trends of

postmodernism. According to Benhabib (2013:105), Lyotard proposes different terms to describe the heterogeneous nature of language games. He believes that these alternatives to metanarratives are more appropriate for the role of knowledge in the post-industrial and postmodern world. However, traditional epistemologies tend to limit our thoughts to unified theories in the postmodern world. In the postmodern world, knowledge has been conditioned with performativity. Knowledge is viewed as power, and science is legitimized through the progress in technology. Nghia (2021:583),critically reflects that from Nietzsche onwards, postmodernity has been an important contributor to the critique of flaws and contradictions in traditional philosophy, while also providing a new outlook for modern thought. However, postmodernity is often seen as problematic and is frequently viewed as nothing more than a passing trend. Moving through history with a sense of tradition, postmodernity has failed to answer the questions it has posed. For Strandbrink (2018:1), postmodernist epistemology has resulted in a diversification and merging of social knowledge and thought, where the modernist principles of methodology, authority, agreement, and subjectivity are no longer attractive.

Carr argues that (2003:20), the question of what exactly is required for knowledge to be present. In order to answer this, a theory of knowledge must be established. The traditional explanation of knowledge is that it consists of a combination of belief, truth, and justification. These combinations are seen as necessary and sufficient for knowledge. Before looking at any potential issues with this account, we should consider the reasons why this concept has been accepted by philosophers as the condition for knowledge. On the contrary, Seidman (1994:1), views on postmodernism are entirely different from the above authors. He argues that modernity is not coming to an end suddenly, and postmodernism only captures some of the changes in society. Most places around the world still want to become more modern. Modern ideas and technologies are being taken up by Third World societies. For example, several agrarian economies, different local cultural traditions, and pro-modernization elites often like the Western morals and knowledge. So, modernity is still strong in the West. He contends that the major signs of modernity have not gone away, such as an industrial-based economy, political parties and unions, ideological debates over market, state in relation to economic growth, welfare society, and professionalism in various institutions. Though modernism is under crisis, it still affects and shapes our lives.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. This paper will attempt to explain Lyotard's postmodern theory of Knowledge. This research will focus on Lyotard's critique of meta-narrative, the effects of techno - science, and the question of its legitimacy in postmodern societies.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research work is based on both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources relate directly to the original work while the secondary sources examine the evaluate that work. The investigative approach is inductive in nature, followed by the development of theories and conclusion.

POSTMODERN THEORY

Every new mode of thought emerges from its previous currents and traditions. Medieval philosophy takes several threads of Greek tradition, and modern philosophy rises from the tradition of medieval and Christian philosophy. In a similar context, postmodern philosophy rises from the critique of several tenets of modern philosophy, particularly the totalitarian and universal views of life, the world, and society. Several authors have explained the modern and postmodern theory. According to Best and Kellner (1991:4), modern theory from Enlightenment to social theory, from Descartes to Comte, Marx and Weber, asserts universalizing and totalizing claims as foundation of knowledge. The proponents of modern theory have criticized and attacked postmodern relativism, irrationalism, and nihilism. The anti-foundational method of Nietzsche has provided the solid ground to postmodern theories. His denial of absolute knowledge, moral values, and dichotomy of subject and object, being and becoming put him very close to postmodern theory. For Best and Kellner ((1991:5), postmodern theory refutes modern theories of cause and effect, unified social knowledge in favor of plurality, contextual and indeterminate theory of knowledge, and subject. Sim (2013:3), explains postmodernism as philosophical movement developed through the challenge and skeptic methodology of authoritative knowledge, universal political, and social norms of Western thought. Such a skeptic methodology promotes an antifoundational style of philosophy by asking questions, i.e., 'what guarantees the truth of your foundation'. He also contends that postmodern thought provides a ground to support the note of dissent and make value judgments without appealing to authorities. For Hicks (2004:6), postmodernism rejects that reason or any other approach used to gain knowledge of reality. Connor(2004:17),describes postmodernism as cultural interference and the intermingling of ideas and values. Sarup (1993:132), associates the philosophy of postmodernism with the textualize knowledge of all discourses and disciplines, including history, philosophy, and sociology. Lyotard (1984:80), defines postmodernism not an the end of modernism, but as the beginning of it.

All of the authors explain postmodern theory in terms of difference, fragmentary knowledge, a multiplicity of language games, and culture-specific truths, rather than relying on transcendental theories of truth and universal theories of reality. The idea of postmodern theory is that knowledge is always incomplete and a combination of many different factors. It suggests that there is no single, absolute, and universal truth,

but rather a multitude of perspectives that are all equally valid and important. The concept of a multiplicity of language games and culture-specific truths is also a part of this theory. This means that knowledge is not only shaped by the language used to express it but also by the culture in which it is created. Postmodern theory does not reject the idea of truth, but rather questions the notion of a single, absolute truth. It suggests that truth is a matter of perspective, shaped by individual experiences and cultural context. This means that truth is not something that can be objectively measured or determined but is something that is constantly evolving as individuals and cultures interact and exchange ideas.

KNOWLEDGE AND POSTMODERN SOCIETIES

According to Lyotard, "our working hypothesis" is that the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age, and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age" (Best and Kellner 1991:4). He asserts that in the second half of the twentieth century society and culture have rapidly changed, leading to incredulity toward metanarratives of modernity. He refers to metanarratives as world philosophies of Marxism, Hegelianism, religion, science, and great stories of society. The social and cultural transformation in the modern period led to the postmodern and postindustrial period founded upon highly advanced technology and computerization (Sim 2011:184,185). Lyotard contends that as metanarrative theories have lost their efficacy, they are subject to crisis in postmodern societies. He favors little narratives, micro politics, and contextual knowledge in the absence of metanarrative. He also refers to metanarrative as metalanguage, one language game, single and unified theory. Lyotard distinguishes modern and postmodern narratives. The knowledge which is based on speculation and emancipatory narratives are two significant metanarratives of the modern world. Postmodernism, on the other hand, suggests that the metanarratives of the modern world are currently challenged, and that there is no conclusive evidence for resolving conflicts between diverse language games (Lechte 2006, 277). In addition, knowledge is produced to be sold with the ultimate goal of exchange. In this way, knowledge loses its intrinsic value, and instead becomes an informational commodity of the global power struggle in the postmodern world. It is possible that nation-states will one day fight for control over information, as they have done in the past for control over territory (Lyotard 1984, 9).

Today, nations are investing a great deal of money in institutional scientific research and developing their technological abilities to gain power over one another. This has resulted in a struggle for control over the world's resources. Consequently, nation-states are diminishing in the face of the overwhelming power of multinational companies and technology firms, such as pharmaceutical businesses, which have considerable influence on the policies and decisions of national governments as Lyotard writes, " In the computer age, the question of knowledge is now more than

ever a question of government" (Lyotard 1984, 5). He argues that the current scientific language game is dominated by performativity. Thus, money, efficiency, and truth are linked through technology. Once performativity reigns, the best-funded research tends to provide truth and justice because "reinforcing technology" "reinforces" reality and increases one's chances of being just and right (Lechte 2006, 278). He demonstrates how knowledge in modern society has evolved into technically effective, and can be translated into digital language of market and computers. Consequently, the contemporary concerns of enlightenments, such as truth, justice and morality of knowledge have been reduced to questions of efficiency, productivity, and profit (Steerman 2003:37).

Lyotard was skeptical of grand narratives and believed that theories claiming to explain everything and resist any efforts to modify them should be replaced by "little narratives". For example, Marxism has its own version of global history that is seen as immutable, not requiring reinterpretation of changing events and cultures. According to Lyotard, this approach is authoritarian and should be challenged. Little narratives, in contrast, are open to interpretation and discussion, leaving room for change and critique. Lyotard believed that by relying on small narratives instead of grand ones, we can acknowledge and understand different perspectives. This allows us to view the world in a more nuanced way, recognizing that while some stories may be universal, others are specific and unique to particular cultures and individuals (Sim 2013:8). Little narratives are put together tactically by small groups of individuals to achieve a specific goal, such as the 1968 events wherein students called for government reforms in France. Lyotard contends that little narratives are currently acknowledged as the basic means of inquiry in science. Furthermore, he defines postmodern science as search for fragmentary and instabilities in science, rather than another grand narrative that applies to the whole scientific community (Sim 2013:9). Lyotard argues that a significant number of 'language games' have emerged in their place of metanarratives. These language games have their own unique set of rules, including the discourses utilized by social institutions and professions. These narrative language games allow various aspects (Bertens 2003, 119). Although "narrative" is often associated with literary fiction, narratives are used to express ideas in all types of discourse. For instance, history, which develops narratives of the past, psychology tells stories about oneself, and sociology shows various social formations and their consequences on individuals. Similarly, scientific claims are presented in narrative form to describe the physical world. Even mathematical disciplines are required to transform their equations into stories that explain the implications of their discoveries to explain and defend their findings (Malpas 2005:21). Postmodernism aims to disrupt the hegemonic language games that have historically consolidated with modern social and cultural bonding. The numerous language games played in any society cannot be transcribed and evaluated in any totalizing meta-discourse. Attempts to do so must be countered

by the practice of paralogism, which seeks to defer consensus, produce dissension, and permanently undermine the search for commensurability among no identical language games (Benjamin 2012:87).

Modern science has been touted as a source of liberation from ignorance and superstition, providing truth, wealth, and progress. However, according to Lyotard, consensus disregards heterogeneity, enforces homogeneous standards, and creates the illusion of universality through modern metaprescriptives (Best and Kellner 1991:165,166). In contrast, Lyotard values disagreement over agreement, diversity and dissent over conformity and consensus, and heterogeneity and the incommensurable above homogeneity and universality. He claims that consensus undermines the diversity of linguistic games, and creation is usually the result of disagreement. He believes that knowledge is created through dissent, by questioning current paradigms and developing new ones, rather than by assenting to universal truth or reaching a consensus. According to Lyotard (1984:xxv), “postmodern knowledge is not just a tool used by authorities; it increases our awareness of differences and strengthens our capability to accept the incommensurable”. He also suggests that consensus puts an end to thought and freedom, while disagreement enables us to think and be free, thus expanding our possibilities. On the other hand, Habermas believes that liberation passes through momentary consensuses on the way to a final consensus (Bertens 2003, 122). Lyotard argues that modern knowledge is based on three conditions: the use of metanarratives to legitimize foundationalist claims; the inevitability of legitimation, de-legitimation, and exclusion; and the desire for epistemological and moral prescriptions that are the same for all people. Postmodern knowledge, however, opposes metanarratives and foundationalism, avoids grand schemes of legitimation, and supports heterogeneity, plurality, constant innovation, and the pragmatic construction of local rules and prescriptions agreed upon by participants. Therefore, it is in favor of micropolitics (Best and Kellner 1991:165).

PROBLEM OF TECHNO-SCIENCE

In his book “The Inhuman,” Lyotard refers to the term “techno-science” to describe a range of forces dedicated to advancing technology at the cost of human values and ideals. These forces are driven by the pursuit of progress and dominance, particularly in the realm of advanced capitalism and multinational corporations, which seek to increase efficiency and control of the world (Sim 2001:79). Lyotard is concerned with how these “techno-scientific” forces, which may include multinational corporations, are attempting to seize control of human history by preparing for the end of life on earth. According to Lyotard, scientists are developing ever more advanced computer technology that can replicate itself and survive even after the destruction of earth, ultimately seeking to replace humanity with machine programming (Sim 2001:10). He also emphasizes the transformative nature of scientific knowledge, which

has been linked to various fields such as linguistics, communication, cybernetics, and computer technology (Lyotard 1984 :3). Consequently, he reflects that the ultimate goal of 'techno-science' is to create a form of thought without a body, which poses a threat to human values and their sanctity. The problem with 'techno-science' for Lyotard is that it eliminates events, differences, and openness to the future, even the dehumanization of humanity (Sim 2001:11).

Lyotard seeks to replace Western rationality and instrumentalism with postmodern epistemology. Rather than analyzing postmodern society or culture, as Foucault does, Lyotard critiques current knowledge and calls for new knowledges (Best and Kellner 1991:164). It has been thought that techno-science is the extension of human thought and its byproduct, even though the human being is its producer; however, it can become servitude to its own extension of thought. Lyotard speaks about of the 'inhumanity of the system' which attempts to subjugate human beings in the name of progress, leading to a significant move away from the realm of the human (Sim 2001:21,29). Techno-science has encroached upon human beings in multiple ways. It has colonized human lives and their natural potential for thought. Humans naturally have potential that needs to be realized in society, family ties, and the public sphere; however, it is all transforming into something inhuman and artificial intelligence (AI). "The inhuman" is now with us in a variety of forms, and technology is encroaching further into our lives, even to the extent of breaching the boundaries of our physical bodies' (Sim 2001:7). Lyotard rails against Artificial Intelligence (AI), which introduces the concept of an advanced life-form that could challenge our dominance over the earth and its resources. For Lyotard, philosophers have a "duty to thinking" that surpasses the techno-scientists' pragmatism, whereas computers simply perform tasks, rather than fulfilling a duty (Sim 2001:9,10,34). He argues that knowledge cannot remain the same in this changing world and must be converted into data to be used in new ways. Furthermore, the idea that attaining knowledge is connected to educating individuals is no longer meaningful or effective in postmodern culture. The encroachment of techno-science has had a severe impact on culture and human society, making human minds irrelevant and outdated. This is not the end, but rather the start of a continuing journey (Lyotard 1984, 4).

Several authors have critically examined Lyotard's postmodern position critically. For instance, Nola and Irzik (2003:420) have argued that his primary premise that the nature of knowledge has changed in postmodern society, is unsustainable. They suggest that epistemological assertions about knowledge should not be confused with sociological explanations of changes in the amount of what is known or believed or with accounts of how information has become more accessible yet commodified. Furthermore, they state that Lyotard has no argument against the epistemic legitimation of the sciences and is unaware of other attempts in this area. Additionally,

they write that his effort to demonstrate that legitimation is impossible is based on an erroneous language game. Regarding the sociopolitical legitimization of science, there is no convincing argument for the loss of credibility of science's emancipatory capacities. Therefore, Lyotard's postmodern ideology should not be endorsed, as it is a source of confusion and misunderstanding. For Simons (2022:682), Lyotard's postmodern analysis has attempted to prevent "totalitarianism", but has failed to do so since his denial of the independence of justice and truth only serves to encourage those in power to promote their own agenda. Best and Kellner (1991:165) suggest that Lyotard is the only thinker who does not offer any critical insights into modernity as a social occurrence. In line with his postmodern epistemology, he only ever critiques modern knowledge, and never theorizes modernity as a historical development.

DISCUSSION

The question of what constitutes knowledge has been discussed from antiquity to the present day. Throughout history, people have debated what true knowledge is and how to acquire it. Knowledge of transcendental entities, such as God, Soul, and Ideas, is also considered to be authentic knowledge. However, there are certain techniques of knowing that can be used to determine the truth. Socrates employed the approach of intellectual midwifery (dialectic) to find the true meanings of concepts. Plato's idea of knowledge sought to comprehend the unchangeable and universal forms. Descartes recognized the importance of intuition and deduction in determining reality. Empiricists believe that sensory knowledge is the only way to know reality. Kant distinguished between phenomena and noumena and argued that we cannot know noumena since it cannot be experienced by human reason. Existentialists, such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, favored a subjective form of knowledge and truth. The project of the Enlightenment in Europe developed due to social, cultural, and knowledge transformation. It laid the groundwork for scientific techniques of understanding and the purpose of human life.

Postmodern knowledge theory critiques the grand narratives that were once popular in the modern world. Knowledge has been reduced to quantitative metrics, efficiency, commodity, and technology-driven devices, instead of truth and justice, leading to humanity into becoming non-human. Lyotard proposes that instead of creating a new overarching narrative, we should look for differences within the existing systems. The principle that underpins the workings of capitalism is efficiency or performativity, with the intention of becoming the dominant force. Science and technology are major contributors to this aim, as they help to increase capital. Lyotard believes that the advancement of science and technology can have a dehumanizing effect. However, he also believes that these same forces can lead us to think beyond what is considered to be the traditional definition of humanity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study recommends considering and understanding the value of knowledge in the context of a changing society, which is a very challenging task. While Artificial Intelligence (AI) has taken over conventional methods of learning and thinking, the value and relevance of personal experience, mediation, intuition, deduction, and creativity remain vital and integral aspects of human beings.

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