



MEETING THE MONSTER

Understanding Poststructuralist Assumptions

*To my mind these endless abstractions, at best, are the grindstones of the garrulous;
at worst, they are the word salads of the mentally deranged.*

—Michael Faia (1993:65)

It is my intention that this text be readable and politically relevant from the outset. Although there will necessarily be a substantial amount of abstraction and difficult-sounding terminology to master, these discussions and terms are illustrated with detailed examples grounding them in everyday life. Abstractions are most accessible when surrounded by the context of lived understandings. This said, let me be honest and up-front about obstacles that accompany initial encounters with poststructuralist writings and thinking, including the work you have just begun.

For poststructuralists, there is no extra-social access to the world. One can only know reality by using tools (language, imagery, theory, and methodology) that are always socially acquired. Although other social theorists (e.g., the philosopher Immanuel Kant and the sociologist Max Weber) were quite forthright in acknowledging this lack of direct access to the world, poststructuralists have abandoned *even the desire* for an unmediated approach to reality. Think about this for a moment. Poststructuralists find even the apparently basic pursuit of objective truth to be an assumption that ought to be questioned—an assumption whose social history should be explored and analyzed. Many social scientists find this unsettling. They speak and write of feeling intellectually paralyzed, as if banished into vastness without any firm ground in which to place even temporary anchors. Yet others, including myself, find this orchestrated and perennial disturbance to our patterns of understanding enlightening. Nonetheless, questioning the wisdom of pursuing objective truth is a poststructuralist habit that many find difficult to swallow.

Let me begin by immediately living up to my promise to provide you with examples from everyday life. Imagine that the coffee mug I am drinking from this morning is placed in the middle of the classroom where our theory lessons this semester are taking place. Now we have made it our task to discover and understand “the real” qualities of the mug. What is it, exactly? How might we arrive at a definition that anyone in her right scientific mind could agree with? What methods can we employ to get so near to understanding the essence of the mug that the correctness of our definition will become accurate enough to transcend time and place? Our goal is to depict *only the qualities of the mug itself*. If a scientist one hundred years from now is to agree with our definition, our account will have to be as free as possible from the prejudices of our own time. The same is true for geography and culture. We want our description to be accurate regardless of whether our classroom is in California, Austria, or Australia. Initiated in the time of Socrates and Plato (fifth century BC), for centuries this “view from nowhere”¹ has been among the most central goals of intellectuals from European civilizations.

As a poststructuralist, I understand this to be a pursuit of structure. To look for the essence of the mug, for its “actual” makeup, is to look for its inherent structure, that which it *is*, despite any social context where it might be found for a time. But what if the meaning of our mug can never be reduced to the mug itself? What if this coffee-holding, ceramic creation, which happens to be adorned with colors and designs celebrating the University of Oregon (my alma mater) can only always have meaning as it relates to other significations that are not part of the mug itself? Said another way, what if I can only know what the mug is because I also know other things that are not inherent to the object itself?

The mug is a birthday present from my family. Because it came from my wife and sons, the mug of coffee has a warm, reassuring, feeling-of-home quality to it. I have a vivid memory of the smiles on my two sons’ faces as they gave it to me. On the other hand, when I unwrapped it I saw that the tag read “coffee mug.” Like any good sociologist, I try to be aware of my consumption habits and of their impacts on peoples and places often far away from my desk at San Francisco State University. Thus when I pour my morning coffee, I wonder about where it was grown, about the economic conditions that the farmers who grew the beans live under, about their relations with their own governments, and with the large corporations who buy their crops. For example, I know that the governments of impoverished nations often do all they can to encourage (if not force) farmers to abandon subsistence crops in favor of export crops that can be grown and sold on a large-scale to wealthy multinational corporations for hard currency. Perhaps the farmer who grew the beans that I consumed this morning no longer farms food for local consumption? Maybe s/he is now wholly dependent on global coffee prices for her subsistence? S/he may even be exposed to dangerous agriculture industry chemicals that are used in the race to stay competitive in

a global market? Obviously, neither the love of my family nor my environmental and political concerns can be found in my new mug, itself. As an object, the mug has significance inasmuch as it relates to meanings and concerns that are in excess of its physical presence.

To be a *post*-structuralist (“post” means “after”) means to be no longer interested in searching for truths (the “real” structures) contained in things themselves. The meanings of the objects of the world, including my birthday present, are as varied and unstable as the narrative threads that provide for their interpretation. I could have gone on for some time about how the importance of a simple coffee mug arrives from outside of itself: the meaning of its decorations, of its place of manufacture, the significance of ceramics, and so forth. No doubt you could add your own list of descriptors to the conversation. But, you may also still be intent on asking, what is the mug *really*? Doesn’t it still have a physical reality that is prior to the narrations within which I have placed it?

As I noted, Western intellectuals have traditionally pursued their belief in objective truth by isolating and de-contextualizing parts of our world. Perhaps the most widespread method for doing so is to introduce numerical and geometric representations. After all, an eleven-centimeter-tall piece of circular ceramics is the same regardless of where it is found or in what context it exists. If I am mathematically capable enough, I can figure out the volume held by the mug, its circumference, diameter, and construct a whole host of defining mathematical portrayals. So why would poststructuralists insist on rethinking the desire for numerical representations of reality that seem to be correct despite any temporal (time), cultural, or geographic context?

There are two related answers to this question. First, poststructuralists do not necessarily find fault with this style of knowing itself. Isolating, de-contextualizing, and applying numerical representations to existence continues to show itself to be a powerful way of understanding. The problem is rather one of questioning the absolute authority assumed by the users of these styles of understanding. In other words, if we can show that structuralist desires are born in the particular circumstances (many of which we will trace in the following pages) of European history, does it not follow that the spread of these traditions may be more a function of European colonialism and influence than proof of their obvious and universal correctness? Surely it is foolish to believe that had native Australians or Native Americans occupied and conquered Europe we would now think so highly of the scientific method. No doubt understanding would be a rather different enterprise, and the effects of these alternative modes of thinking would be a profoundly different world. So if the pursuit of the “real” nature of my coffee mug through de-contextualizing, mathematical calculations is itself a political outcome, a historically arrived at, culturally specific desire, do these geometric, numerical accounts depict a reality contained in the mug itself? Or, do these meanings *also come to the object from outside of itself*: not unlike my narrations about family and the political economy of coffee?

Recall that this coffee mug story all began as an illustration of initial obstacles to learning to think in a poststructural way. Said simply, poststructuralist arguments can be difficult because they assume that desires for an existence made up of definable, verifiable, essential structures (desires to defy the contextual contingencies of time, place, and culture) are best understood as effects of time, place, and culture. Structuralist desires for extra-cultural understandings *are themselves cultural understandings!* Given that the social realities studied by sociologists are far more complex than any coffee mug, you can begin to see why questioning the very foundations of knowledge making appears ominous to many social scientists. How can we ever get anywhere in the already difficult business of knowing (which, after all, is what professional intellectuals are paid to do), if we continually and forever circle back on ourselves to interrogate the “how we know” of our “what we know”? Although not new to sociologists, who refer to this self-awareness as “reflexivity,” poststructuralists have taken this self-critical attitude to a level that very few, particularly American, sociologists have been yet willing to tolerate, let alone embrace.

Even when one decides that the effort is worthwhile, scanning the torturous sentences of many of the writings of the thinkers now labeled poststructuralist, is enough to send most newcomers to social theory screaming into the night. Indeed, many a seasoned social scientist has thrown up his or her hands in disgust at the apparently unconquerable composition contained in poststructuralist texts. For example, in this chapter’s epigraph Faia (1993:67) refers to the writing of Michel Foucault as “the word salads of the mentally deranged.” Later in his text, he laments, “the human mind does not work this way.” Similarly, Jerry L. Lembcke (1993:67) refers to poststructuralist writings as “facades of theoretical sophistication” that he hopes his students will recognize for the “pig Latin” that they really are. As I have already said, these complaints are overstated, but they are not without some merit.

Let’s consider another passage from the essay by Jacques Derrida cited in the introduction. Despite his many vociferous critics Derrida remains perhaps my favorite thinker. “The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality has its center elsewhere. The center is not the center. The concept of centered structure—although it represents coherence itself, the condition of the episteme as philosophy or science—is contradictorily coherent.” (1966/1978:279)

What on the Creator’s blue earth could such sentences possibly mean! Many readers never get past this point. Indeed, I chose this particular set of sentences precisely because they are a favorite of my students, who at first glance believe them to be totally nonsensical. However with their intellectual diligence and a little guidance, the passage and indeed the whole of Derrida’s essay on social science becomes not only intelligible but profoundly insightful. We will return to these difficult lines by the end of this chapter. By then, we will be in a better

position to assess the wisdom contained therein. In the meantime, there are still other initial impediments to understanding poststructuralism.

Despite the attempts at comprehensive definitions, there is no single definition of poststructuralism.² Making any attempt at definitive description still more improbable, in the United States the label is often taken to be synonymous with “postmodernism.” Together these labels have been used to group a variety of thinkers from varied academic disciplines and national origins who write in different languages for different purposes. Usually, this collection is said to include thinkers ranging from, but not limited to, Derrida, Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan, Gayatri Spivak, Judith Butler, Joan W. Scott, Homi K. Bhabha, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Henry Giroux, Zygmunt Bauman, Jean Baudrillard, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Trinh Minh-ha, and Friedrich Nietzsche.

The homogenization legislated in the creation of this mega-camp of “post-moderns” is a function of critics’ perspectives and not a sign of agreement between theorists and their followers who at times are downright hostile toward each other. Critics who too quickly tag this immense diversity “postmodern” and then move to the attack, are doing poor scholarship. Lumping together such vast difference certainly helps one dismiss a great deal of thinking in short order, but it does little to promote thoughtful, productive understanding. Even the most cursory of readings reveals that the majority of these thinkers do not use the terms *postmodern* or *poststructuralist* in their writings or in descriptions of their own works.³

Recognizing the Monster: “The Species of the Nonspecies”

So how as students and teachers of a poststructuralist sociology are we to deal with this confusion? How can we understand poststructuralism if no one can say for sure what it is? Our answer to this difficulty lies in furthering our understanding of the “post” notation in the label: *post*-structuralism. Remember, “post” means *after*. To think in a poststructuralist way, then, means no longer seeking to document the existence of a structured, at least somewhat stable, and eventually comprehensively understood social reality. It means to think and write at a point after the pursuit of a structured reality has lost its appeal. It means being part of a very different intellectual species.

Remember, we live, work, and attend classes at locations in time, culture, and political climates. Sociology never happens in a social vacuum. Whether we are considering the thinking of Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, or authors labeled poststructuralist, the significance and meaning of theory shifts with context. For example, over time in the United States prevailing opinions about Marx and his works have varied tremendously. Although several generations of Americans have been taught that Marxism is evil, the intensity level of anticommunist propaganda has waxed and waned throughout the

years. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, many Americans openly sympathized with socialist ideals. By the 1950s, though, a red-hysteria had spread through the land and people were taught that “Communists could be anywhere”—in the schools, in government, and in their neighborhoods. My point is that any theoretical tradition becomes what it “is” from within the context of times, places, and politics. (This should sound familiar; remember how my coffee mug got its significance?) Writing and reading a book about poststructuralist sociology are practices that exist within what Foucault called “conditions of possibility.”

You might be tempted to argue that “Clay decided” to write this book to set the record straight, to quell the critics, and to tell the truth once and for all about poststructuralism. But this is too simple and misses the point. I am not just arguing that critics are mistaken about what poststructuralism is; I am saying that they are wrong *precisely because* they try to make poststructural thinking into a stable, containable “is.” Perhaps the first lesson when learning to think in a poststructural way is that the instability of social reality must be studied from within this same instability. From a poststructuralist perspective, neither I, as the author of the pages you hold in your hands, nor the meaning of the writing on these pages have anything like a stable essence. The narrations that you read in this text are effects (complicated outcomes) of our experiences in time, culture, politics, and geography. I have reasons for promoting a poststructuralist approach to sociology, but they do not include an attempt to say what the meaning of such a diverse list of authors’ texts “really are.” Indeed, it is more accurate to say that others’ misguided attempts at such pronouncements are a condition (found in recent decades among too many American sociologists) of my own motivation for this writing.

Consider that for me to produce any such definitive narration, I would have to escape from the unstable narrations of life (mine and countless others’) that continue to constitute me as a person and that therefore inform how I understand the works of these authors. Then, you readers would have to escape the contingencies of your own lives and all uniformly read the sentences I create. This means that each of you would have to read my words as having exactly the same meanings and significance. This highly unlikely occurrence would need to happen after I purge all the “bias” born of my life from my reading of poststructuralist thinkers. Again, it is all but impossible that this will ever occur. So why should we assume that there is a “real poststructuralism” in all of this interpretation of interpretation?

Some of you have heard about poststructuralism (or, more likely “postmodernism”) before. Have these opinions impacted what you expect to read here? Does the relative weight of these expectations relate to your respect or lack of respect for the person who provided you these assessments? Certainly my writing this book has to do with how I perceive prominent American sociologists to have read, and not read, the works of thinkers I find immensely important. So again, let us anticipate the impossibility of discerning the “real” poststructuralism: Is it

what I write here today? What you read here? What you reread here five years (full of attitude-altering experiences) from now? Is it the critics' readings of the thinkers in the above section? My readings of the works of the authors just listed? Or, is it my readings of the critics who have read from that list?

Admitting and embracing this overwhelming complexity means recognizing this writing as an articulation (a pronouncement, a giving over of meaning) born of the complicated, changing affairs of my life and the lives of those who influence and provoke me. In turn, you readers glean meaning from within the instability of your lives, and from the lives of those whose commentaries on postmodernism or poststructuralism you have paid attention to. Thus as a post-structuralist, I understand that this book can only be written, read, and made sense of from within the complexities and contingent qualities of many unstable agendas. Poststructuralist thought *cannot* be reduced to structure. To attempt such a reduction is to miss a fundamental lesson of poststructuralism.

If poststructuralism has no essence, no inherent structure, then it is not a difficult jump to assert that authors who embrace this label also lack a core structure. Why, except due to habit, should we assume that I, as the author of the text, am a stable, essential, self-directing being? This question is at the center of the first half of this book, and we will take a much more detailed historical approach to its answer in chapter 2. For the moment, though, we can further our introductory discussion by questioning that perhaps most cherished of American beliefs about the nature of being human: "individualism."

Most Americans like to think that they are individuals who in exercising free will make independent choices in life. But was I born "an individual"? Should we suppose that the earliest humans understood themselves to be "individuals"? Or, have we all learned along the way that this is what we are?

Given that many societies do not, and have not, championed the idea of individualism, should we assume that everyone *has* individuality, even if they do not know this is the case? Are those who do not know, and have not known themselves to be individuals, misguided? Misled? No doubt most Americans have little trouble with the assumptions in such logic. Indeed, if we consult one of our society's popular culture icons whose very character is to seek out all that is unknown and different, we find Star Trek's television starship heroes maintaining that not only are all humans everywhere "individuals," but even life-forms alien to earth are inherently individual.⁴ Thus the most easily understood and far too simple answer to questions about why I wrote this book is to say that it was an individual decision. It is also, then, an act of cultural literacy (a learned "appropriate" behavior) to refer to my "free will" when asked to explain why I spent so many long hours learning and writing about something as difficult as poststructuralism.

If I had to learn that I am an individual and that I have this thing called "free will," then these are socially acquired ideas and not innate or naturally occurring perceptions. Indeed, are not the very notions of individualism and free will tantamount to a sentiment that one is not willing to simply be like

the rest of the group, that one should insist on thinking for oneself? Yet how do we know that we are “individuals” if not by referencing the very group definitions that our individualism would seem to require us to defy? It would seem, then, that like my coffee mug, and like poststructuralist theory, my “self” is an ongoing, social (and thereby unstable) effect.

I can even say that this book will impact how others perceive me and consequently how I perceive myself. Assuming that people actually read the book, my selfhood will be shaped by the way in which they read and by what they say and write about what they read, and they will read it from within unforeseeable contingencies of disparate lives that will amount to their capacity to award it significance. Maybe poststructuralists will be herded out of academic departments as heretics or blamed for allowing a world war to begin? Maybe some prominent thinker who is labeled as a poststructuralist by her critics will invent a new means of space travel? Who knows? My point is that any number of contexts and unanticipated events may impact how the book is read in the future. Inasmuch as my sense of self is tied to my perceptions of these readings, my personhood (what philosophers call “subjectivity”) will evolve and change. Like the mug and like social theory, the significance of me (as an object) does not reside within me. My self is not reducible to something I have been taught to value and refer to as “my individuality.”

Of course, my relations with the readings of my work done by others plus what I have learned about being an individual are only two minor examples of a far more complicated set of affects and effects that make me who I am from moment to moment. Consider the fact that I am a father of two boys, a husband, a man of forty plus years, a Little League coach, a sociology professor, a Native American, and a friend to many different kinds of friends. To start with the beginning of my abbreviated list, what does it mean to be a father? Either one is born knowing how and what “father-ness” is, or one has to learn it, socially. Surely I have gotten some of my ideas about being a father from my own fathers. (I have two.) They in turn learned about being a father from their fathers. No doubt the many popular images of what “being a good father” looks like, have also affected my image of myself as a father. The mass media, particularly since the 1980s when conservative politicians began shouting about “family values,” have provided countless images of what being a good father entails. (My television cable company has a Family Channel that seems to show endless re-runs of *The Brady Bunch* and *The Cosby Show*.) Inasmuch as I am affected by these images, I am an effect of others’ narrations. Inasmuch as I internalize and act on these articulations of fatherhood, I affect the ideas about being a father that others, most notably my own boys, come to understand. When I try to be a good father, I inevitably judge myself by comparing my efforts to images of fatherhood that have affected me. Thus in using a learned scale of fatherhood stretching from “goodness” to “badness,” I am again an effect, a consequence, a complicated outcome. And none of this is stable. Yet these competing, overlapping, changing narrations of fatherhood that all of us have been exposed to, are the

very condition of the possibility of my self-understanding: “father.” Despite the centrality of this role to my self-perception and to the everyday functioning of tremendous numbers of families making up society, the role has no internal essence. It has no inherent structure.

We could have gone through similar discussions for each of the pieces of subjectivity I listed. What does it mean to be a husband, a sociologist, and a friend to this or that friend? Where did I learn how? Are the readings that I continue to do (of narrations that inform my understandings of all of these roles) stable? My point is that I as a subject (as a knower and a doer, as an author) am no more essential, finite, or stable than my coffee mug or poststructuralist theory. I also am not structure.

Let us pause to review where we are in our discussion of initial difficulties in understanding poststructuralist approaches to the study of social reality. I have argued that despite what too many critics maintain, there is no single, identifiable poststructuralism. Poststructuralist writings, like the being now pushing computer keys, have meanings and significance that are forever unstable. Indeed, I have even gone so far as to suggest that *the desire* to know in a final and comprehensive way is itself a profoundly social, albeit long and complex, effect. This, then, is why, as a poststructuralist, I will not supply a simplistic, structuralist description of poststructuralist theory. It is also precisely this unwillingness to assume a structure in subjectivity or in the objects that knowing subjects encounter in life that renders poststructuralist thought difficult to read and comprehend. It is what makes poststructuralism, as we heard Derrida say, “a terrifying form of monstrosity.” However, once one becomes comfortable with this poststructuralist sentiment, it is emancipating, both intellectually and politically. The initial obstacles to learning to think poststructurally are now on the table, but the claim of increased political efficacy remains to be considered.

Why Should Sociologists Care about Poststructuralism?

Given all of this complexity and difficulty, why should sociologists and our students care enough to dedicate the hours and effort needed to learn to think poststructurally? Above all, sociology should be socially and politically relevant. Sociology should equip one with tools for understanding and changing society. I believe this style of analysis to have the best chance of improving the lives of underprivileged, impoverished, and systematically abused human beings.

Pursuing sociological understanding as if it were an ever-growing stockpile of truths quickly becomes politically debilitating. Chasing truth has a tendency to remove sociologists from the always-evolving and contingent concerns of, for example, my eighty-three-year-old neighbor who struggled with the onset of Alzheimer’s disease, of the homeless Romanian immigrant whose son plays with my son at the community pool, or of the single mothers whose

sons play on the Little League team I coach. In other words, the conviction that there is a “more real” world of the social that escapes the unscientific perspectives of my elderly neighbor, the immigrant, or the mothers, disconnects sociologists from those we know and care for. It sets us up as distant experts who on the basis of our advanced degrees are charged with determining the levels of veracity contained in the perspectives of everyday folks. Furthermore, assuming we have a duty to pursue an overall and underlying structure in social reality (to “advance knowledge”) detracts from the moral pursuit of social justice that I see as the most important part of professional, sociological work.

Surely sociology is most relevant when people beyond the doors of our university offices and professional meetings actually care about what sociologists say and think. It makes no political sense to carry on arguments with other sociologists about esoteric problems of theory or methodology while desperate political battles with immediate life consequences rage in the lives of oppressed human beings around the world. Because I do not dream of one day knowing existence as an extra-social structure, I do not spend time and energy chasing it nor engage in academic street fights over the best way to approximate it. As a poststructuralist, I understand existence to be a borderless realm of competing and overlapping organization schemes. For me, truth exists *within* narrations of reality. Truth is not something that exists independently of competing perspectives whose champions strive to isolate it and lay it bare. Truth does not pre-date the rather emotional desire, if not fear-based need, for such certainty; things are quite the reverse. Truth has always been a wholly human destination. As Friedrich Nietzsche (1873/1954:45) put it: “Only through forgetfulness can man ever achieve the illusion of possessing a truth.”

Once again, abandoning the pursuit of an ultimately verifiable and structured existence is important for at least two reasons. First, it allows me to concentrate on improving the lives of those I care about. I get to write, speak, and teach about subjects that I find meaningful because they are important to real people with real lives outside of exclusively academic discussions. Second, I am free to explore how fellow human beings organize their lives without the (rather egomaniacal) expectation that I must eventually pass judgment on the accuracy and mistakes in their narrations. This is not to say that I refrain from making moral arguments. I absolutely do make and defend moral and political assertions. However, I do not claim to base my politics on an extra-social, *metaphysical* realm. This last term is one that you will hear throughout the rest of this book, so let us take a moment to discuss its meaning.

“Meta” means other, after, or beyond. Metaphysical, then, refers to that which is beyond or other than the physical. Prior to the nineteenth century, scholars assumed that some ultimate force (usually God) in the universe ordered and caused systematic movement in existence. Understanding this theological force that lay behind and beyond the physical world was the concern of metaphysicians. Metaphysics fell out of favor as the positivist science of the nineteenth century openly declared its separation from, and opposition

to, theology. Science, positivists argued, should validate only what can be seen and positively measured (sociologists still refer to this as “the empirically available world”). Because God is not physically present for scientists to observe and measure, belief in the existence of God is a metaphysical assertion.

Poststructuralists maintain that believing in essential qualities of objects—objects that therefore have inherent meaning (like my coffee mug or my self or a theoretical tradition)—requires defending metaphysical positions. Like attempts to describe God, every attempt to isolate and accurately depict a “really real” world must always fall short. To continue to believe in a structured and ultimately knowable existence, then, is to do so solely on the basis of faith. Thus when I, as a poststructuralist, offer analyses, they are explicitly political interventions (as opposed to attempts at impartial description) and moral arguments. I do not claim that my narrations are based in an objectively structured reality that I can empirically “verify.” Indeed, I see such claims as akin to those of earlier generations of intellectuals who sought verification of God’s plan. Another example from daily life can add to our appreciation of this important poststructuralist sentiment.

How do Bob and Margaret, my elderly neighbors, understand themselves, me, my family, or our city and state? Before Margaret’s death and his subsequent move to a senior center, Bob often saw me leave home at noon on my way to teach a late afternoon seminar. Having trouble with his memory, he asked me on more than one occasion, “do you go to work after noon everyday?” From our conversations over cake and ice cream at the boys’ birthday parties, I know he believes that he pays too many taxes and that public employees deserve a large part of the blame. He feels this way in part because he contextualizes the present using a past where he remembers feeling comfortable. He recalls a California with far fewer people, fewer public services, fewer laws, and from his perspective fewer social problems. He and Margaret talked fondly of the 1940s and 1950s. Things then were “made by Americans for Americans”; people shared values and community; and despite hardships, during the war years people were dedicated to the certainty and nobility of their purpose. Margaret lost her first husband in the Korean conflict; Bob served in the Air Force and displayed a bumper sticker identifying his war-time unit on their car.

When my family and I bought a Toyota car, Bob and Margaret were visibly annoyed. How could such nice young people not realize how important it was to buy American products? From the political conversations Margaret and I had over coffee and beer, I know that her perspectives on patriotism, immigration, education reform, and other important social issues were vastly different from my own. For example, she saw that the United States had lost many young men and spent enormous amounts of money (causing shortages, rationing, and heartache at home) to defeat the Japanese not too many generations ago. Now, she and Bob believed, the United States has helped to rebuild a Japan so economically powerful that it threatens to overwhelm American productivity. What’s more, she and Bob knew that I spend their

tax dollars presenting arguments to my students that are quite critical of the nationalism that they embraced so completely.

I knew Bob and Margaret to be wonderful human beings and dependable friends. I disagreed completely with the strength of their (what I would call “overzealous”) patriotism. I also shuddered at Margaret’s near blanket dismissal of any arguments she related to “socialists.” As I think back, I remember that Margaret used the word “colored” to refer to our African-American neighbors and looked cross-eyed at me when I told her that I agreed with President Bill Clinton’s attempt to modernize the status of gay men and lesbians in the armed forces. Clearly our friendship existed despite having almost no agreement about the social and political issues that we each cared deeply about.

As a sociologist, how am I to think about these potentially unsettling differences? As I have already admitted, my self-perception is fundamentally tied to my sociology. Thus I think that patriotism is a dangerous phenomenon that can allow people to avoid thinking and that can allow leaders to channel great rushes of emotional energy that too often end in unnecessary death and destruction. I also tense with anger when I consider the amount of amassed wealth that exists alongside abject poverty, not only around the world but, here, in the enormously rich United States. Thus although not a Marxist, I routinely hear myself making arguments that most social scientists easily recognize as those of a socialist. I understand why *African American* is a much better term than *colored*, and I cringe when I hear reactionary AM talk radio hosts trivialize the difference as “just more liberal P.C.” I am also abhorred by the continuing open and ugly discrimination waged against homosexuals in the United States and around the planet. So given that a great deal of my subjectivity is created in and by my expressions and feelings about these social problems, what are my options for handling Bob and Margaret’s also honestly believed opinions?

If I believe that history and reality have essential and singularly truthful qualities, then I somehow have to reconcile the differences between my perspectives and those of my dear neighbors. For example, I remember that in 1995 the Smithsonian Institution proposed to display part of the Enola Gay airplane that dropped atomic bombs on Japan, ending the Second World War. The display was to be part of a fiftieth-anniversary-commemoration of the end of hostilities. However, almost immediately after the plan was announced, newspaper accounts began relating details of a growing controversy over how to narrate the display. Should the captions say that this plane symbolized a great victory in a just and necessary war fought at great human cost to defeat a maniacal enemy? Or should the plane be remembered as a symbol of a great human failure, of human cruelty to humans in abominable proportions, and as a warning to the young—illustrating past generations’ inability to solve their differences in less than barbaric ways?

By the time of the controversy, I did not have to ask to know that Margaret would have strong feelings about these news-stories. What to do? Perhaps I should listen closely to her opinions, thinking that I might gain some insight

that was “at least of historical value.” After all, I could have concluded, most of that generation was so shaped and formed by that era, by wartime propaganda, that they could never understand those events from a less-biased perspective. I would glean her words for the value of her firsthand experience, all the while remembering that I understood things from a much wider and more objective viewpoint. But Margaret was smart. She would know immediately if she was being patronized. She had piercing blue eyes that would immediately convey that she knew I was merely listening politely while dismissing the real significance that she assigned to each sentence rolling off of her tongue. Another option would be to do what I have all too often seen other academics do and insist on setting wrongheaded opponents straight by insisting on “the facts.” Adopting a pose of displayed profundity, I could “wow her” into submission by reciting social scientific understandings of the events and their significance leading up to the war. I could go on for some length about imperialism, colonialism, racism, and state-produced propaganda. I might even secure the victory by researching and presenting statistics illustrating differences between the reality of the American government’s behavior and its propaganda claims. There may be still more options (we might admit that we are both partly correct or that we are both completely wrong), but my point remains, if we stick to a structuralist interpretation of existence, there is an essential reality to the events leading up to, and surrounding, the dropping of the bombs, and the argument is over whose account comes closest to truthfulness.

On the other hand, if I take a poststructuralist and more humble position, I can be comfortable with Friedrich Nietzsche’s (1882/1974:32) counsel that “conclusions are consolations.” There is more than enough room in life for Margaret (who lived very different and longer years than myself) and I to have completely different understandings, and even to celebrate these differences. Understanding that things are more complex than quests for underlying structure can seriously allow for, provides us with a far richer basis for practicing sociology and for doing politics. Perhaps it also suggests the appropriateness and intelligence of genuine respect for the experiences and wisdom of an elder.

Recall that our goal in this section is to illustrate why poststructuralist analyses provide for greater political efficacy than do more traditional social scientific quests to verify “empirical reality.” We now need to add a few more analytic tools. This will take several pages, but by the end of the chapter we will come back to recollect Margaret’s sense of history within our poststructuralist analysis.

De-centering Subjectivity (Person-hood)

A few pages back, I argued that I (as an author or a father) lack structure. I maintained that my subjectivity is unstable and continuously reconstructed. Let’s now extend this “de-centering” to our sociology courses and to the disciplinary training we receive there.

Subjectivity as a centering force is the bedrock of modern structuralist understandings. Essential personhood (understood, e.g., as “the nature of the psyche,” as “pure consciousness,” or as the qualities inherent to humans’ “Being-ness”), is the centering foundation of modern knowledge forms. Remembering that structuralists pursue exactness in what they surmise is an empirically available existence, it makes perfect sense that they should require some stable and central place from where to record their measurements. Knowledge understood as an accumulation requires a consistent foundation: a disciplined knower. Indeed the term *epistemology* (which refers to the study of the bases, possibility, and limits of knowledge), is derived from the Greek *epi* (upon) and *histemi* (I place). Thus knowledge is the result of “placing oneself upon,” of adopting the correct posture and position. If the knower is untrained in the correct method of physical observation or is not steadfast in his intellectual composure, then his observations will lack “reliability” (consistency) and “validity” (accuracy).

As sociologists, we learn methods for avoiding systematic bias in our work. For example, we learn to be sure that our sample populations are randomly acquired, to be aware of our potential to influence those we interview, and to understand the gravity of editing decisions as we work with ethnographic data. This is epistemological training, and the self-discipline learned is what gives sociology its status as a science. In these courses, sociology students are taught to discipline their subjectivity, to put their mental and physical acumen into a correct knowledge-gathering posture.

As we shall see in chapters 2 and 3, this discipline is rooted in a cultural despair over the inadequacies of the self that is a very old sentiment in European and European-derived civilizations. We will spend many pages tracing sociologists’ modern style of subjectivity (a learned version of being human) to ancient Greece and Judeo-Christian theology, but for the moment I only want to reach back as far as the seventeenth century and the self-examinations of the French philosopher, Rene Descartes (1596–1650). Like all of us, Descartes inhabited conditions of possibility. His interests, his work, and his self-perception reflected his era, place, and culture.

By his lifetime, Europe had seen recent and serious challenges to many old and established understandings. For example, firsthand accounts of the strange and marvelous peoples, plants, and animals of the Americas were accumulating. Medieval understandings of natural history, based on a mixture of Christianity and the works of Aristotle, had assumed a systematic finality and closure in nature. Known as the “Great Chain of Being,” this ordering maintained that everything (from angels to insects) had a proper place and role in the cosmos. Because God was perfect, he had created no more diversity than could precisely fit within existence. This great chain, then, was a classification scheme that showed how all things were related, including hierarchically with God at the top and humans below angels but above other earthly life forms.

The New World held countless marvels that severely disrupted this theretofore neatly cataloged, European existence. Before the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, no known European had ever seen a skunk, tasted corn, heard a Native American language, or smelled the many strange trees, plants, and flowers of the Americas. Adding to this confusion, Galileo used his telescope to see beyond the known heavens, and Copernicus and Kepler had asserted that the earth and planets orbit the sun. Long relied upon imagery, including nothing less than the physical locations of heaven and hell, were thrown into doubt. It is this environment of epistemological disarray as well as the resulting intellectual self-doubt that Descartes attempts to conquer.⁵

The “scholastics” (the Aristotelian Christians) had gone wrong because they assumed that existence made sense only if one first understood the logic of “the big picture.” These medievals assumed that pieces of existence were meaningful because they fit deductively within larger, older, and established understandings, and, surmised Descartes, it was their failure to adequately interrogate these grand systems that produced their horrendous errors. Although a devout Christian who was careful not to offend the Church Fathers, Descartes was also influenced by Plato. By his lifetime, Latin translations of long-lost Platonic dialogues were impacting the intellectual classes of Western Europe. In the pages of these dialogues, Descartes heard Plato call for systematic knowledge of the true forms of the things themselves. To free himself from the elaborate prejudices of the previous centuries, he must doubt everything. Accurate understandings of larger existence depended upon disciplining the self. (Students will recognize this sentiment in their professors’ encouragement to “make a contribution to the discipline.”)

It is difficult to overstate the impact that Descartes has had on modern, Western knowledge forms. His self-interrogation in the discipline-enshrined pursuit of certainty was almost manic. For example, in his *Meditations on First Philosophy* ([1641/1984]1994), Descartes allows his readers into the privacy of his study for an up close look at the rigorous, inward-turned skepticism that he heaps upon himself. In an all-out and self-torturing attempt to purify his mental capacity, Descartes says that he will stop his ears, shut his eyes, withdraw all senses, and eliminate all images of bodily things. As for those worldly understandings that he cannot finally purge, he will force himself to regard them as “vacuous, false, and worthless” (24). Like glimpses into neuroses, for more than sixty pages Descartes treats us to a desperate self-abuse of his perceptions, at one point even contemplating whether he really exists, or whether some demon is at work making him think that he can think. In the end, he falls back upon the only things he is sure of: his God and the goodness of his God. “. . . I know by experience that there is in me a faculty of judgment which, like everything else which is in me, I certainly received from

God. And since God does not wish to deceive me, he surely did not give me the kind of faculty which would ever enable me to go wrong while using it correctly" (37-38).

So at the beginning of the modern scientific era, we find Descartes' God guaranteeing that he and all right-minded Christian intellectuals have a "faculty" which, if used correctly, places them in an epistemological relation to existence through which certainty can be discerned. The mind, he says, was created by God. Thus it is separable from the lies often communicated by mere senses that are (after all) shared with lesser animals. This divinely awarded reasoning faculty is indivisible and unquestionably good, although, in humans it requires perfection and protection through technique and discipline. Descartes' attempt at self-overcoming (resolved finally and only by appeals to his God) amounts to a metaphysical centering of a metaphysical subjectivity. Neither the version of personhood he champions nor its position as the basis for all legitimate knowledge can be substantiated by anything greater than his religious faith.

Descartes' theology is the basis of his self-perception, and this theological subjectivity is the only possible center of correct knowing. "If I were unaware of God," he proclaims, "I should thus never have true and certain knowledge about anything, but only shifting and changeable opinions" ([1641/1984]1994:48). Descartes knows what is true because God, who is unquestionably good and does not deceive, gave him this faculty for knowing. This circular reasoning is based in a faith that Descartes placed beyond his formidable power to doubt. For Descartes, there was ultimately no way to justify his belief that this "faculty" or mind could be isolated and purified for the purpose of gleaning knowledge, except through the faith-based, theological reasoning he supplied. I do not mean to suggest that he found this reasoning to be insufficient. Descartes believed unquestionably in his God, and his science was theologically inspired.

Although later generations of structuralists have abandoned Descartes' theological language, the scientific subjectivity (the scientific selves) of modern, structuralist, sociologists remains Cartesian. When sociologists attempt to control bias, when we insist upon discipline in our knowing procedures while pursuing objectivity (even as we grudgingly admit the goal unattainable), when we strive for correspondence between our theoretical models and an objectively present social existence, we are acting in a Cartesian way. Structuralist scientists, then, are trying to cleanse their knowing postures, struggling to place their subjectivity (the Cartesian "faculty") in an epistemological stance that will, as Descartes said, "not enable [them] to go wrong while using it correctly." Indeed Descartes helped institutionalize the subject-to-object binary that remains the basis for the scientific method.⁶ In the three hundred and fifty years since Descartes' death, many famous philosophers have struggled to improve upon his call for purity in understanding and the promise of ultimate knowledge that it holds out. Despite the impossibility of

success, these attempts continue; the old and Western disdain for the self, and the discipline this self-loathing perpetuates, remains active. Only in the last four decades of the twentieth century (with the exception of Nietzsche who was horribly alone in his own era) do we find thinkers who seriously question the entirety of this metaphysical, theologically inspired, structuralist project.

I have already said that poststructuralists understand subjectivity to be a complex effect. Our short discussion of the ongoing impact of Descartes' project and the intellectual concerns of his time illustrate how and why this is the case. Descartes' self-interrogation and attempt at self-discipline is one important part of the history of scientific subjectivity. Modern subjectivity is, in part, a Cartesian effect. Yet, and as we will see in chapter 2, this notion that there exists an "I" (a "faculty," mind, ego, etc.) that predates its experiences, or any context where it would arrive only later, is much older than Descartes. One need only consider the Christian concept of "eternal soul" or read the words Plato placed in Socrates' mouth to appreciate the ancient origins of what Derrida has for the past forty years called "metaphysics of presence."

The modern scientist must dream that s/he is (at least in principle) capable of taking on a purity of form that allows her to correctly assess objective reality. S/he must have a stable basis for gathering knowledge. Thus the idea of "empirical verification" requires that the subject (the knower) be understood as a nonproduced presence. The scientific self must be whole and self-contained before and after any particular context where it lives for a time. Because if the personhood of the scientist is always only a complex outcome rooted in the many and specific contingencies of her life, her perceptions have no hope of approaching the objective truth that s/he aspires to. If s/he is an effect of long making, an amalgamation of countless and innumerable episodes of social engineering (her failures, triumphs, loves, hatreds, gains, losses, and the appraisals of her authority figures), her subjectivity can never be completely present in any place or moment. Her self is made of affairs that are not present in the instant when she seeks to do her science. The episodes of her life *are not* physically or temporally present in her research settings, but *they are* the possibility of her understandings. The history and ongoing construction of her self is far too complex to be controlled for by any regimen of discipline, by any epistemological stance, or by any research design. The Cartesian and scientific attempt to purify the "faculty of judgment" can never succeed because this faculty can never be simply present to itself, in all of its significance, all at once. Subjectivity can never be centralized (found whole) in a comprehensive presence. Unless we too agree to believe in Descartes' God, the self is not theologically awarded, and it can never succeed in making itself into a metaphysical essence.

My point is not that our scientist has first of all a pure subjectivity and that life then colors this self in innumerable and unpredictable ways. This would only be a reiteration of the primacy of Descartes' pure "faculty" that would allow us to hold out hope for one day arriving (through discipline) at a purity

of mind. Rather, the point is that social existence *far beyond and before the birth of our scientist* is the very possibility of her having *any subjectivity*. All of the things that have happened to her in life and that continue to make her who she is can have meaning only because of countless events that pre-date her existence (including Descartes' systematic self-disdain).

For example, let's suppose that she speaks English and is an American. Did you know that there was a war between the French and the English that resulted in British colonial control over important parts of North America? There was (The French and Indian War) and the British prevailed, but what if the French had won? There is a good chance that our scientist would now speak French and be part of a United States with much closer cultural ties to France. How would another language and a different history of cultural affiliation have played out through the generations between the French victory and the self of our scientist? Would the form of her government and thus of her citizenship be other than they are today? Presumably, the framers of the American Constitution would have been French aristocrats and not men derived of wealthy British families. So would our scientist have been born into a nation where she acquired political perspectives that looked more French in heritage and less British? How about her aesthetic tastes and her artistic sensibilities? Furthermore, given that our fictitious scientist was born into a United States that evolved much more French and much less British, what of the impact of the American military, economy, and cultural influence on the rest of the world? Would the impact of the French language and French culture not be much greater the world over than it is today? What kind of impact might an increased French American hegemony in the world have on the self-understanding of our fictitious scientist? Of course, it is impossible to know. My point is simply that a British victory over the French in this often forgotten (some might even say obscure), mid-eighteenth century war is one condition of possibility of American subjectivity. Indeed, it is a condition of the very language that animates most Americans' self-understandings.

We could go on with this (what Nietzsche and Foucault called "genealogy") exercise indefinitely. Since our scientist is a woman, we might ask about the many feminist battles of the past and even those yet to come. Would she even be a scientist if feminists of earlier generations had not done what they did? Does the fact that contemporary feminist leaders will surely continue to point out the inequalities in opportunities that exist between men and women in our society have anything to do with her chances of competing successfully (because of legislated fairness) with her male colleagues in some future research competition? Indeed, if she is interested in feminist sociology, might the very possibility of the recognized relevance of such work be tied to the civil rights struggles of countless activists from many historical periods? Again, my point is that there is always much more to any subjectivity than anyone can be aware of in the present of a particular moment. Why then is it not a metaphysical belief to assume that I can have, all at once, in any single

place, enough control over the scattered and complex makeup of my (and thus is it really “mine”?) self to provide a foundation for the gathering and accumulation of truth?

The complexity that is the very possibility of any subjectivity is perhaps limitless. It is certainly more than any discipline or piety can hope to control and domesticate. I sometimes relate this to my own students by telling them that they “cannot push the same bus they are riding in.” If disciplinary self-overcoming is to remain an ethos in European-derived civilizations (for knowledge making or entrance to heaven or overcoming self-indulgence), then it is an unrealizable one. One cannot interrogate, evaluate, and subjugate the social origins of one’s self from anyplace other than the unstable perspectives of that same self. I can only evaluate my biases by invoking biases.

Because the attempt to discipline one’s scientific subjectivity for the purpose of gathering knowledge is already an effect, an outcome of quite researchable political disputes (some of which can be revisited in the pages of Descartes’ works), then a truly diligent Cartesian is faced with trying to eliminate the prejudices that are the very possibility of the Cartesian project. In other words, the Cartesian attempt to nullify historical contingency in the quest for epistemological certainty is, itself, a historical and cultural contingency.

Appreciating Margaret on Terms Other than My Own

Clay Dumont de-centered is a consciousness that recognizes the scattered, overlapping, mutating, unstable conditions of its possibility. A de-centered subjectivity understands the impossibility of self-possession and even learns to enjoy the feeling. My father once told me that people are like the infinity of reflections that can be seen when we stand between two mirrors. I think that this is as good an analogy as any I have since come across. If we can imagine that each of the reflections built upon the one prior to it are not exact replications but rather the variety and differences of perception one encounters in everyday living, then my father’s mirror illustration is a fine one. I am a reflection not just of my life but also of those lives who react to me, who mirror myself back to me. I am also the lineage of faded and difficult to see reflections that originated long before I had life (complex assemblages of reflections that harbor no coherent theological or metaphysical pattern). Surely then it is folly to attempt to identify any center of “my” (again I have to point out the mistake of claiming possession) self.

Margaret and I, as social and historical effects, shared much social genealogy. Like me, she spoke and read English; she was taught to pay attention to many of the same historical events, although from rather different history books; she watched some of the same television programs and often read the same newspapers; we shared an understanding of many customs, traditions, holidays, and of social etiquette. Because we shared all of this, and were able

to share all of this in part because we were both born into cultures that continue to bear the strong imprint of Christian, Greek, and Roman influences, Margaret and I could interact, understand, and appreciate each other. This common social genealogy, none of which had to unfold through the centuries as it eventually did (that is to say not because of some metaphysical “laws of history” or “divine plan”), is the possibility of the conventions (the social agreements) that Margaret and I relied upon for our daily interactions. However, there was much to Margaret’s subjectivity that was nothing like the outcome of my own origins.

Margaret was a Virginian and a proud Southerner. (I once made the mistake of suggesting that she was from West Virginia, which she promptly informed me was “filled with Yankees.”) I am from Oregon. The narrations about being from the South that she grew up with were vastly different from the accounts of civil rights battles that I learned to associate with that part of the country. Her father was a Southern minister; one of my fathers was an Indian boy in a Catholic boarding school. She vividly remembered the Second World War; I am just old enough to remember the years of the Vietnam War. All of our understandings of these events (and consequently of ourselves) were made possible by other people and events far beyond the moments Margaret and I inhabited. Yet because I do not pursue nor believe in the possibility of some centered subjectivity, some extra-social, extra-cultural, un-arrived at, Cartesian faculty, I do not require reconciliation of the differences that these vast contingencies produced between Margaret and myself. I have no metaphysical premise about my subjectivity to protect. I feel no need to deny living (hers or mine) to understand living. Inasmuch as Margaret and I are the consequences of ongoing narration and dispute (she is still being constituted and re-collected after her death, even by this writing), we are political outcomes and continuing political events. Thus, and as I have already said, when a post-structuralist argues for the superiority of an intellectual position, s/he does so only by invoking explicitly political and moral (not metaphysical) claims.

My discussions with Margaret remained civil, respectful, and even productive for precisely this reason. Because we were not arguing about God’s will, or Truth with a capital T, or any other metaphysical center (and we both understood the excess of self-importance required for those sorts of discussions), we could appreciate each other on terms supplied by each other. I caused Margaret to rethink some of her political opinions, and she returned the favor. Our relationship and my understanding of history grew and flourished because I did not attempt to assume some central, foundational, epistemologically secure vantage from where I could assess the accuracy of her experiences. My goal was to get Margaret to think about her political positions in different (and I thought better) ways and to allow her to do the same for me. I learned an immense amount and developed an intellectual cooperation that would have quickly disintegrated in an adversarial dynamic where the “really real” was under contestation. In fact, my understanding of us as contingent, contestable, and without