

**A Review of 'The Postmodern Condition: A report on Knowledge', by  
Jean-Francois Lyotard** **Aaron Kennedy**

Jean-François Lyotard (1924-1998) is most famous for his associations with postmodernism, and in particular, through the book in question, *The Postmodern Condition* (PC). This short essay will consist of an indication of the books' contents, Lyotard's intellectual context, some thoughts on his conclusions and some considerations of the books usefulness.

As Lyotard tells us in his opening sentence, the book is concerned with 'the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies.' (PC, xxii) That is to distinguish the condition of knowledge from the general cultural condition of postmodernism, which he defines in the crudest sense as 'incredulity toward metanarratives', (PC, 1979: xxiv) and reveals how knowledge has, up until the end of the 1950's (PC, 1979: 3) been legitimated by the metanarratives of science, for example that "it contribute[d] to human freedom and well-being." (Vanhooser, K., 2003: 10) He examines developments in the nature and circulation of knowledge since the end of World War II, and insists that this has led to the discrediting of the Enlightenment narrative of emancipation and progress. (Nola, R., Irzik, G., 2002). He sees a distinction between scientific knowledge and non-scientific narrative, and holds that because science has no 'metalegitimation' it must resort to narrative for that legitimation, i.e. a non-scientific legitimation. Since both narrative and scientific knowledge have a common foundation of legitimation in narrative, they are equally valid. As Smith writes, "Postmodernism is not incredulity toward narrative or myth; on the contrary, it unveils that all knowledge is grounded in such." (Smith, 2005 cited in Robinson, 2005, Web Blog) The question is therefore, 'Where, after the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside?' (PC, 1979: xxv) As Halbert says, Lyotard goes on to make clear that "what legitimates knowledge in the postmodern condition is how well it performs, or enables a person to perform, in particular roles.' (Halbert, Website) Towards the end of the book

he stresses that the influence of industry upon research causes it to be legitimated by 'performativity'. In contrast he advocates a paralogical legitimation, which is in essence, a conscious move away from established reason and methods. He sets about constructing a postmodern epistemology, which can accommodate knowledge under the new conditions of being "against metanarratives and foundationalism; ...and [being] for heterogeneity, plurality, constant innovation, and pragmatic construction of local rules and prescriptives agreed upon by participants." (Best and Kellner, 2002: Web Page)

After World War II, Lyotard took a job teaching in Constantine, Algeria. It was during this time that he read some of the writings of Karl Marx. This was to prove to be a significant influence upon his thinking both constructively and deconstructively. He shared Marx's discontent with capitalism, and became involved in the socialist revolution movement in Algeria. However, he resigned from his involvement there in 1966, due to his loss of faith in Marxism as a totalising theory. (Woodward, A., 2005: 1) In this way, Marxism encouraged Lyotard's growing incredulity toward metanarratives, already stirred by his World War II experiences. After this he returned to the study and writing of philosophy.

The writings of Lyotard were strongly influenced by the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. This short quote bears out Nietzsche's own incredulity toward an understanding of truth as universal.

*What is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms. Truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they are illusions...*

(Cited by Felicilda, 2001: 1)

Or again, as Felicilda says of him, 'The **I** is masked so that knowing the **I** through tearing its mask one after another ends up with no **I** left. The uncertainty concerning the identity of the **I** leads to the uncertainty to all our claims for truth so that what is left is nothing but perspectives.' (Felicilda, 2001: 1)

A contemporary of Lyotard was Jacques Derrida. He is responsible for the development of the concept of deconstructionism. As Felicilda (2001: Web Page) says of him, 'Following Nietzsche, he also talks of the metaphoricity of language. The signifier is not always related to the signified. There is no one to one correspondence so that meaning is not immediately clear to us.' As an intellectual ally of Lyotard, it is clear to see that Derrida does not resort, as would not Lyotard, to metanarrative legitimation.

'Lyotard sees reason not as a universal and immutable human faculty or principle but as a specific and variable human production' (IEP, Lyotard J-F. entry: Web Page). Reason, it is believed, is a product of human intelligence, and not as something that inevitably leads to an apprehension of the truth. Speaking in general everyday terms, it is preferable to view ultimate legitimation of all actions, scientific or otherwise, as understood through a variety of faculties, including reason. To this extent, this author would agree with Lyotard's conclusions.

The point has been made in numerous places (Jacob, N., 2005: Web Blog; Best and Kellner, 2002: Web Site & Vanhoozer, K. J., 2005: 10) that in fact Lyotard effectively contradicts himself in his discussion of postmodernism by virtue of that concepts' function as a new, all-embracing metanarrative. The metanarrative is seen as the sole way of understanding the world and interpreting events, facts or experiences, to the exclusion of all others. It would appear that Lyotard has merely offered a new 'true story of knowledge'. (Vanhoozer, 2005: 10)

Also against Lyotard, it is believed that he gives unnecessary weight to the fact that the nature and circulation of knowledge are changing in the postmodern era. His line of thought is that knowledge is codified as information and translated into computer languages. It is commodified and therefore ideas in research are produced not for their truth-value but for their saleability. It is the contention of this author that 'commodified knowledge can co-exist with knowledge for its own sake.' ('Mike', 2004: Web Blog) It seems a narrow interpretation of his own prediction to limit the existence of knowledge to a commodified form. This realisation may well have serious implications for the internal cogency of Lyotard's whole thesis.

The usefulness of Lyotard's work is already well established, indeed Best and Kellner say that "in many circles [he] is celebrated as the postmodern theorist par excellence." They continue to say that, "above all, Lyotard has emerged as the champion of difference and plurality in all theoretical realms and discourses." (Best and Kellner, 2002: Web Site) As such, it is believed that his theories have been and will continue to be a support to all who find themselves in the minority of opinion or thought. This includes women, in their fight for equality with men, in all realms of life. It also includes all those who have found themselves at the sharp end of the 'fundamentalist' stick, whether at the hands governments around the world, or as members, or non-members of religious groups and sects. Lyotard, it could be said, has played a significant role in the 'pluralisation' of Western society. It would have been impossible for so many different types of people, with different faith expressions, political persuasions, sexual orientations, etc, to share space in this 'multi-everything' society, without an acceptance of plurality. While many have offered some serious theoretical criticisms of this book, they have also conceded its outright success in securing a firm foothold for dissimilarity and divergence within 'the most highly developed societies'.

In conclusion, it has hopefully been made clear that 'The Postmodern Condition: A report on Knowledge', is an important and influential book,

which is both original, and a product of the times and the intellectual context in which the author found himself; both lastingly significant, and yet, to many, inherently flawed.

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