LYOTARD
For Claire
LYOTARD

Towards a Postmodern Philosophy

James Williams
Key Contemporary Thinkers

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Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the University of Dundee Research Initiative Fund for a grant towards my research on Jean-François Lyotard and French philosophy.

The author and publishers are grateful for permission to quote from the following works by Jean-François Lyotard: The Differend: Phrases in Dispute, trans. George Van Den Abeele, Manchester University Press and University of Minnesota Press, 1988, by kind permission of the publishers; Libidinal Economy, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant, Athlone Press and Indiana University Press, 1993, by kind permission of the publishers.
Jean-François Lyotard's work is indispensable to any reflection on the most difficult problems of late twentieth-century society and culture. In his definition of the postmodern condition, he gives us an overview of these problems and one of the most important theories to draw them together. Lyotard reflects on the relation between the social fragmentation of contemporary societies and the global interconnection of markets and media. In fact, the concern with this relation, between radical differences and structures that attempt to bridge them, connects his account of the postmodern to his work as a whole. He tries to structure and decide upon the opposition of positive and negative reactions to fragmentation and globalization. Should we rejoice in differences drawn out of the end of unifying forces such as religion, nationhood, universal ideals? Or should we lament the passing of systems that legislate against conflict and difference in the name of greater progress and community? What are the political implications of fragmentation? How can we act with justice if there are no universal moral or legal norms?

A first response to these questions extends Lyotard's influence to the arts. According to his philosophy, if we are to testify to difference and to fragmentation, then we must do so in art and literature. He is also, therefore, an all-important theorist of and apologist for avant-garde arts. His contribution there is as important as his political and social theory. In his work, we find new and influential ways of thinking about the avant-garde and the experience of art. The political and philosophical roles of aesthetic experiences and creativity are thought anew and in a manner consistent with the latest
representations of society, language and individuals. This explains his ubiquity in works on the postmodern, whether at the level of politics, sociology, philosophy, literature or art. Where all these spheres are considered in unison, in terms of general theories of postmodernity, he is invariably one of the main protagonists. This does not mean that he is taken as correct. The contrary is more often the case: Lyotard is the main representative of a strain of divisive postmodern thought that many have sought to prove wrong or to decry. This is because he champions difference and division against reconciliation. But the role of villain does not detract from his importance. It is impossible to understand the resurgence of arguments on modern values without referring to his attack on them.

The great frequency of references to Lyotard’s work across a wide range of topics can also be explained by the pivotal role played by his writing in terms of schools of thought and influential debates. This role is best surveyed through an analysis of the main stages of his career, from his earliest postwar essays to his latest works. His first consistent set of essays (1956–63), collected in La Guerre des Algériens (1989) and translated in Political Writings (1993), brings together Marxist theory and a critical concern with a development of Marx in the context of the struggle for Algerian independence. These essays link him to Marxism, but also to theories on the development of Marxism by, for instance, Cornelius Castoriadis and Jean Baudrillard. His next main publication, Discours, figure (1971), connects poststructuralism, Marx and Freud in a critique of phenomenology through a study of art. In Économie libidinale (1974), Lyotard’s work rejoins the post-1968 rebellion against theory and turns towards materialist enactments of desire. This book connects him to Deleuze and Guattari and to the contemporary attempt to think beyond Marx and Freud.

Later, Lyotard drifts away from this extreme materialism and his work takes a turn towards a combination of aesthetics, social critique and analytic philosophy of language, in the context of the postmodern. This work is announced in La Condition postmoderne (1979), but the key book is Le Différend (1983). He claims that this is his most philosophical work. It has become an important book for questions of justice and political action within the postmodern condition. Lately, Lyotard has contributed to debates on postmodern ethics and aesthetics in the collections L’Inhumain (1988) and Moralités postmodernes (1993). Lyotard’s pivotal role does not only reflect movements. He has entered into important debates with many of the most influential thinkers of his generation: Derrida, Levinas,
Nancy, Lacoue-Labarthe, Habermas (by proxy), Rorty, Deleuze and Guattari. These debates and his original work on the postmodern also involve interpretations of key figures from the history of philosophy, notably Marx, Freud, Kant and Wittgenstein. Put together, his contribution to important debates, his position within key movements and his influential definition of the postmodern explain why future developments across many subjects will continue to depend on reactions to his work. Our contemporary desire to think ‘after’ the postmodern must refer back to Lyotard, not only for historical accuracy in terms of theory, but in terms of lessons to be drawn from his efforts to think ‘with’ the postmodern condition.

Thus, in a century when specialization has become the norm, the work of Jean-François Lyotard stands out for its range and variety. Few contemporary thinkers have had his ability and determination to cover and contribute to topics and subjects as disparate as art and aesthetics, politics and active political engagement, the philosophy of language, psychoanalysis, the interpretation of texts from the history of philosophy, literary criticism and critical analysis, and social critique. This richness is as rare as it is difficult to maintain, for the price of the division of his efforts could be that depth is achieved nowhere. This book seeks to show that, with Lyotard, philosophical range is accompanied by profundity, and what appears at first sight to be mere variety is in fact a variation and a deepening of thought across a wide area. Here thought reacts against the pressures which force philosophy towards specialization and away from an engagement with the complex connections which bring together the multiple aspects of modern life and societies.

My account of Lyotard’s philosophy depends on the isolation of a central concern that runs through most, if not all, of his work: a rethinking of the political. Here ‘political’ stands for all forms of action linked to change, or resistance to change, in our societies. Politics is not limited to political parties or institutions. In fact, these may be seen to be far removed from political action – for example, when financial markets are seen to control the future of nations. Yet a series of familiar political and philosophical positions can be used to justify acts within this broad definition of the political. In line with this broad view of the political, Lyotard develops a wide-ranging philosophy that allows him to discard established positions with regard to political action, values and institutions. These are then replaced by new forms of action in tune with a new way of thinking about how acts can bring about just or valuable outcomes. For example, his later philosophy runs against any appeal to univer-
sal rights as the basis for action. Instead, the just act involves a recognition of radical differences between individuals, cultures and systems. These differences cannot be bridged by an appeal to the universality of rights. Similarly, in the case of the dominance of financial markets as agents of change, Lyotard’s philosophy rejects the argument that claims that the greatest performance and hence the greatest well-being can be achieved in capitalist systems. Instead, he draws our attention to the necessary injustice of systems dependent on a criterion of performance that cannot be sensitive to radically different ways of living.

This disruptive and original way of thinking about political action depends on a teasing out of a set of recurring figures typical of Lyotard’s work: the idea of the limit, the event, absolute difference and the avant-garde. The central concern and the recurring figures are brought together in his dissatisfaction with established or traditional ways of thinking about the political dimension in art, philosophy and linguistics. Thus the figures provide a new frame of reference for thinking the political, for example in Lyotard’s turn away from totalization and towards fragmentation, which can be traced back to his awareness of the importance of limits and absolute difference. Thus, at the same time as political thinking undergoes a radical change through a reflection on different topics, the thought of the political in those topics is rebased and reinvigorated:

What I have to tell you is driven by a work that is neither linguistic, nor semiological, not even philosophical, but rather political. This, in a sense of political that is not institutional (parliament, elections, political parties . . .), nor Marxist, a sense too close to the one already dismissed – political in a sense that is not determined yet and that will always, must always, remain to be determined. (Lyotard 1973: 127)

The stress on a sense of the political which involves a duty to desist from final definitions and judgements, and which defeats the will to determine the political with any such finality, is characteristic of Lyotard’s approach to the political. For example, Bill Readings gives an illuminating account of this understanding of the political in the context of the modern–postmodern opposition (1993: xiii). Lyotard’s work reflects a suspicion of knowledge as a basis for action. There will always be limits to such knowledge and the task of philosophy can be seen as revealing them in and through art and language.

Lyotard’s most famous book, The Postmodern Condition, attempts to reflect on the political aspects of modern science and knowledge
in terms of their claims to validity. Where claims to truth in science would appear to be above the raw competition more readily associated with politics, he shows that they involve conflicts that can only be understood as power struggles at the boundaries of different social practices. Thus, although different social practices (science and art, for example) involve quite legitimate rules when they operate within their proper spheres, these rules fail at their limits. There are valid tests of the validity of a scientific hypothesis; however, when this hypothesis is used in a social application then it enters into competition with other rules from other practices. For instance, it is possible and legitimate for medicine to determine the best form of treatment for a given illness, but that ‘best’ treatment becomes involved in a further struggle when financial and ethical considerations come into play. There may be best treatments from many different points of view: the most effective, the most economical, one that saves more valuable lives (the young, for instance). Lyotard’s work in *The Postmodern Condition* is a rethinking of the political because it insists on the political element that enters into any discussion once claims from different spheres come into contact with one another.

This also explains how the book fits into Lyotard’s work as a whole. It is a particular instance of his thought on the way specific philosophical problems become part of practical political struggles. In *The Postmodern Condition*, the incommensurability of language games (that is, the way rules from different spheres are inconsistent) throws all action at the boundaries between spheres into a power struggle. Lyotard’s philosophy is characterized as the effort to understand and guide this struggle across a wide range of topics and issues.

In no way, though, does my decision to focus on a central concern imply a lack of interest in Lyotard’s analysis of society, his theories of language, or in his studies of law and morality. On the contrary, these are the most interesting and influential facets of his philosophy, alongside his work on aesthetics and modern art. It is more that these facets are best understood when they are seen as leading to a rethinking of the effort to bring about change in society through a political act. Though this does not imply that Lyotard has always wanted to act ‘for society’, or even less ‘for a new society’. He has advocated utterly rebellious acts that break the organization of society and turn to individual or group desires and interests. The consideration of the political act allows us to make sense of the models of society found in his works, but that consideration can only be felt