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Summary Article: **Lyotard, Jean-Francois**

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Jean-François Lyotard (1924-1998) was a French intellectual and philosopher. Although most commonly associated with postmodernism, he was also an important part of the French poststructural movement. He is best known for his critique of modernity and for his view of reality as a fragmented ensemble of complex events that cannot be represented or interpreted accurately. Although Lyotard's work has been extremely influential in social and cultural anthropology, it spans several other realms, including philosophy of language, psychology, ethics, political philosophy, and aesthetics. Mirroring this diversity is Lyotard's engagement with a number of eminent thinkers: Immanuel Kant, G. W. F. Hegel, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Lacan, Gilles Deleuze, and Jean Baudrillard, to mention a few. This entry offers a brief biography followed by a discussion of some of Lyotard's fundamental ideas and his work *The Postmodern Condition*, concluding with some critiques and comments on his legacy.

Biography and Major Works

Lyotard was born in Vincennes in 1924. After graduating from the Sorbonne in philosophy and literature, he taught philosophy in a number of schools, including one in Constantine, Algeria, where he experienced firsthand the conflict between Algerian workers and the French oligarchy. In 1948, he married Andr e May, with whom he had two children, Corinne and Laurence. In 1993, he married his second wife, Dolor s Djidzek, with whom he had a son, David.

In 1954, Lyotard joined the Marxist Trotskyite group Socialisme ou Barbarie (Socialism or Barbarism) and was a contributor to the journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. In 1964, due to internal discord, he joined the splinter group Pouvoir Ouvrier (Workers' Power), until 1966, when he also resigned from his academic post as assistant professor at the Sorbonne. Around that time, he took up a position in the philosophy department of the University of Paris X (Nanterre) and, despite his loss of faith in Marxism, participated in the May 1968 student protests against the government. Eventually, Lyotard's critique of Marxism was outlined in *Libidinal Economy* alongside his critique of capitalism. Arguing that both systems are intertwined with libidinal forces—irrational desires and impulses underlying a multitude of events that are exploited by economic structures—Lyotard concluded that Marxism's "truth" is no better than the "truths" it criticizes, while acknowledging that libidinal forces potentially have the power to destabilize and transform these structures.

Lyotard's academic career reached new heights as a professor of philosophy and languages at various distinguished institutions, including the University of Paris VIII (Vincennes), where in 1978 he became professor emeritus; the University of California; and Emory University. He was a visiting professor at several universities around the world, including the University of Montreal, Quebec, Canada; the University of Sa o Paulo, Brazil; and the University of Siegen, Germany. Between 1968 and 1970, he was in charge of research at the National Centre for Scientific Research in Paris. In 1983, with Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and others, he cofounded and was one of the presidents of the International College of Philosophy in Paris. Lyotard died of leukemia in Paris in 1998.

Lyotard's most famous books include *Phenomenology* (1954), *Discourse, Figure* (1971), *Libidinal Economy* (1974), *Au Juste: Conversations (Just Gaming)*, 1979), *The Postmodern Condition: A Report*

on Knowledge (1979), *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (1983), *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (1988), *Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event* (1988), *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime: Kant's Critique of Judgment* (1991), *Political Writings* (1993), and *Postmodern Fables* (1997).

Some Fundamental Ideas

In *Discourse, Figure*, Lyotard critiques structuralism, to which he relates “discourse” (written text), a form of cognitive communication that he juxtaposes with “figure,” the potentially subversive product of the senses (phenomenology). These two categories are not simply opposites; they are intertwined. Despite the fact that discourse has historically dominated, it has been inadequate in representing historical events as well as the *sublime*, a concept that Lyotard adopted and modified from Kant to include not only the “transcendentally great” but also anything that we as humans are incapable of representing or fully grasping.

These ideas are tied to Lyotard's important anthropological insights. First, he challenged the notion of the “subject” as the central, rational entity of modernity, suggesting instead that it is as fragmented as reality itself. Second, in later works, for instance, in *The Inhuman*, these ideas gave rise to his notion of humanism, where, influenced by Lacan and Freud, he disputed the idea of human nature as the essence and argued that humans are not born human and that this inherent inhumanness never leaves us completely—in contrast to teleological interpretations that interpret the unhuman as only the initial stage of the life cycle.

Furthermore, as Veronica Vesterling notes, Lyotard's humans are permanently afflicted by high levels of “affectability” or sensitivity to external events, thus remaining finite and vulnerable in the universe, unable to express the sublime. In contrast to Kant, Lyotard does not believe that rationality compensates for the failure of the senses and imagination; moreover, what our imagination cannot grasp should not be suppressed or hidden. The only exception to humanity's inability to express the sublime are subversive and disruptive forms of “avant-garde” art, a realm at the periphery of society sufficiently detached from established language games, hence free of the prejudices and limits imposed by reason and convention. “Good art” is not about faithful representation or about harmony between form and contents as modernity would have us believe. It is not even about new ways to represent. For Lyotard, it is about discovering the limitations of representation and unmasking the unrepresentable: Art becomes an important catalyst for social and political revolutionary change.

Failure to adapt to the world is significant not only in the anthropological sense but also politically. Lyotard built on Wittgenstein's theory of language as something complex, multifaceted, and governed by forces that are neither eternal nor universal.

He regards “language games” as phrases or utterances that carry their own rules—by being incommensurable and heterogeneous, they ensure the fragmentation of discourse. They can be descriptive (knowledge) or prescriptive (action). What phrases are chosen and which ones are silenced are political decisions. Mirroring his idea of the social world as fragmented and diverse, Lyotard's language games are individual expressions of conflicting realities, values, and practices from a range of social areas engaged in a power struggle. Just as there is no narrative superior to any other, there is no language that is higher than any other or capable of resolving conflict between the different language games. The important point is that discourses that are incommensurable should not be forced to speak a common homogeneous language, for that would not be just.

Taking this idea further, Lyotard conceptualized injustice in discourse in *The Differend*, argued by many to be Lyotard's most important book. The “differend” is a situation of unresolved language conflict where victims cannot present the wrong they suffered or their side of the story; the inability to negotiate the unrepresentable is part of the notion of the sublime. Lyotard believes that the duty of philosophy is to continuously expose the differend or the misappropriation of language games. The matter of how ideas about reality and justice differ is also explored in *Au Juste*. Lyotard argued that a single “rational rule” of judgment cannot be applied to both parties in a dispute. In postmodernity, it is crucial that we build a system of ethics that includes a willingness to allow others to express their own language games. According to Lyotard, justice in modernity is rationalized by descriptive knowledge and universal preexisting criteria. He argued that it should instead be based on indeterminate reflective judgment, using the Kantian constitutive imagination, where the criteria differ in each case according to its own circumstances. This allows the coexistence of incommensurable and irreducible differences, a situation Lyotard refers to as *paganism*.

The Postmodern Condition (1979)

Arguably, *The Postmodern Condition* is Lyotard's most famous book. It was originally a report commissioned by the Council of Universities of the Quebec government on the status of knowledge in developed countries. It is regarded by many as the guiding text of postmodernism, extending its key ideas from the realm of art to that of sociopolitical and cultural theory. Others regard it as a critique of Jürgen Habermas's appeal to discursive coherence in the public sphere. At a basic level, *The Postmodern Condition* is a book about the effects of technological progress on the nature and role of knowledge. According to Lyotard, in modern advanced societies driven by “performativity” or efficient performance, knowledge becomes a commodity, a way to power rather than the means to a better life. Knowledge is linked to both science and language in the sense that there is scientific knowledge and narrative knowledge, the latter taking on a variety of forms or language games.

In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard argues that grand narratives or metanarratives, which underpin modernity, have lost credibility. This is the postmodern condition, one of “incredulity towards metanarratives.” Grand narratives are stories that set the rules for other narratives and language games by organizing knowledge in universal terms to justify the way things are or to explain the occurrence of important events, whether theological (e.g., the creation of the world) or political (e.g., capitalism). In modernity, Lyotard identifies two grand narratives: (1) the speculative narrative (knowledge is the basis of the progress of human life in the quest for truth) and (2) the emancipation narrative (which makes knowledge the prerequisite for human freedom in the pursuit of justice).

However, loss of faith means that narratives no longer have unifying power—identity and reason no longer play a legitimizing role in the formation of knowledge, values, and institutions. Knowledge is no longer the means to a better society underpinned by universal values. The world dominated by capitalism runs on efficiency and profitability, and these are the standards by which the nature and status of knowledge are determined. At the same time, societies become fragmented and individuals alienated from the networks and bonds they previously relied on. This moral and ethical disintegration has been identified by countless scholars as a problem. What makes Lyotard different is the fact that he thinks that the grand narratives themselves are the problem; thus, it is not a matter of replacing one narrative with another. In other words, consensus, compromise, and cooperation are not the solution, and neither is the forceful imposition of a single narrative. For Lyotard, the answer is small local narratives (*petit recits*) and the maximization of language games to ensure a difference.

Criticisms and Legacy

Lyotard's work, contentious at the best of times, has been condemned as philosophically and politically self-defeating. Can any political or legal system work without universal values and without a unifying vision or compromise of some sort? Another criticism is that the postmodern rejection of the Enlightenment does not take it into account that the rights of minority and exploited groups owe much to the values that emerged from it. Furthermore, in the anthropological sense, there seems to be little acceptance of human limitations, and the obsessive emphasis on diversity denies that humans, at least those who live in the same societies, do have some similarities. Finally, there is the most obvious trap for postmodernism to consider: Loss of faith in grand narratives is itself a narrative.

Despite these critiques, Lyotard's assault on grand narratives has important anthropological and political implications: He does not simply wish to tinker with the political spectrum, he wishes to change the very way in which we practice politics. Politics as we know it needs to shift beyond representation; furthermore, he is not concerned with political parties or ideologies but with a politics where difference is cherished rather than downsized and where small narratives speak about the unrepresentable. Yet respect for diversity is not the only legacy: Lyotard's commitment to a sociopolitical system that is just and ethical rescues him from the emptiness of relativism and inspires those who wish to change the world for the better.

See also Baudrillard, Jean; Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari; Derrida, Jacques; Freud, Sigmund; Habermas, Jürgen; Lacan, Jacques; Modernism; Phenomenology; Postmodernism; Poststructuralism; Structuralism; Wittgenstein, Ludwig

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