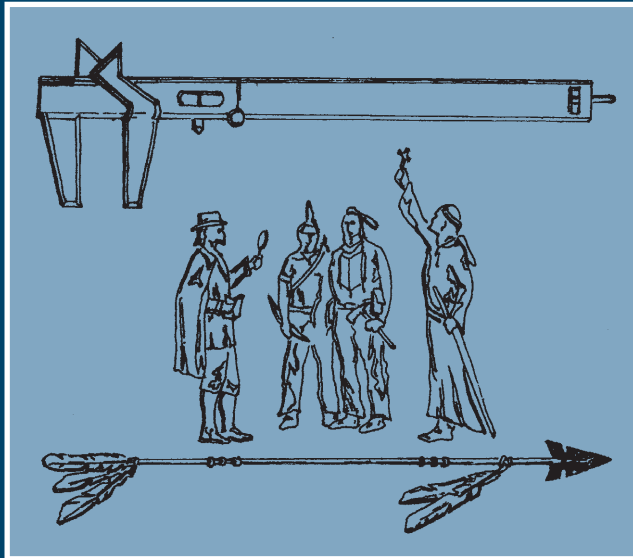


The Promise of Poststructuralist Sociology

*Marginalized Peoples and
the Problem of Knowledge*



Clayton W. Dumont Jr.

THE PROMISE OF POSTSTRUCTURALIST SOCIOLOGY

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Clayton W. Dumont Jr.

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS

Cover art by Shawn E. Dumont

Published by
State University of New York Press, Albany

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For information, contact State University of New York Press, Albany, NY
www.sunypress.edu

Production by Diane Ganeles
Marketing by Anne M. Valentine

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Dumont, Clayton W., Jr. 1962–

The promise of poststructuralist sociology : marginalized peoples
and the problem of knowledge / Clayton W. Dumont

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-7914-7441-9 (hardcover : alk. paper) —

ISBN 978-0-7914-7442-6 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Knowledge, Sociology of. 2. Sociology — Philosophy.

3. Sociology—Methodology. 4. Postmodernism—Social aspects.

I. Title.

HM651.D86 2008

301.01—dc22

2007033816

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book could not have happened without the love and understanding of my wife Cheri and our sons, Clayton and Jesse, each of whom has been gracious about my absences. Many colleagues read earlier drafts of chapters and provided invaluable feedback. Luiz Barbosa, Chris Bettinger, Marjorie Seashore, Tugrul Ilter, and Rhonda Coleman were particularly helpful. I am indebted to Sandra Luft for her close reading, particularly of chapters 2 and 3. Joanne Barker read the entire manuscript in various drafts and gave hours of criticism and insight. Tomás Almaguer, despite his opinions of poststructuralism, has been a wonderful mentor, always honest and encouraging. Two sets of anonymous reviewers were also most helpful, and I thank them for their wisdom and candor. My son, Clayton Andrew, and his grandfather, Clayton Sr., read and commented on early chapters of the book. My brother, Shawn, did the artwork for the book cover. Additional members of the Klamath tribe provided their insights for earlier drafts of chapter 5. My thanks to Donnie Wright, Carmalita Stieger, Nancy (“Kates”) Midwood, Gale (“Hungry”) Brenton, Gerald Skelton Jr., Tori Tupper, and Dino Herrera. Luis V. Perez was an eager and capable research assistant for chapter 6. Elizabeth Sedgwick worked hard to produce an index that is helpful to undergraduate students.

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INTRODUCTION

What is Enlightenment? . . . It is not seeking to make possible a metaphysics that has finally become a science; it is seeking to give new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom.

—Michel Foucault (1984/1997:101,125–26)

Early in our new century, there is still little agreement about what poststructuralism is and what it means for sociology. Indeed, we might say that the label *poststructuralist* refers to a group of philosophers, social scientists, historians, literary scholars, and linguists whose affinity for each other is more a function of their critics than an assemblage of their own making. Nonetheless, in North America a conversation over the meaning and consequences of poststructuralism began to emerge in the social sciences in the last decades of the twentieth century. “Conversation,” though, is too nice a word. Angry argument is a more telling description.

Racialized, ethnic, and cultural minorities were largely and conspicuously excluded from the debate of previous decades; and I hope this book speaks to that omission. Despite the tremendous impact that Cultural Studies and Postcolonial Criticism—traditions heavily influenced by poststructuralism and where ethnic and cultural minorities are a major presence—had on anthropology in the 1980s and 1990s, American sociologists mostly resisted these incursions. Consequently, a tremendous opportunity to reinvigorate sociology, making it more relevant for marginalized populations was lost. It is time to rethink that mistake.

Writing as a proponent, my position is that a sociology informed by poststructuralist thought will increase sociologists’ intellectual, civic, and political power. Yet how does one write a book about an intellectual movement that insists upon, indeed celebrates, its own lack of structure? How can one hope to write truthfully about a tradition that willfully and ruthlessly strives to pry open the politics of any truth telling, no matter how esteemed or sacred? And how can newcomers, particularly students, ever hope to comprehend let alone

appreciate the mind-bending writings that one of my less than appreciative colleagues disparages as “that postmodern gobbledygook”?

My insistence on revisiting and rethinking a debate that many American sociologists are happy to believe was finished by the late 1990s will draw wary glances from colleagues who want to get on with the business of producing scientific knowledge. Social scientists, after all, continue to develop careers by creating and defending elaborate systems of definitions that they hope help us better understand the social world. Indeed, for generations sociologists have even gone so far as to imagine that these understandings can improve the lives of humanity around the globe.

My argument is that leading American sociologists in the 1980s and 1990s largely missed the tremendous intellectual and political potential of poststructuralist philosophy. Their unwillingness or inability to adequately consider the power of poststructuralist criticism stemmed from a self-protecting blindness to their own cultural inheritances and worldview. As a result, they failed to appreciate the reasons behind the appeal that these writings hold for many intellectuals from marginalized populations.

I argue that sociology’s central organizing principles are inherited from Greek and Christian ancestors and that the lack of attention paid to these philosophical and theological assumptions is at the root of American sociology’s overwhelmingly hostile reaction to poststructuralism. Furthermore, had the structure of institutionalized sociology not been so thoroughly inundated with Greek and Christian presuppositions, poststructuralist criticism would not have appealed to intellectuals from marginalized groups to the extent that it has. After all, the disciplined quest for purity of understanding and foundational truth—an endeavor that has caused no shortage of pain and suffering for oppressed populations of many kinds—has its complex origins in Greek and Christian cultural histories. This quest, in recent centuries having become a scientific undertaking, is at the heart of what motivates contemporary poststructuralist critique.

With these European origins in mind, it is important to acknowledge that my own identity is fundamentally related to my affinity for this difficult French philosophy. I am a mixed blood, enrolled member of the Klamath Tribe from southern Oregon. My paternal family is both Klamath and Umpqua (another southern Oregon tribe), and my mother’s people are fourth- and fifth-generation loggers who homesteaded close to the Klamath reservation early in the last century. When I discovered poststructuralist philosophy, and this happened in spite of the objections of my faculty advisers in sociology, graduate school was salvaged for me. Without Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and later Gayatri Spivak, T. Minh-ha Trinh, Henry Giroux, Judith Butler, and Homi K. Bhabha, I would have dropped out and gone home. With the help of these thinkers, I soon learned to understand myself as a “nontraditional” student “from the margins.” Poststructuralism authorized my confrontations with powerful representational strategies deployed by privileged, professional sociologists.

Derrida remains one of the most controversial of the thinkers responsible for unsettling, poststructuralist challenges to traditional Western philosophy (philosophy that is the ancient origin of modern sociology). In an essay published nearly forty years ago, Derrida writes of the difficult birth of this post-structuralist turn in the social sciences.

Here there is a kind of question, let us still call it historical, whose *conception*, *formation*, *gestation*, and *labor* we are only catching a glimpse of today. I employ these words, I admit, with a glance toward the operations of childbearing—but also with a glance toward those who, in a society from which I do not exclude myself, turn their eyes away when faced by the as yet unnamable which is proclaiming itself and which can do so, as is necessary whenever a birth is in the offing, only under the species of the nonspecies, in the formless, mute, infant, and terrifying form of monstrosity. (Derrida 1966/1978:293, *emphases in original*)

Derrida calls the birth a “terrifying form of monstrosity.” The decades following the publication of his essay bear out this prophecy. Fear and desperation, and outright hatred of the birth, erupted in sociologists’ professional meetings and in sociological writings.

Sociologists pursued at least three distinct albeit overlapping attacks on the terrifying newborn. Perhaps most important is the claim that poststructuralism equals relativism, nihilism, nominalism, solipsism, or subjectivism. Susan Hekman (1986:196) asserts, “Derrida and Foucault lead us toward a nihilistic Tower of Babel.” Rosalyn W. Bologh and Leonard Mell (1994:83,89) see an “ultimate subjectivism” that can only end in “a Hobbesian version of society as a war of all against all.” Stephan Fuchs and Steven Ward (1994:506) worry that the birth of Derrida’s monstrosity will bring “a crisis in solidarity, organizational cohesion, and professional communication.” In these and in countless other alarmed sightings there is great fear of destabilizing long institutionalized methods for producing scientific knowledge.

Much of this dread stems from the closely related worry that poststructuralism will destroy a prerogative for making political claims that sociologists have gained only with generations of hard, disciplined, scientific scholarship. If the foundations for truth making are overwhelmed, this criticism goes, then sociology loses any authority to claim that its understandings are superior to those of anyone who cares to claim anything. Thus Pauline M. Rosenau (1992:139) maintains that sociologists will be forced “to relinquish any global political projects” as we “struggle to survive in a normative void.” Ward (1997:785) goes even further, arguing that this lack of foundation is dangerous. “Without the trust and moral commitment which realism generates,” he exclaims, “all social interaction and communication would break down under the weight of paranoid suspicion.” Anxiety, here, tends to be over consequences and not about the merits of poststructuralist arguments *per se*.

A third criticism claims that poststructuralist writings are purposefully unintelligible or a kind of elaborate scam designed to fool people into believing outright nonsense. Jerry L. Lembcke (1993:67) writes of “pig Latin” while Michael Faia (1993:65) refers to “the word salads of the mentally deranged.” Randall Collins (1992:184) lampoons that the academic jokester Erving Goffman is probably responsible for the whole charade since “the condition of ‘being dead’ is just a social construct.” Todd Gitlin (1998:71) finds in the new birth only the schizophrenic, nihilistic “blank stare of the postmodern,” while George Ritzer (1997:xvii) describes these works as “self-consciously unreadable.” Although these attacks are vicious and overstated, it is true that many poststructuralist writings are difficult to decipher.

Although that is not my primary motivation, I write with each of these criticisms in mind. Poststructuralist thought is not nonsensical, and missing the great potential found in these admittedly dense texts is far too high a price for scholars to pay for this flimsy excuse not to read closely and carefully.

Nor does poststructuralist scholarship impede political work. On the contrary, the rigor of poststructuralist analyses promotes a hyper-awareness of the politics found in all knowledge creation. And this awareness is precisely why it appeals to many nontraditional intellectuals. Poststructuralist writings, seriously considered, can help sociology become a far more inclusive and vibrant project.

As a poststructuralist, I assume that all knowledge is political. Thus I understand political work as my *primary* endeavor. Notions of pure knowledge or pure research or knowledge for the sake of knowledge make no sense to me—except perhaps as historical curiosities. In fact, the very fearful charges of “relativism,” “nihilism,” “solipsism,” and “subjectivism” that prop up this alleged political paralysis appear to a poststructuralist’s gaze as profoundly political gestures. Recognizing these accusations as political actions leveled in defense of hardened cultural traditions requires careful exploration of their extended cultural origins.

In his famous essay, “The Promise” (1959), C. Wright Mills argues that sociology ought to help people see the too often unrecognized links between extended history and personal biography. Mills thought that sociology could teach people to understand how social history and individual actions come together in society. In the early chapters of my book, I take this tack. The founding assumptions of our methods for making knowledge (which in the opening chapter students will learn to call “epistemology”) become, in the pages that follow, sociological phenomena. Understood as cultural forms with long and complex genealogies, familiar social scientific habits are less comforting and the possibility of new intellectual assumptions is less frightful.

Relieved of some very enduring superstitions, a poststructuralist-inspired sociology can finally lay claim to the civic duty and public responsibility that generations of sociologists have sought. As differences within and among societies explode, spread, and overlap, the freedom that Enlightenment-era Europeans dreamed about grows more elusive. Only a fearless investigation and

critique of sociology's most cherished epistemological (and culturally inherited) assumptions can sustain sociologists' honest participation in that dream for much longer.

Coming as I do from a nonacademic background, I learned early in my university education that academics' dreams of freedom and equality are often scarcely recognizable to, and at times quite patronizing of, the people and social spaces where I feel most comfortable. The social science I learned from my graduate and undergraduate professors left me unconvinced of its claims and uninspired by its aspirations. I was interested in politics and social issues even as a small boy, but I did not grow up around educated, middle-class people. Academic culture initially struck me as strange. I remember marveling at how seriously professors took themselves and their works. I soon realized that they believed unequivocally in the superiority of their knowledge over that of all other knowing traditions. Because social scientific narrations were given a privileged status by the sociologists from whom I learned, I soon found myself struggling to reconcile those scientific accounts with the narrations of friends and family who often became the unwitting objects of my sociological gaze.

Most of my extended family has at some point worked in the timber industry, and most of my maternal family members are quite proud of their "time in the woods." During my graduate school years at the University of Oregon, there was an all-out cultural, economic, and political struggle over the fate of the forests of the Pacific Northwest. I very much wanted to understand, and to help others understand, what was happening to our timber-dependent communities. I endeavored to write a doctoral dissertation that would do exactly that. However, explanations of "class consciousness," "resource mobilizing social movements," or "ideal types" made me increasingly aware of the fact that sociology and sociologists are themselves thoroughly cultural and political entities. Ironically, then, my familiarity with small, timber town culture was more hindrance than help. I spent countless hours fretting over how my family and friends would react to being sociological categories written about in tones of analytic distance. Ultimately I finished a rather traditional academic dissertation, but I balked at revising it for publication. I simply could not sanction the conspicuously unacknowledged power of the academic renderings that structured the project.

By the time I was a junior at Southern Oregon State College, it was painfully clear to me that being Indian was destined to be a constant annoyance should I choose a future in academe. The authority of science was always at work in any academic discussion of Indians and our ways. But social scientists, particularly the anthropologists, were rarely willing to admit that their queries, desires, and ideals were anything but natural and designed to increase a universalized knowledge of humanity. Worse still, they routinely denied they had this power even as they constantly invoked it.

During my graduate school years, one professor who knew of my fondness for fishing asked me if my Indian side had a problem with my white side putting

live bait on a hook. Another wanted to know, “what happens to you when you are with other Indians?” I wanted to tell him that we get gut-splitting laughter from the telling and retelling of questions like his. But, I refrained and wished someone or something would teach him that his scientific gaze was neither objective nor without consequences. Both of these individuals and their institutions possessed and wielded great power. However their status and that of their institutions—status that gave them the power to pronounce judgment on the merit of my work—did not require that they see their scientific ways as cultural and political acts.

My academic experiences since leaving graduate school have only strengthened my conviction that scientific knowledge, while powerful and often of monumental benefit, must not be allowed the status of extra-cultural, extra-political truth. By the time I obtained an academic post at San Francisco State University in 1991, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) of 1990 was federal law. This hard-won statute finally made it illegal for museums and universities to hold and “collect” the grave contents of deceased Native Americans. The debate over NAGPRA was and is intense. Many in the scientific community continue to believe that the law amounts to destruction of their scientific data.

The vast majority of Indians, including myself, tend to see things very differently. In this case, then, the power of scientific narrations is directly confronted by Native reasoning(s) that are often well beyond what many scientists can appreciate or even tolerate. Indeed, successive chairs of the Sociology Department on my own campus repeatedly engaged me in vigorous debate over what they see as the overzealousness of the law. These knowledge politics are taken up in considerable detail in the penultimate chapter of the book.

Similarly, chapter 6 stems from my frustration with the assumed authority of academic narrations purporting to depict the reality of affirmative action programs in the United States. Although I have benefited in multiple ways from affirmative action policies, I do not accept any of the accounts contained in the widespread and vigorous debates over these initiatives as descriptions of an empirically verifiable reality. Rather, I see these scientific and judicial portrayals as active and politically powerful constructions of me, my family, and many of my friends. These politics, I maintain, are far better navigated by sociologists who understand and appreciate the challenges brought to the academic table by poststructuralist writings. Chapters 5–6 both demonstrate why and how a poststructuralist-informed sociology can increase the political efficacy of cultural and racialized minorities.

My short biographical reflections point to politics as an enduring part of all knowledge making, but they are not an argument for a more penetrating, more accurate, more comprehensive sociology. Rather, they point to the contingency of all sense making. In the words of Steven Seidman (1997: 37), they “relativize sociology.” That is, they support his request that we learn to understand sociology as “a local practice” with “conceptual strategies and

thematic perspectives . . . indicative of a particular tradition rather than . . . a universal language of the social.” Sociology should not, as he says, “fantastically imagine its conventions as providing a privileged access to the social universe” (54).

Once again, my argument is that leading American sociologists of the 1980s and 1990s missed a tremendous opportunity to increase the relevance of sociology for a wider, more diverse audience. This failure stemmed from these sociologists’ unwillingness or inability to think critically about the discipline’s Greek and Christian origins. A close examination of cultural assumptions inherited from their Greek and Christian predecessors can help professional sociologists see poststructuralist writings in a less hostile light. This, in turn, will lead to a sociology that can be far more productive for marginalized populations. My argument is made over six chapters.

Chapter 1, “Meeting The Monster: Understanding Poststructuralist Assumptions,” is an extended introduction. Because I want this text to be accessible to undergraduate theory students, I begin with demonstrations and stories from everyday life that provide easily accessible, interpretive context. In these early pages, students and colleagues can both gain access to assumptions routinely made by poststructuralists and recognize how these assumptions are consonant with their everyday experiences.

Chapter 2, “A Genealogy of the Scientific Self,” locates contemporary sociologists’ epistemological assumptions and political aspirations in much older Greek philosophy and Christian theology. My aim in these pages is to demonstrate that our Greek and Christian predecessors pursued unobtainable, faith-based certainty, and that structuralist sociologists have failed to critically interrogate their allegiance to these divinations.

Chapter 3, “Toward a Post-Christian Ethic of Responsibility in Sociology,” substantiates the Christian origins of contemporary, structuralist sociologists’ sense of political responsibility. I argue that the biblical God—understood as a discipline demanding, hard to know, center of certainty—remains the unexamined source of the assumption that viable political work requires a general, thematically coherent sense of history and society. Ultimately, I conclude that the quest for social and historical structure inhabited by an essential human agency is politically debilitating. Chasing our own theological tales distracts us from developing far more pressing, more earthly, and actually obtainable political acumen.

Chapter 4, “The American Debate on Postmodernism,” retraces some of the heated controversy of the 1980s and 1990s as it unfolded in American sociologists’ writings about poststructuralism, or “postmodernism” as these perspectives were routinely labeled. In this chapter I connect the major objections raised by these critics to sociology’s culturally inherited and faith-based assumptions explored in chapters 2–3. I focus, in particular, on these sociologists’ stated desire to include marginalized others while simultaneously trying to defend their own epistemological beliefs.

Chapter 5, “Who’s Understanding Whose Past? Telling the Truth about Native Dead,” is a political document written by a Native sociologist (me) using poststructuralist writings. Anthropologists’ attacks on NAGPRA, attacks they claim are mounted from their concern for objective truth, are rethought and rearticulated using voices of Native peoples. Acting as a political intervention, the chapter recasts anthropological fables of objectivity as acts of political aggression. Anthropological narrations of Indian histories are routinely awarded the status of “facts” and “evidence,” I argue, only because Europeans came to the Americas in overwhelming numbers and carried guns. Thus, far from being a fight over “truth,” Native American struggles to reclaim our dead are better understood as the most recent confrontation with colonialist power that these physical anthropologists uncritically assume as their birthright.

Chapter 6, “Taking Charge of the Affirmative Action Debate: Social Science and Racial Justice,” is both analysis and political strategy informed by poststructuralism. The central argument of the chapter is that the major components of the debate over affirmative action have no inherent structure. “Race,” “merit,” “discrimination,” “individuality,” and “equal opportunity” can never be finally defined, and they will never have their truth laid bare for all right-minded people to witness. Neither affirmative action nor its societal consequences are “empirically verifiable,” in the sense of scientific truth that can end political struggle through appeals to the objective qualities of social structure. These programs and their consequences, I argue, are always constructed, comprehended, and maintained from within the midst of political struggle. Because poststructuralists understand politics, and not discovering “the truth” about affirmative action, as our primary intellectual duty, I maintain that we are better poised to develop the skills and strategies necessary to defend these programs.



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