



Poststructuralism

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Abstract

One theme in Continental Philosophy is to militate against structures, of language and institutions, as Nietzsche and Foucault did, and Habermas to some extent. That is called 'poststructuralism' by some. In this brief note, I do not oppose institutions, because societies cannot do without them. However, I am seeking a structure that leaves some room for freedom of individuals.

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Structuralism

Poststructuralism is a theme in Continental Philosophy (CP). There is no clear definition of CP, and it is fragmented, but one can indicate themes of thought and discussion that arise in it, such as: humanism, non-rationality, critical theory of society after Marx, ethics, linguistics, and existentialism. Some define it in contrast to Analytic Philosophy (AP), which prefers clarity, logic, scientific rigour that it finds lacking in CP. Philosophers involved in CP are, among others: Vico, Hume, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Adorno, Habermas, Wittgenstein, Nietzsche, Foucault, Derrida, Piaget, Levinas and Buber. I am currently finishing a book that connects the themes of CP from a dynamic perspective, in change of knowledge, meaning and language, ethics, society and identity. Here, in this brief piece, I pick out the theme of 'post-structuralism'.

Several philosophers militate against the loss of freedom due to state regulation and neglect of the individual (Nietzsche, Foucault, Habermas), and seek to escape the regimentation of structure. Michel Foucault reported on studies of prisons, clinics, science and sex as imposing discipline, embraced even by the victims of it. I consider myself a post-structuralist but that does not mean that I am

against structure. Society, in particular, is a system with a structure of institutions and culture that is inevitable.

A system by definition provides something that its elements do not, but to achieve this, the elements have to interact and surrender some of their autonomy. This is covered in the notion of 'homeostasis'. That occurs in organisms, as in the human body and mind. In the body certain variables have to be kept within bounds of viability, such as salinity, temperature, blood, immunity. The mind also has homeostasis, in keeping within bounds emotions, reflexes, and reason.

In the brain, only part is dedicated to reason, and the rest to emotions and reflexes, that are partly subconscious, in the stream of hormones and neuronal impulses. Like bodily homeostasis, both reason and emotions and reflexes developed in evolution because they contributed to survival and procreation, together with language ability.

There is a difference between irrationality and non-rationality. Irrationality goes against reason; non-rationality operates next to reason, in emotions and reflexes that are tacit and largely subconscious, arising from evolution

because they also contribute to survival, with fear causing flight, reflexes, such as withdrawal from heat, disgust to avoid poison. Etc.

Society imposes a host of regulations and other institutions. An institution is an 'enabling constraint'. An example is a path through a swamp. You have to stick to it or drown in the swamp, but it does get you across the swamp. However, the regulations have mushroomed into an ever more complex bureaucratic system, in what I call 'institutional crowding', because society has become ever more complex, increasingly adding regulations that run into a wall of limited bureaucratic capacity, with only limited weeding out of defunct regulations.

Democratic governments interpret democracy as satisfying claims, and avoiding loss of votes to populist parties that make it their strategy to whip up complaints. This is exacerbated by mistrust of people, whom governments expect to misuse the regulations, which they try to block with restrictions and controls that make the regulation incomprehensible for ordinary people, who then make errors in procedures, and are penalised for it.

Poststructuralism

The loss of individual freedom by the encroachment of what Habermas called the 'life world' by bureaucracy evokes increasing protests, that are now leading to a rise of old conservative populism with a desire for return to old values of nationalism, family. Patriarchism, anti-feminism, homophobia, anti-ecology, ruled by an autocrat.

This is paradoxical, because many of the adherents are those who depend the most on the social arrangements they are fighting. This is obfuscated by conspiracy theories that throw reason overboard and accuse ruling elites of evil intentions to enslave the population. Yet, the protest against mushrooming bureaucracy is not invalid.

It is essential to simplify regulations and abolish old ones, and to stop catering to all demands for lifting burdens and helping people who feel excluded, and to make regulations simpler even if this yields more fraud. Since the 1980's I have been pleading for a Universal Basic Income (UBI), which lays

a bottom on income that enables many regulations to be abolished or made simpler. Opponents claim that it cannot be financed and will discourage people from contributing to the economy. Experiments in several countries contradict this. Some people use the UBI to let children go to school instead of helping to fight poverty, or to jointly buy a fishing boat or nets, strike a well, buy a sewing machine and cloth to make and sell garments, install WIFI, and set up small enterprises. Yes: some people will use the UBI for being artists and taking care of the old or sick, and that is a good thing, better than some impersonal bureaucratic arrangement. It will save on the public costs of it, and the emergence of small enterprise will feed the economy, which will compensate the cost to some extent.

I seek reduction, not abolishment of institutional structure; in what I would call a 'porous' structure that leaves fissures through which individuals can creep. This can be achieved not only by simplification and reduction of institutions, but also by the fact that language does not yield a closed regimentation. Ferdinand de Saussure distinguished 'langue', the synchronic, public, clear and reasonably consistent set of word meanings and their grammatical and syntactic order of concepts, and 'parole', the personal meanings associated with individual experience, diachronic, developing in time as personal identity unfolds, that can deviate from langue and infuses it with change. Parole is compost from which a flower can bloom that now and then is added to the bouquet of langue.

The point here is that in language there is room, in parole, for personal meaning that goes beyond the order of langue. The paradigmatic example is poetry, aided by metaphor, rhythm, rhyme and structure, but it may also arise in fictional narrative. Thus, there is some freedom of expression, going beyond the structure of langue [1,2].

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