

Reading Lyotard, on the Politics of the New

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Stephanie Mackler's linkage of natality and the *differend* is a creative addition to educational discourse. On the whole, my reading of Jean-François Lyotard is in agreement. Our difference concerns the explicit overarching emphasis on political justice that I find in Lyotard. This is not to say that Mackler neglects the political. She very specifically alludes to Lyotard on both Nazism and the economic rationality of capitalism. Specifically, our differences hinge on her descriptions of Lyotard on language and its relationship to the *differend*. Moreover, because Mackler's attention focuses on the new, her emphasis yields a soft reading; that is, one in which the centrality of political justice becomes diffused and implicit. To begin my different reading, I shall first present Mackler's stipulative definition of natality. This will be followed with her descriptions of language use. My reading will emphasize the significance of the heterogeneity of society's language games and Lyotard's search for justice in his appeal to Kantian categories.

Mackler uses the term natality to mean: "the possibilities within each of us to begin and become something new." (Her usage consistently refers to natality as "the birth of the improbable.") Regarding language, Mackler argues we use language in two ways: as an instrument, or, as a response to the overwhelming unexpected. As a tool, she argues language presupposes its own meaning. But regarding the unexpected (the *differend*), "we bear witness to that for which we do not yet have a language." Mackler emphasizes the limitations of language not only in the experience of the *differend*, but also in the individual's reliance on his/her language at hand. But, again, inspiration for natality is in the *differend*. Curiously, Mackler claims there is a separation between language and the "external world."

To expose the differences between us, my reading of Lyotard will follow a question and answer format.

QUESTION: What is Lyotard's paradigm of language use and the political?

ANSWER: Borrowing from Wittgenstein, Lyotard defines society as a composition of heterogeneous language games or little narratives. All games are governed by rules that the players must obey. But, unlike Wittgenstein, Lyotard emphasizes that language "[i]s not like a box of tools that speakers dip into when they want to communicate...he only givens are phrases."¹ Politically, phrases "[s]ituate within the universe they present, an addressor, an addressee, and a referent." While phrase regimes can be distinguished, Lyotard emphasizes that it is impossible to convert one phrase into another without modifying the pragmatic situation of "[t]he referent, addressee, addressor."² The *differend* highlights a terroristic version of this situation.

It is important to note that phrases belong not only to heterogeneous regimes, phrases also are included within incommensurable genres of discourse: cognitive, persuasive, epideictic. But what is crucial is Lyotard's claim that phrases situate

players in the universes these phrases represent, “before any intention (of the player).”³ Language precedes and positions the subject. The subject-object separation description of language is false. Lyotard says, “Language is immanent in us.”⁴

QUESTION: Is not there a connection here with Lyotard’s characterization of our time as the postmodern condition?

ANSWER: Yes. Remember, Lyotard describes society as a heterogeneous grouping of small narratives (*petits recits*). “These give rise to institutions in patches, of local determinism.”⁵ Further, small narratives operate in the absence of a meta-discourse. A meta-discourse both legitimizes and universally prescribes rules governing every small narrative. But the absence of universal rules means that language users are governed by rules internal to specific language games.

QUESTION: What problems are built into this agonistic political reality?

ANSWER: There are two problems. First, there is the issue of domination. Second is the search for a just political resolution that can link phrase regimes. Domination occurs when a judgment is required to settle a dispute between parties but the decision rendered applies the rules of a language game that is incommensurable with that of the aggrieved party or plaintiff. Lyotard names this the *differend*.

QUESTION: So the *differend* brings forth the new or does it?

ANSWER: For Lyotard, the *differend* concerns the political issue of adjudicating justice. It is not simply the birth of the new.

QUESTION: But does the *differend* not signal a linguistic inadequacy?

ANSWER: Yes, but in a specialized sense. Again, the fundamental issue is a search that would find phrases that would link opposing phrase regimes. Players from opposing phrase regimes must be allowed to continue to play. Justice demands that no side dominates. “In the *differend*, something asks to be put into phrases and suffers the wrong of not being able to be put into phrases right away.”⁶ Quite simply, the dominated victim confronts the unrepresentable.

QUESTION: What would count as a paradigm case of the *differend*?

ANSWER: The controversy regarding the historicity of Auschwitz is a model. Lyotard responded to the historian Robert Faurisson’s argument that the existence of the gas chamber at Auschwitz cannot be proved for lack of eyewitnesses to the events. Lyotard argues that only the dead can testify. But if “[o]ne is dead, one cannot testify that it is on account of the gas chamber.”⁷ This is an instance of the unrepresentable. The unrepresentable resides in the fact that the aggrieved cannot establish the existence of the referent.

QUESTION: What precisely is the meta-discourse at work here?

ANSWER: It is the meta-discourse of positivism with its epistemological criterion of falsifiability. Lyotard says, “It cannot be said that a hypothesis is verified, but only until further notice it has not been falsified...the victims of extermination camps must prove that extermination.”⁸

QUESTION: What is Lyotard’s strategy?

ANSWER: Lyotard contrasts the unrepresentable to Kant's concept of the sublime. Lyotard wants to put into language what cannot be phrased, so that representations of it incorporate conflict and indeterminacy. He wants to find a strategy sufficient to recover the submerged political imperatives of marginalized groups. In confronting the unrepresentable and the force of the event of the *differend*, the marginalized groups experience a feeling comparable to that before the sublime. This is the feeling of wanting to capture the idea or totality but not being able to do it. The pleasure and pain derive from "realizing the capacity to conceive, and the pain of not being able to put those ideas into phrases."⁹

QUESTION: Can the strategy be specified?

ANSWER: Lyotard compares the strategy to modernist painters such as Newman and Malevich. In the face of the *differend* game players like these, artists "[m]ust work without rules to establish rules for what will have been made." Language first is impotent. But Lyotard places the sublime against the political *differend*, as a model to create and invent new phrases without fixed rules.

Lyotard uses the event of the sublime as an analogue; and it is a first step to expose the limits and conditions of the *differend*. It is not a question of the separation of language from our experience of reality. Remember for Lyotard, language is immanent in us. The politics of natality does not happen *ex-nihilo*.

QUESTION: Are there direct implications for the school?

ANSWER: One short answer is that Lyotard's critique of positivism is applicable to the physicalistic idiom that characterizes the assessment of schools today.

This reading has emphasized the politics of language in the unrepresentable and the *differend*. It is in this sense that I find Lyotard delivers the new "[t]he as yet unthought, even when it is already thought."

1. Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 42.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

4. Lyotard, "That Which Resists After All," *Philosophy Today* (Winter 1992): 407.

5. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

6. Jean François Lyotard, *The Differend Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges van den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11.

7. Jean François Lyotard, "Presentations," in *Philosophy in France Today*, ed. A. Montefiore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 3.

8. *Ibid.*, 8.

9. Jean François Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thebaud, *Just Gaming*, trans. Clad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 31.