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## POSTMODERNITY, POSTMODERNISM, AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

*[I]t is not really a matter of arriving at the truth of the content of the theses of the book, but rather a question of coming to grips with the new effects produced by the new situation of a joint discussion ... it will be rather an attempt to produce a new book. The effects that have been produced upon us will be constitutive elements of the new book (the book of our conversations), and the latter will not be the clarification, the correct version, of the previous ones, but one of their effects upon two addressees, you and me, who are in no way privileged.*

(Lyotard, in Lyotard and Thébaud, 1985)

**T**he aim of this book, among others, is to provide a different lens to look at the impact of public relations theory and practice on society and is a continuation of the project I started in my dissertation and in subsequent publications (Holtzhausen, 1995, 2000, 2002, 2002a, 2002b; Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002). I hope that this book will contribute to a discussion, to producing a “new book,” as Lyotard (Lyotard & Thébaud, 1985) suggests, on the nature of public relations in the Western world and the possibilities of practice to bring about a more just and egalitarian society. That is the first aim of this book. The aim is not to provide a direct critique of specific public relations theories, although I do occasionally use some theories to show how the underlying worldview and philosophical assumptions lead to theory building and related practice. This is a second aim of this book: to show that no public relations theory or practice is neutral or objective but, particularly in the social and human sciences, deeply influenced by the cultures and societies in which they are formulated. In turn these theories and practices contribute to shaping those societies and cultures.

As such this text might very well raise more questions than answers. It investigates the possibilities of postmodern theory for public relations theory and practice in more depth than any of my previous work. I believe that many postmodern perspectives already have become a natural part of the discourse in our societies. The genie is out of the bottle and because so many people found their voices through postmodern perspectives, the postmodern genie will not go back. As Ermarth (2001b) says,

Once across the threshold of postmodernity—and most of us already have crossed it here and there whether we like it or not—history in its traditional sense, along with its founding unitary subject, [is] no longer possible simply because the postmodern world is not one system but many. (pp. 207–208)

In the United States the fact that Barack Obama was elected president indicated that some of the old barriers of race and class are breaking down and that there is a much bigger appreciation of diversity in society. Other phenomena of postmodernity are the fragmentation of media and their audiences, facilitated by new technologies; an increased understanding of the complexities of the postmodern world; and more general acceptance of the reality that life and society are not neatly ordered but quite chaotic. At the same time this event has threatened many whose hegemony and norms have never been challenged in such a fundamental way and who do believe the world works in one way only.

This relates to two issues the book will focus on in terms of their application to public relations theory and practice: the postmodernization of society and the possibilities postmodern theories offer to explain, understand, and deal with a changing society. This does not per definition mean that existing public relations theories are redundant. However, it is important to understand that theories are created by people who themselves have specific understandings. Theories are not objective and all-knowing but rather represent one way of looking and explaining. Theories are the products of specific contexts. If contexts change, so do theories. In public relations there still is a dominant modernist and positivist approach to theory building. Much of practice is situated in the context of market economic principles of organizing and in finding linear causal relationships between distinct variables. In a recent bibliographic analysis of public relations theory Pasadeos, Berger, and Renfro (2010) found that the field of public relations is maturing but this also presents a challenge because much of the cited work resides in a specific scholarly (and one might argue self-referential) community. They believe it will be necessary to take note of Broom's (2006) warning that public relations theorists cannot work in a closed system and that public relations scholars need to see their work cited by scholars from other disciplines. In conducting the research for this book I found very little evidence of any citations of public relations theorists in other domains.

Fortunately, Pasadeos et al. (2010) also found that there is a very strong tradition of critical theory in the field and I hope this book will contribute to that genre. Many phenomena in our field today are undertheorized or explained in naïve ways, such as the role of media in society and their impact on public relations practice, the implications of globalization, and practice in the context of new organizational structures. Unfortunately, in public relations as in many other social and human sciences many “theorists went on with ‘business as usual,’ ignoring the massive alterations taking place and the controversies over their significance” (Best & Kellner, 2001, p. 4).

### Rupture or Progression?

Some might argue that postmodernism is a passing fad and that modernism has won the day. And there are indeed many who wish it away because the questions and viewpoints postmodern-leaning scholars raise are uncomfortable. I wish to argue that postmodernity in many instances is an outflow of modernity, rather than a rupture with modernity; that pitting the modern against the post-modern is a form of intellectual blackmail that forces one to choose between the two (Foucault, 1984; Lyotard, 1984). They also are not binary opposites; as a result I do not support the interpretation that the two philosophies lie on a continuum with modernism on the one extreme and postmodernism on the other, as Mumby (1997) contends. These two philosophies do differ in important ways. At the same time I would argue with Best and Kellner (1991, 1997, 2001) that there need to be some criteria on which a life of activism can be built, even if those criteria are always contested and might change from situation to situation.

Some postmodern theorists argue the process of postmodernization gave rise to a form of society that is so radically different from that given within modernity that a continuation is impossible. This book, however, will take the approach Lyotard (1992) offers when he proposes that postmodernism is a condition that *precedes* modernism: “A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern” (p. 147). He criticized the notion of a rupture with modernity as “a way of forgetting or repressing the past ... repeating it and not surpassing it” (Lyotard, 1993b, p. 48). As I have argued previously (Holtzhausen, 2000), post-modernity provides an opportunity to look at public relations differently and to find alternative solutions for a more just and democratic society by entering into a postmodern condition, to borrow Lyotard’s phrase.

Lyotard’s definition would challenge those who argue that postmodernism is a passing fad. If the postmodern is considered a phase through which paradigms are challenged and new ways of thinking are sought, all modern phases will be preceded by postmodern phases, even though they might not be called such. The specifics of this postmodern phase will then most certainly pass as it is absorbed into a new modern phase, which will eventually be challenged

by another postmodern phase, and so forth. I also strongly support Foucault's (1984) argument that his work, and I would argue the work of others who we identify as postmodernists, is not a "doctrine, nor even ... a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life" (p. 50).

This is similar to what Eagan (2009, p. 141) calls "a method or strategy" to deal with postmodernity. His arguments shed more light on the relationship between modernity and postmodernity when he says postmodernists do not pretend that "there is anything genuinely new under the sun" (p. 141) but rather view postmodernism as a tool to interpret actual and linguistic events differently. It is a dialogue with tradition and does this in a flexible way that challenges fixed modernist interpretations. The purpose of this dialogue with modernity is an attempt "to heal some of the wounds inflicted by the excesses of modernity, such as imperialism, patriarchy, racism, fascism, etc." (p. 142). Thus postmodernism "[stings] us into acknowledging that our intellectual grids are deficient" (Farmer, 1997, p. 119, as cited in Vickers, 2005, p. 84).

At the same time postmodernism is not only about philosophy but also about the real changes in society that go hand-in-hand with different ways of looking at the current time. Ignoring postmodernism "would fly in the face of some significant evidence for seismic socio-cultural shifts" (Lyon, 1999, p. 92). An exploration of the postmodern would enable us to "discern what sorts of questions—of knowing and being, of ethics and politics—are raised" (p. 92) and "obliges us to lift our eyes above narrowly technical and discrete issues and to grapple with historical change on a grand scale" (p. 7). Many scholars indeed view postmodernism as an "epochal shift" from modernity that involves the "emergence of a new social totality with its own distinct organizing principles" (Featherstone, 1991, p. 1), mostly facilitated by new communication technologies.

Some scholars identify different types of postmodernisms, such as "epochal postmodernism" (Boje, Fitzgibbons, & Steingard, 1996, p. 63), "epistemological postmodernism" (p. 63), and "critical postmodernism" (p. 64). In epistemological postmodernism Derrida's deconstruction methods are applied to, among others, organizational discourse. Mickey's (2003) work is an example of this application in public relations. Such analyses focus on showing how so-called rational decision-making in organizations are procedures used to mask the underlying power strategies of those already in power (Cooper & Burrell, 1988, p. 110). Epistemological postmodernism reflects a sceptical postmodern perspective, whereas critical postmodernism takes an affirmative position (Rosenau, 1992). Critical postmodernism is a mid-range position that moves seamlessly between applying postmodern perspectives to modernist organizations. Although there is a transition from modern to postmodern organizing, it "is in its infancy. Modernism, modernist organization, and positivist science rule the day" (Boje et al., 1996, p. 62). I believe this also is the case in public relations and this type of approach is by far the preferred methodology for publication in journals such as *Journalism*

*& Mass Communication Quarterly*, which is the flagship journal of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication in the United States. But labeling an organizational dimension as postmodern does not guarantee the disappearance of exploitative practices in organizations. The approach that will be used in this book is a combination of epistemological postmodernism and critical postmodernism. These two approaches allow for a cross-over approach between otherwise incompatible theorists such as Bourdieu, Gramsci, Foucault, and Lyotard (Deetz, 2001).

Reading the works of those philosophers who generally are viewed as postmodern, or somewhat postmodern, such as Foucault, Lyotard, and Deleuze and Guattari, it will be hard to argue for postmodernism as a rupture. The works of these theorists even sometimes hark back to ancient philosophers such as Socrates and Plato in the sense that the works of these philosophers often are cited as laying the foundation for those principles of modernism postmodernists critique. Seeds for major changes in society were invariably planted in preceding ideologies and philosophies (Lyon, 1999).<sup>1</sup> Postmodern phenomena should be situated in time and eras such as the Baroque crisis in the 17th century or the turbulence at the transition from the 19th to the 20th centuries. These periods should guide us during our own time to ask the right questions, Lyon argues.

Since that time, and to this day, I am most informed and influenced about postmodernism and postmodernity through the work of Best (1995) and Best and Kellner (1991, 1997, 2001). Having read, and reread, everything they have written on this topic, their work has hugely informed my own work in and perspectives on public relations. With full recognition to these two authors, who set me on my “postmodern adventure,” to borrow from the title of their 2001 text, I follow their direction and distance myself from the extreme postmodern notion that there is a rupture between modernity and postmodernity. Therefore, this book does not intend to become a propaganda piece for postmodernism, but rather a text that, in the words of Best and Kellner, “combines the most useful of modern and postmodern perspectives” (2001, p. 5) in an effort to advance theory in the field of public relations.

At the same time I feel my work is somewhat more radical than theirs because of my extreme wariness of metanarratives, most likely because of my personal history as related in the Preface to this book. The results of the metanarrative of *apartheid* are now familiar to us all. From this follows my insistence on the importance of theory building and practice at a local and regional level and as a technique for empowerment because I believe change from resistance at the local level is what facilitates positive change. This also might be a consequence of my focus on public relations, a field I have now been involved in as a practitioner and academic for close on forty years. Most likely also because of my many years as a public relations practitioner the biggest influence on my work is that of Lyotard, whose perspectives in my view are particularly relevant to public relations practice. In the end one can only critique what you know. As Foucault

(1989b, p. 65) says, “It’s up to you, who are directly involved with what goes on in [your terrain of expertise], faced with all the conflicts of power which traverse it, to confront them and construct the instruments which will enable you to fight in that terrain.” The theories one would use to critique your terrain of knowledge will therefore also depend on their applicability to that field.

While I might have a stronger anti-foundationalist stance than Best and Kellner (n.d.) I do support their belief that theories can be compared on the basis of their logic and ability to promote an argument that “are reasonable to hold” (§ 10), e.g. arguments against racism have stronger merits than those for racism. As they say, “Our court of appeal is reason, facts, verified bodies of knowledge, and our experience of the world itself, which is not infinitely malleable to any and all descriptions, such as the one which says the world is flat” (§ 11). Similarly Ermarth (2001b) argues that instead of being “loonies unable to kick a stone” (p. 212) postmodernists are more respectful of detail than modernists. The reason why postmodernists argue for complexity and chaos is that they do not disregard certain facts just to fit their empiricist paradigm; “in the same way quantum theory is more precise just as it becomes less secure in the familiar empiricist way” (p. 212).

A related argument about theorizing and choosing the best theories is the one of theorizing as a “wrangle in the marketplace” (Heath, 2009, location 790). In an excellent overview of the rhetorical tradition in public relations Heath repeats the argument that theoretical approaches to public relations are similar to a marketplace because their usefulness is debated through rhetorical strategies. Theories that have the best explanatory abilities will be the ones with longevity. I find this seamless transition from metaphor to practice problematic, as I generally do when metaphors are treated as facts. First, treating theory building as capitalism has an ideological base that those who use it should be clear about. Capitalism is not the only possible explanation for the phenomenon of public relations. As I argue repeatedly, democracy offers a better explanation. Ermarth (2001b, p. 196) refers to the market as an “often dysfunctional fiction” (p. 196) and Westwood and Clegg (2003, p. 12) describe such an approach as “an overt pragmatic politics promulgated as the means to redirect and give impetus to the field” in the case of organization theory. Even Pfeffer (1997), that stalwart of positivist approaches to the field of organization theory, rejects such an approach as

tautological reasoning. Practices are presumed to be efficient because of their very existence—if they were inefficient they would disappear—and thus the logic of economic science as it is practiced is, given a particular empirical observation, to derive a proof that demonstrates the efficiency properties of what has been observed. (p. 49)

Perceived usefulness of theories also can be a symptom of intellectual laziness or resistance to acknowledge other ways of seeing. This argument also

would presume that everybody knows every theory and that everybody has the same basis of knowledge and access to argue about the usefulness of all theories.

Some scholars, such as Deetz (2001), while acknowledging the basic tenets of postmodernism, proposed the alternative name of “dialogic studies” (p. 31) for this new movement, particularly because of the extreme viewpoints so often associated with it. Although I believe postmodernism goes far beyond a rhetorical approach, I do support Deetz’s notion that a broader approach allows scholars to include theorists not normally associated with the postmodern movement, again resonating the views of Best and Kellner. Yet another approach is that of Cornell (1992) who prefers to call it a “philosophy of the limit” because it does not refer to a “periodization” (p. 10) of the term but rather points to the philosophical differences between the two traditions. Nonetheless, I believe that the term postmodern now has generated enough debate to become a fixed term and that other terminology created with the aim of deflecting the accusations of “presumed relativism, amorality, and rampant subjectivity” (Westwood & Clegg, 2003, p. 13) are no longer necessary.

The rest of this chapter is devoted to an explication of the differences between the modern and the postmodern. I also give a brief and introductory overview of the major tenets of postmodern theory at the hands of the major philosophers associated with this movement: Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, Deleuze, and Guattari. Lastly, I provide a brief overview of the chapters of this book.

But first it might be beneficial to set the scene briefly for further theory development by elaborating on the postmodernization of society, or postmodernity, and to explain the difference in the terms postmodernity and postmodernism. Scholars generally discern between postmodernism, which is the theoretical and philosophical school of thought that flowed from the *Zeitgeist* of the time; and postmodernity, which referred to social, cultural, and political changes in society itself (Boyne & Rattansi, 1990; Crook, Pakulski, & Waters, 1992; Friedberg, 1990; Lyon, 1999; Lyotard, 1989). These changes manifest themselves in different forms of culture, state, inequalities in society, politics, work organization, science, and technology (Best & Kellner, 2001; Crook, et al., 1992). This also is the distinction made in this book. While postmodernity will refer to societal changes, postmodernism will refer to the theoretical and philosophical thoughts underlying postmodernity. Postmodernism thus is “an intellectual practice that problematizes philosophy and all matters of ontology and epistemology” (Westwood & Clegg, 2003, p. 8).

## The (Post)Modernization of Society

To understand the postmodern it is important to understand what modernism means because postmodernism largely represents a critique of and resistance to modernism per se.

### *The Impact of Modernity*

Modernity generally refers to a variety of economic, political, social, and cultural transformations that took place in the historical epoch following on the Middle Ages or feudalism (Best & Kellner, 1991). Ermarth (2001b) traces it back to a “culture of representation” (p. 202) that emerged during the Renaissance and was defined in relation to the debate between the ancient and the modern (Featherstone, 1991). Modernity devised a way to describe both natural and human phenomena through a systematic process of representation or description, which laid the foundation for the management of society. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the term came to be contrasted to the traditional order and implied progressive economic and administrative processes that resulted in the modern capitalist-industrial state.

While the term *modern* actually means *today*, the term *modernity* refers to a kind of society different from those preceding it and is recognized by developments in science, technology, industrialization, and an improvement in living standards, including life expectancy (Cahoone, 2003). A philosophy that promoted “free markets, a largely secular culture, liberal democracy, individualism, rationalism, humanism, etc.” (p. 8) facilitated these developments. The exact starting point of modernism is in question. Cahoone’s philosophical starting point is Descartes’s *Meditations* written in the 17th century but he acknowledges that the religious reformist movements in Europe and the scientific revolutions in the 17th century among others could also be regarded as such. With him I would argue that it really does not matter because it is what it meant that is important for us to understand the postmodern.

Modernity also is linked to a philosophical movement called the Enlightenment, which Cahoone (2003) refers to as a “positive self-image” of Western culture “which places the highest premium on individual life and freedom, and believes that such freedom and rationality will lead to social progress through virtuous, self-controlled work, creating a better material, political, and intellectual life for all” (p. 9). As he rightly remarks, despite the evidence to the contrary, this philosophy persists. The continuous insinuations that Blacks and women (McNutt, 2011) do not want to work but merely want to rely on the state is a typical example of this belief. One of the great benefits of modernity, Cahoone argues, is the explosion of art forms, which he refers to as “aesthetic modernism” (p. 9).

What is important is that modernism is associated with liberalism and humanism, which still today remain important in some significant ways, also in public relations. I wish to suggest that these also are the underlying values of the work of James Grunig (Grunig & White, 1992) and his contemporaries and the subsequent focus on two-way symmetry as a communication approach in the field. This is a state of the field that scholars from other fields do not realize because they prefer to not read these works and would rather revert to naïve and simplistic descriptions of public relations as “spin.” Inherent in symmetry



is the *desire* to live and practice the values of liberalism, which Good (2001, p. 3, citing Gray, 1995) describes as

individualist, in that it asserts the moral primacy of the person against any collectivity; egalitarian, in that it confers on all human beings the same basic moral status; universalist, affirming the moral unity of the species; and meliorist, in that it asserts the open-ended improvability, by use of critical reason, of human life.

This definition, however, also brings to light the major issues with modernism, such as the individual as solely responsible for his destiny; the claims of universality; and the concept of reason. Modernism regarded reason as the source of progress in knowledge and society, the locus of truth, and the foundation of systematic knowledge. I use the word *his* here deliberately because to suggest that women and others on the margins of society were included in this perspective is simply untruthful. As an aside, this is a strategy often used, namely to seamlessly slip in *women* when cited philosophers used the term *men*. To do this is disingenuous, to say the least, because with a simple stroke of the keyboard millennia of the suffering and abuse of women and men who were not from the privileged classes are swept under the rug, while simultaneously suggesting that a new utopia of equality has been reached. A recent example is Heath's (2009) review of the rhetorical tradition in public relations. It is indeed a wonderful piece but I do wish to critique his insertion of "[and women]" and "[or women]" when citing Aristotle (locations 907–916) for the above reasons.

It is exactly scientific reasoning that many argue led to many of the problems of modernity, such as the extreme differentiation of labor and the life world, the breakdown of community and communalism through urbanization, social control through the rise of bureaucracy, self-discipline and self-surveillance, and the rise of secularity at the cost of religion, to mention but a few (Lyon, 1999, pp. 25–45). This produced a new industrialized and colonial world that resulted in untold suffering, genocide, and repression, of among other women and people who were viewed as different—the Other. It produced disciplinary institutions, practices, and discourses that legitimized domination and control, also over men (Best & Kellner, 1991).

The United States is generally viewed as the ultimate modern society because of its pervasive bureaucratization of society, which is made increasingly possible through technology, supervision, control, and standardization. The engine that drives this kind of society is capitalism, which manifests in a continuous quest for new products and new consumers, portrayed as progress. In modernism not only the life world is differentiated in terms of work, home, church, recreation, and so forth, but also society, where men and women are given different roles, and *normal* people are differentiated from the *deviant*, particularly through the use of psychology, psychiatry, and empiricism that is used to create categories of people. The accessibility of information about individual

behavior of people further strengthens this process. Differentiation in turn creates problems of integration, which necessitates surveillance, also made possible by new technologies. The “rational” increasingly displaces the traditional, particularly through the advancement of science, mathematics, and other forms of calculation, such as accounting practices.

At the basis of modernist philosophy lies the belief that “there is *a* human nature” [italics added], which Rabinow (1984, p. 3) views as fundamental to modernist perspectives on true scientific knowledge. Modernists believe human nature is a bio-physical structure that allows humans to develop a unified language, which will eventually lead to a universal understanding of all life. This, for instance, was the life goal of Noam Chomsky, namely, to develop “a testable mathematical theory of mind” (p. 3). It is the unified, single language that describes all of human existence that is known as *reason*. Reason is central to the Enlightenment, which promotes the idea that all humanity has the faculty of reason to find a universal understanding of life. Reason then becomes the unified way of improving and reconstructing human society. From the very beginning some 18th and 19th-century philosophers were critical of reason and argued that it per definition implied the replacement of one form of life for another, which in reality resulted in “a very real loss: community, tradition, religion, familiar political authority, customs and manners” (Cahoone, 2003, p. 17).

It is against this background that this book will offer a critique of public relations theory to see to what extent existing theoretical approaches still are based in modernist principles of rationality. Some of the assumptions of modernism are evident in public relations theory in terms of the focus of public relations as a management (control) function, the need to measure our outcomes, the different roles we perform, differentiation between men and women’s work, the increasing emphasis on our ability to conquer and apply new technologies, and the quest for the standardization of public relations practice on a global (universal) scale.

### ***Ring in Postmodernity***

The rise of postmodernism is generally associated with a political and social mood that points to deep and permanent changes in society. This manifested openly at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. Postmodernity is largely a reaction to the many “discontents” with modernity (Lyon, 1999, p. 25).

However, modernity now has led to postmodernity, which is typified by globalization with its resultant power conflicts, new modes of work, uneven economic development, rampant consumerism, environmental exploitation, and bioengineering. Thus postmodernity is the consequence of foundations laid in modernity. At the same time, paradigmatic changes did redefine theory and knowledge in the arts, sciences, and the socio-cultural environment in

general (Best & Kellner, 2001, pp. 1–5). The question is, how can postmodernism help us to develop public relations theories appropriate for the times we live in? To what extent are existing theories with their roots in modernism still relevant to today's practice? If postmodernism does not represent a rupture with modernism, can one assume a continued relevance of these theories, albeit in a revised version, to public relations?

Some postmodern scholars of the doomsday type, in particular Baudrillard (1975, 1983a, 1983b),<sup>2</sup> argue that postmodernity was created through the new, high tech media society and emergent processes of change and transformation, which resulted in a novel stage of history where the sign is more real than reality. Computers, media and other technologies, new forms of knowledge, and changes in socio-economic systems produce and are producing postmodern social reform. This is resulting in increased cultural fragmentation, changes in experience of time and space, and new modes of experience, subjectivity, and culture.

### ***The Root of the Problem***

Several scholars explore the roots of the term. Lyotard (1989, pp. 7–10), one of the few postmodernists who openly identifies with the movement, points to the many debates around the term postmodern, many of which he believes interpret the term incorrectly. He, for example, contests the popular belief that the term *postmodern* originated in architecture. Although there is no clear indication when the term *postmodernism* was used for the first time, some suggest it started in the mid-fifties and early sixties (Boyne & Rattansi, 1990, p. 13; Huyssen, 1986, p. 184). In a very thorough overview of the development of the postmodern movement, Best and Kellner (1991, pp. 5–31) cite Toynbee, who said it was first used in 1875, referring to a state of anarchy and total relativism. They believe the term further developed in 1957 when Rosenberg and White used it in terms of mass culture and the economist Peter Drucker used it in terms of postindustrial society. The postmodern has for decades invoked strong feelings on both the positive and negative sides of the fence. Some believe postmodernism attacks the inner connection between reason and freedom and therefore rings in the end of the Enlightenment and the destruction of Western civilization. Others welcome its challenge to rationalism and how it is used to create meaning and order.

The argument can be made, however, that modernity already carried the seed of its downfall, as Nietzsche predicted in 1888 (Vattimo, 1988). Nietzsche's concept of nihilism laid the foundation for our current understanding that meanings are not fixed but situated in personal belief systems that are created to dominate society. Modernity inevitably led to extreme forms of individualism, the kind of militant individualism that is emerging in our societies, and the rejection of religion and other dominant forms of control. It is this set of

circumstances that led to the emergence of postmodernism and that provides the theoretical and philosophical foundations for understanding the rejection of modernity and the emergence of postmodernity.

### Major Tenets of Postmodern Theory

Although general agreement exists that the structuralist and poststructuralist schools do not form part of postmodernism, there also is consensus that the arguments that emanated from these schools played an important role in creating the *Zeitgeist* that gave rise to the student revolution in May 1968 and prompted postmodern theorists such as Foucault to investigate the links between power and knowledge (Best & Kellner, 1991; Harland, 1987; Macdonnel, 1986). The structuralist revolution describes phenomena in terms of linguistic structures, rules, codes, and systems. It rejects the Enlightenment focus on the self as the center of knowledge and was the first to argue that the self is structured through language and socialization (Cahoone, 2003). Although this might sound familiar to critical and postmodern scholars they also argue that the self can be studied purely through the scientific analysis of linguistic and sign systems.

Poststructuralists reject the “scientific pretensions” of structuralists (Cahoone, 2003, p. 4) and argue that humans cannot objectively study themselves, much like Lyotard (1984) would later argue. I believe much of critical theory today, also in public relations, is related to poststructuralism, with its rejection of the unified self, and the way in which the poststructuralists theorized the “oppressive nature of Western institutions” (Cahoone, 2003, p. 4). The tradition in public relations that critiques societal institutions and their use of language reflects poststructuralism.

Poststructuralism broke with conventional representational schemes of meaning and rejected totalizing, centered theories of meaning and systems. This led to a collapse of boundaries between philosophy, cultural critique, social theory, literature, and other academic fields (Best & Kellner, 1991, pp.19–25). Poststructuralism therefore forms part of the matrix of postmodern theory and is a subset of a broader range of theoretical, cultural, and social tendencies that constitute postmodern discourses.

Next I will review a number of recurring themes in postmodern theory that I apply to public relations theory throughout this book. My review will be quite cursory because these tenets of postmodern theory are discussed in depth in their application to specific themes in public relations theory.

### *The General Debate in Postmodern Theory*

Before a formal analysis of postmodern theory is undertaken, it might be useful to broadly sketch the *Zeitgeist* within which postmodernism developed and to

highlight the major issues, without specific reference to the main contributors to postmodern theory. These theorists will be discussed in detail in subsequent chapters and in specific contexts.

There is no unified postmodern theory; it is diverse and pluralistic and often conflicting (Best & Kellner, 1991, p. 2). The overriding issue in postmodernism is a questioning of modernist philosophies and their quest for a single truth that tries to mould the thinking of Western civilization into a single direction. This is what Ermarth (2001b, p. 202) refers to as the “One World Hypothesis.” Postmodern philosophers insist that it is a philosophy specifically pertaining to Western thinking and that it cannot speak on behalf of or be applied to Afro-centric or Orient-centric philosophies.

A major area of postmodern focus is the way in which Western societies dominated and still try to dominate other cultures through colonization and the institution of power structures in those communities and cultures. Postmodernism attacks the way in which modern philosophy contributes to the marginalization of Blacks, women, men outside of the existing power structures, and people who function outside “normal” society, such as homosexuals and criminals. As mentioned, capitalism is viewed as a manifestation of modernist philosophies and although many postmodern philosophers started their criticism of capitalism from a Marxist perspective most, with the notable exception of Jameson (1984), reject Marxism as inadequate to criticize capitalism. Most regard Marxism as just another manifestation of modernist capitalist structures. They generally view Marxism as just another ideology that is part of invisible power structures that subject humankind to limited thinking patterns and domination.

The concept of power and how it subjects people at both the macro and micro levels of society is a major focus of postmodernists. In terms of a macro perspective, postmodernism shows how people are dominated and subjected, not only by the state, but also by all the institutions and bureaucracies inherent in a capitalist society. The role history plays in this process is also highlighted.

At the micro level people willingly subject themselves to power by inhibiting their libido, subconscious, and creativity through ordered and structured ways of thinking to fit in with what they believe are the norms of society. Postmodernists argue for a release of the natural and uninhibited power sources within the individual and argue for an aesthetic of the self that will allow people to create themselves outside of the bondages of a normalized society. They are particularly sympathetic to people who are incarcerated in asylums and prisons because their psyches do not fit into the orderly world of modernist thinking with its prefixed categories of behavior. Postmodernists attack the normalization that comes with modernism, which rejects any form of behavior that does not fall within the norms promoted in modernity.

Language is not only a part of life but is the basis of society. Because there is no single truth or way to understand life, language has no representational

value outside of itself, and its original meaning only can be determined at the moment of its use. Language also is a manifestation of how culture, society, history, knowledge, and power, among others, shape the individual. An analysis of language would therefore also shed light on the broader social and political discourses that take place in society. The discourse of the postmodern is furthermore full of metaphors, imagery, and new ways of writing, aimed at explaining its multi-faceted approach and defying structured ways of thinking, writing, and applying knowledge.

Postmodern philosophers also critique the way in which knowledge and meaning are formed and proliferated through the many educational institutions in society. In fact, the postmodern approach defies structure and promotes difference, multiplicity, and non-hierarchical tradition. It attacks the hegemony of the many obvious and also invisible power structures in society. Postmodernism views the guiding motivation as to respect differences (Foucault, 1973b, p. xii).

The postmodern concept of micropolitics further suggests that a different kind of political movement will evolve. Political struggle will no longer be fought in terms of ideology but in terms of value systems. This political struggle will particularly include people who have been marginalized and discriminated against in the past. It also suggests that individuals might attach themselves to more than one of these smaller political groupings, depending on what the issue of struggle is at a particular point and might belong to different political groups at any single moment. From there comes the concept of the fragmented nature of the postmodern individual.

From this very brief and evidently simplistic introduction the work of major postmodern philosophers might be more accessible for the uninitiated reader.

### ***Postmodern Discourse***

As discussed in the previous section, one of the mainstays of modernity was its belief that rationality, objectivity, and a single, unified understanding of how the world works would lead to the emancipation of humankind. Therefore, probably the most important aspect of postmodern discourse is the rejection of the modernist belief in logic and truth. Although the subject of theories and knowledge will be discussed in greater depth in later chapters, it becomes clear that postmodernists reject any form of totalizing discourse. From their perspective, theory and science can never be held as the ultimate truth, but only as the interpretation of the person who proposed it. All knowledge, particularly in the human and social sciences, is based on narrative and therefore value-based.

### ***Discourse as Conversation***

The concept of *discourse* is directly related to this argument. Discourse refers to “all that is written and spoken and all that invites dialogue or conversa-

tion” (Rosenau, 1992, p. xi). For instance, the whole postmodern debate is a discourse, consisting of many different discourses (debates). The concept of discourse emanated from new ways of looking at how meaning is formed. Dialogue is the primary condition for discourse, which is always socially related, although postmodernists rather promote a dialectic approach to discourse. Discourses differ “with the kinds of institutions and social practices in which they took shape, and with the positions of those who speak and those whom they address” (Macdonnel, 1986, p. 1).

### *Discourse is Unstable*

In addition to a discourse being related to institutions and speakers, it takes effect indirectly or directly through its relation to other discourses in which the speakers were involved, the speakers before them, and so forth. As a result it is impossible to determine the point from which discourse originated. Because meaning cannot be retraced to its original meaning or intention it topples forward and is always future-directed. Meaning does not only originate from spoken and written discourse but also from signs, which may be verbal or non-verbal.

### *Discourse Also is Created through Institutional Practice*

Institutions have the power to shape the way we talk about issues. This leads to the argument that discourse is formed and meaning is created through institutional practice, particularly through the use of language and signs in institutional context. This places public relations practice squarely in the postmodern debate and I will explore later in the book how public relations practice is used in this regard. The way in which ideologies shape meaning and language is another important focus of postmodern discourse. This is a particularly poststructuralist position that argues that ideologies proliferate through society in various forms and institutions, all supporting the capitalist system. These ideologies subject humans in various ways to support the capitalist ideology. Thus, meaning is formed through ideologies promoted by institutions supporting capitalism.

### *Discourse as Strategy*

Discourse often is associated with a strategy to examine contradictory positions (Gordon, 1979). The term discourse is normally used in two ways (Fairclough, 1992). The one is in terms of the use of language and signs in texts, samples of spoken words, and different contexts. The term can also be extended beyond language to symbolic forms such as visual images. The other is its use in social theory, where it refers to different ways of structuring areas of knowledge and social practice. Fairclough argues that with the move to a post-industrial

society language is assuming greater importance as a means of production and social control, also in the workplace. With new styles of management and the democratization of the workplace, workers are expected to be more proficient in communication skills. There is general agreement that discourse analysis is a strategy or method to study social phenomena and that discourse can only be understood within a broader social context (Best & Kellner, 1991; Cook, 1989; Schiffrin, 1987; Stappers, 1986).

### ***The Quest against the Ultimate Truth***

To understand the development of discourse in its postmodern sense, it will be important to understand the historical context through which this argument was shaped. With the revolt among students and academics in 1968 in both Europe and the United States, presuppositions about knowledge and truth were called into doubt. Students in particular revolted against the institutional practices that subjected individuals to social norms. Foucault (1982, p. 212) argues these struggles were not aimed at class or racial struggles, but engaged with ideological practices. They were directed against “subjection, against forms of subjectivity and submission.”

The contribution Althusser (1971) made to the postmodern interpretation of the term *discourse* should be seen against this background. Although Althusser cannot be regarded as a postmodernist, his 1970 essay on ideology and ideological state apparatuses (ISA's) made a radical breakthrough in the understanding of ideologies.<sup>3</sup> The argument that meaning is formed through a number of institutions that support the capitalist state originated from him. These “apparatuses” are largely ideological and encompass churches, education, the family, the law, political parties, trade unions, communication, and culture (pp. 136–137). He believes ideologies are systems of meaning that position everyone in imaginary relations different from the real relations in which they live. For instance, he would argue that in the institution of family the father as the head of the household is an imaginary position and not a real one in the sense that the position was created to serve a social and political purpose. Education acts as the key ISA in capitalist societies, a point that is repeatedly made in this book. One of the important points that emerged from Althusser's work is that the ideology dominant in an ISA comes from a point of struggle and that it is reshaped through struggle. Thus, an ideology can only exist with some opposing ideology that shows what it is not and therefore ideologies shape each other through struggle (Macdonnell, 1986).

In a further development of Althusser's work, Pêcheux (1982) suggests that discourses develop out of clashes with one another and as a result words and phrases in writing or in speech have a political dimension (Macdonnell, 1986). Similar to Althusser, Pêcheux holds that meaning does not exist in itself but antagonistically, from positions in struggle, so that words change their meaning



according to the positions from which they are used. Pêcheux used the term *discourse* to stress the ideological nature of language use (Fairclough, 1992).

Thus, because ideology is shaped in the struggle between differing meanings, language is ideological. This perspective again poses a problem to existing public relations theory, questioning the underlying assumptions about symmetry in practice. Because meaning exists antagonistically and is formed through struggle, no public relations discourse can be truly symmetrical, and will always be political in nature. These arguments will be further explored in a later discussion on public relations as a form of activism.

### ***The Double Bind of Binary Opposites***

Postmodernism rejects the use of binary opposites in modernist discourse, which always implies the superiority of one meaning over another. Because there cannot be a single truth, the use of binary opposites cannot be validated. The work of Jacques Derrida is closely associated with postmodern theory and he is generally regarded as the first linguist to be termed as such, although he followed the route to postmodernism via poststructuralism (Best & Kellner, 1991; Featherstone, 1991; Harland, 1987). As Pêcheux, Derrida also takes issue with the binary opposites inherent in Western philosophy and discourse. He argues that it constitutes a hierarchy of values that attempts to guarantee truth and devalue inferior terms or positions, such as man's superiority over women, speech over writing, and reason over nature. He proposed the now famous term *deconstruction*, arguing that modern philosophy needed to be deconstructed to determine the way in which it constructed meaning (Derrida, 1976).

Garver, in his preface to the English translation by David Allison of Derrida's *Speech and phenomena* (1973), remarks that Derrida attacks the notion that language is conceived through logic, rather than rhetoric. Garver uses rhetoric as an analogy for discourse and argues that Derrida attacks the modernist concept that signs represent ideas that are timeless and thus not located spatio-temporally. In other words, Derrida attacks the concept of logic, which says that signs (ideas) stand in some logical relation to each other (p. xiv). Derrida further rejects the concept of "private understanding" (p. xvii), which means that logical understanding exists within a human being without prior learning. He regards the role of utterances in actual discourse as the essence of language and meaning, and therefore views logic as shaped through rhetoric. His development of the principle of *différance* is unique and radical in that it suggests that "definition rests not on the entity itself but in its positive and negative references to other texts. Meaning changes over time, and ultimately the attribution of meaning is put off, postponed, deferred, forever" (Derrida, 1981, pp. 39–40). This elaboration of the terms *discourse* and *deconstruction* are important because one of the aims of this book is the deconstruction of public relations discourse through an analysis of its underlying philosophies, theories, and practices to

determine how they influence and are influenced by larger discourses in society. This process will mirror Allison's interpretation of the term *deconstruction* as "a project of critical thought whose task is to locate and 'take apart' those concepts which serve as the axioms or rules for a period of thought, those concepts which command the unfolding of an entire epoch of metaphysics" (Derrida, 1973, p. xxxii). Derrida maintains that linguistic meaning is the product of the arbitrary configuration of differences between signs. As such, there can never be an absolutely signified content or an absolutely identical or univocal meaning in language. Purity of language is impossible because "there can be no expression without indication, no signified without the signifier, no meaning or sense without the factually constituted complex of signifiers" (p. xl).<sup>4</sup> For Derrida, the belief that an absolute objective core of meaning is impossible means that a certain period of metaphysical thought has come to a close.

### *The Instability of Meaning*

An outflow of Derrida's argument is the understanding that meaning and its formation are unstable. Based on Derrida's radical interpretation of language and meaning the signified does not exist and is merely an illusion invented by humans (Harland, 1987). Signifiers are always signifying, pointing away from themselves to other signifiers. This constant state of unfulfilled meaning that exists in the absence of the signified is called *dissemination*. The result is that language takes on its own energy and creativity, distinct from the creativity of the individual writer, much like Lyotard tells Thébaud in the introductory quote to this chapter. In the words of Harland "(L)anguage in the mode of dissemination is endlessly unbalanced and out of equilibrium ... [meanings] push successively, in causal chains, toppling one another over like lines of fallen dominoes" (p. 137).

This understanding of how meaning is formed questions the assumption that public relations practitioners are responsible for the outcomes of campaigns, and that message effects can be measured and controlled—another point of interrogation in this book. Because meaning is socially constructed, always changing, and always unstable, new ways of understanding meaning have to be found. Even when the social, historical, and political contexts within which communication takes place are considered understanding always will be limited because the person trying to understand can never go back to the original understanding. Meaning proliferates because the signifier keeps changing its meaning through a process of dissemination. This book will continuously return to this notion, and will explore how this changes our current understanding of public relations theory and practice.

The social context of meaning is a recurrent theme in postmodern theory. Foucault (1980b) comes close to the position that discourse constitutes all social phenomena. He defines the social body as "a thoroughly heterogeneous ensem-

ble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid” (p. 194).

Foucault continuously does battle with the discourse of modern rationality, which he believes dominates the individual through social institutions, discourses, and practices. He argues modernism attempts to classify and regulate all forms of experience through a systematic construction of knowledge and discourse, echoing Althusser and Pêcheux. In his earlier work (Foucault, 1972, 1973a, 1973b) he develops the concept of the archaeology of knowledge in which he attempts to show that history and society are not unified and are single entities that can be understood through reason. Instead of being a single linear discourse, history for example is actually a narrative of disconnected events strung together to create a single understanding of history to promote a particular ideology that uses history for its own purposes of power. Discourse is so complex a reality that it cannot be analyzed from one single truth, theory, or method but should be analyzed at different levels with different methods (Foucault, 1973b, pp. xii-xiv). Foucault’s concept of the archaeology of knowledge will be more fully explored when postmodern theories on power and knowledge are discussed.

Several other philosophers, such as Deleuze and Guattari (1983, 1987) and Laclau and Mouffe (1987) reflect these thoughts of Foucault. Best and Kellner (1991, p. 176) argue that although these philosophers did not want to be called postmodern their continued efforts to dismantle modern concepts of unity, hierarchy, identity, and subjectivity place them in the midst of the postmodern discourse. Like Foucault, they developed counterprinciples of difference and multiplicity in theory, politics, and everyday life.

### ***Media Discourse as Hyperreality***

Another issue that postmodernism takes up is the discourse of technology and the mass media, which Baudrillard in particular believes results in a completely new society that needs new ways to be understood. In this new society, class and economic struggles are replaced by new forms of social reality, which have nothing to do with the real and are therefore a hyperreality. In hyperreality new forms of communication, such as marketing, advertising, and public relations, use the mass media to implode the barriers between reality and simulation in an effort to create a demand for commodities. This results in social groupings around life styles rather than class and ideology.

Baudrillard and Lyotard are two of the few postmodernists who openly identify themselves with the movement. Baudrillard’s postmodern discourse is mainly concerned with the way in which signs and sign systems dominated the individual in the new world order, which he referred to as hypercivilization. For Baudrillard the new order constitutes a momentous rupture in history and

with modernity (Baudrillard, 1975). He called this new era the era of simulation. This era is organized around simulation codes and models that replace production as the organizing principle of society. He coins the term “semiur-gic” society (Baudrillard, 1981, p. 185) where signs take on a life of their own. This constitutes a new social order structured by models, codes, and signs. He believes the concept of *real* disappears in postmodern society as the boundaries between simulation and reality implode, creating a hyperreality (Baudrillard, 1981). Baudrillard (1983b) argues the media play a deciding role in this process by increasingly imploding boundaries between information, entertainment, images, and politics. He blames public relations experts and other media advisors for transforming politics into image contests or sign struggles. According to his theory of implosion, a process of social entropy develops that leads to a collapse of boundaries in which the social disappears and with it distinctions between classes, political ideologies, and cultural forms and between media semiurgy and reality (Baudrillard, 1983a, 1983b). Although many see Baudrillard’s views as extreme, there also is general consensus that his interpretation of the current media environment needs consideration. Not only are his references to public relations directly relevant to the context of this book, but also to his interpretation of the media environment that creates the climate within which public relations practitioners have to operate.

### ***Theory as Discourse***

As is the case with other postmodern theorists, Lyotard (1984) also attacks the totalizing discourse of modernity and champions difference and plurality in theory and discourse. He supports Derrida’s viewpoint that Western philosophy is organized around a set of binary opposites (Lyotard, 1971). He critiques metalanguage, or totalizing theories, and uses linguistics as a strategy to provide new ways of theorizing, talking, and writing (Best & Kellner, 1991, p. 159). All discourse is narrative and he makes a distinction between “grand narratives” as totalizing strategies, and “little narratives,” which refer to the proliferation of narratives in culture (Lyotard, 1984). He argues that theories, particularly those in the social and human sciences, are narratives and that they are not valid for all time (Lyotard, 1989, p. 130). His conceptualization of postmodern knowledge will be further discussed in the section on postmodern views on power and knowledge and will be addressed at length in Chapter 6.

### ***Power and Knowledge***

A problem in an analysis of postmodernism is that the concepts discussed here are not clearly defined, but free-flowing, and its basic philosophical concepts do not wish to be structured and over-theorized. As a result there will be an overlap of themes in the various sections, which is inevitable. The aim in this

section will be to investigate postmodern thinking on scientific and theoretical knowledge and how the modernist approach to knowledge impacts on the individual. It will also focus on the theoretical strategies of postmodernists to counteract modernist approaches.

### *A Critique of Knowledge*

Postmodernism is critical of institutions of knowledge and of the processes by which philosophical thought and scientific knowledge develop. The general postmodern approach is that institutions of knowledge also are institutions of power and their aim is to normalize, control, and administer people. As a result of the struggle of students and workers in the late 1960s Foucault in particular began to theorize how the intimate connection between power and knowledge is used to control society. Students turned their attention to “the full range of hidden mechanisms through which a society conveys its knowledge and ensures its survival under the mask of knowledge: newspapers, television, technical schools, and the high school” (Foucault, 1977a, p. 25). It also was at this time that poststructuralism focused its attention on the production of the subject through language and systems of meaning and power.

The term *subject* in postmodern theory has different meanings but generally refers to the entity under study (Rosenau, 1992) and also to being human, as in contrast to the human as object. In the Foucaultian tradition ‘subject’ means humans who are subordinate. Through a number of works, Foucault creates his now famous principles of archaeology and genealogy, with the objective “to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects” (Foucault, 1982, p. 208). In his search for the relationship between power and knowledge, Foucault concentrates on the domination of the individual through social institutions, discourses, knowledge creation, and practices of discipline. Reason attempts to classify and regulate all forms of experience through a systematic construction of knowledge and discourse, which he understands as systems of language imbricated with social practice.

He argues that human experiences are discursively reconstituted within rationalist and modern science frames of reference, particularly in the form of categories and differentiation, which make people accessible for administration and control (Foucault, 1982, p. 38). This is a point I return to repeatedly in this book to show how this process has also permeated public relations theories and practice. Modern theories view knowledge and truth as neutral, objective, universal, and vehicles of progress and emancipation and is developed particularly through empirical methods. Foucault analyzes theories as integral components of power and domination. Postmodern theories in general reject totalizing or meta-theories as myths that obscure the complexity inherent in the social field to enforce conformity and homogeneity, similar to the argument Ermarth (2001b) made earlier.

### *The Historicity of Knowledge*

As opposed to modernism, the aim of postmodernism is to fragment and break up and not to unify. History and philosophy in particular are the targets of postmodernists. For postmodernists theory and knowledge are always relative, never a given, and can never stand for all time. They aim to break up metanarratives by making people aware of how metanarratives are constructed, what their aims are, and how it is possible for the individual to resist these totalizing structures. This postmodern stance is another core principle of this book, which argues that if public relations is not practiced as a form of activism that resists dominating power structures, public relations practitioners will become subjects serving the power needs of others, such as corporate managers and other powerful communicative entities who have a lot to gain from public relations practice.

Foucault opposed conventional history in favor of historicity, which aims to break up the vast unities of historical thought to see whether they could be reaffirmed, or whether other groupings could be made (Foucault, 1972). Foucault seeks to destroy historical identities by creating many alternative historical perspectives and by critically analyzing modern reason through a history of the human sciences (Foucault, 1977a, p. 160). Chapter 3 in this book applies many of Foucault's approaches to historical analysis to public relations history.

### *Knowledge as Normalizing Practice*

Postmodernists target capitalism and its normalizing strategies, especially medicine and psychology. Their special attention to psychology is not incidental, because they accuse the discipline of categorizing human behavior and creating norms for what is normal and what is deviant. The categories of normal and deviant are arbitrary and socially constructed. The main aim of psychology is to create a type of morality that will control the subject from within.

Although other theorists such as Deleuze and Guattari also support this view (Best & Kellner, 1991), Foucault in particular argues this point and shows how the social and human sciences produce disciplinary processes of which the outcomes are control of society in general and the individual in particular (Foucault, 2003). As part of the social sciences public relations cannot escape Foucault's critique. A postmodern analysis of public relations' complicity in shaping identities and making people subject to power and control through knowledge creation, the specific uses of language, and selective information dissemination would thus form an integral part of this book.

He refers to the modern individual as *subject*: subject to someone else by control and dependence, and in the postmodern sense as having self-knowledge. Self-knowledge, particularly in the form of moral consciousness, is a strategy one can use to resist power (Foucault, 1982, p. 212).

### *The Death of Knowledge*

Baudrillard (1987, pp. 11–12) was extremely critical of Foucault's interpretation of power because Foucault did not take into account new forms of power such as signs, symbols, or media power. Baudrillard even went so far as to suggest that we should forget Foucault because his theory of power is obsolete. Although Baudrillard's concept of power, briefly touched on in the previous section, will be discussed at greater length in the section on politics and power, he did theorize modernist meaning versus postmodernist meaning, which will be discussed here.

Whereas other postmodernists argue that modernist power permeates postmodern society, Baudrillard (1984b) declares modern power structures and meanings to be dead. He views postmodernism as a "second revolution, that of the twentieth century, of postmodernity, which is the immense process of the destruction of meaning, equal to the earlier destruction of appearances" (pp. 38–39). There is no meaning in postmodernity, and theories float in a void. No new meaning is created; everything is a repetition of things that happened in the past. As such, theory has exhausted itself. In the postmodern world no definitions are possible any longer. "It has all been done ... It has deconstructed its entire universe" (Baudrillard, 1984a, p. 24). He also declares history to be dead because it has been deconstructed to a position of senselessness. Because history presented modernism with hope for a better future, the end of history destroys all hope for a better future (Baudrillard, 1987, p. 68).

In a critique of Baudrillard, Best and Kellner (1991) say his arguments degenerate into sloganeering and rhetoric without a systematic theoretical position. They believe Baudrillard postmodernizes theory itself and thus "theory ... becomes a hypercommodity, geared to sell and promote the latest fashions in thought and attitude" (p. 140). They accuse him of theoretical burnout.

### *The Role of Postmodern Theory*

The concern with theory and its role in how knowledge is generated and perpetuated is an overarching theme in postmodernism. For postmodernists the purpose of theory is to always break up other theories in a process of continuous renewal, never building on what is past, but rather destroying it with the purpose of creating new knowledge. This implies that the barriers between domains might fade away, as is already happening with interdisciplinary research and studies. Public relations is a good example of this. Although Pasadeos et al. (2010) argue that the field is maturing and that it is developing its own theories, their analysis also shows that theory building is largely self-referential between a group of established scholars. The field still has to rely heavily on theories in other domains to inform public relations theory and practice. This is not at all a bad thing and can only enrich the field and bring it in line with

other disciplines, such as organization theory. That is also the approach that will be followed in this book.

As with theory, Western philosophy as a totalizing strategy also comes under attack. Postmodernists propose the end of philosophy and regard theory as transcendental and relative, only applicable to specific situations, and ever changing. Lyotard (1984) in particular is the main proponent of this argument and views modernist philosophy and other forms of modernist sciences as meta-narratives of which postmodernism is highly suspicious. He in fact calls for the end of the philosophical tradition because its metanarratives co-opt the subject into suppression. The role of the philosopher/scientist is to continuously cut herself free from metanarratives that have been transmitted through the rules, practices, and norms of modernist institutions (Rorty, 1984). Rorty believes Lyotard's approach "necessarily devalues consensus and communication, for insofar as the intellectual remains able to talk to people outside the avant-garde he 'compromises' himself" (p. 43).

Lyotard (1989) suggests that all knowledge is based on narrative, a position I will explore extensively in Chapter 6. "Theories themselves are concealed narratives (and) we should not be taken in by their claims to be valid for all times" (p. 130). Lyotard also refers to theory as "game rules" and describes the post-modern condition as "the state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature, and the arts" (Lyotard, 1984, p. xxiii).

Lyotard (1988) rejects consensus in favor of dissensus because consensus suggests conformity and co-option by power. Dissensus will promote heterogeneity, and instead of agreeing to agree (consensus) there will be agreement to disagree (dissensus). This will force people to recognize and respect differences and to deal with them in everyday life. The issue of consensus is indeed a serious concern for Lyotard (1992) because he believes that through consensus, the intellectual is co-opted into particular metanarratives. The role of the intellectual should be to always oppose any form of metanarrative, to continuously cut free from theory, even those proposed by the individual himself and to always develop new ways of observation.

Modern knowledge excludes views not supporting metanarratives, and as such homogenizes knowledge through consensus. Consensus violates heterogeneity and imposes a false universality on knowledge. Lyotard (1984) champions dissent over conformity and consensus, and heterogeneity over homogeneity and universality. Lyotard's explication of dissensus is one of the core arguments I make for public relations as a form of activism.

### ***Power and Politics***

The concept of metanarratives is as valid in a discussion of postmodern politics as it is in a discussion of postmodern knowledge. In its political context



postmodernism focuses on ideology as a metanarrative and totalizing strategy of the state to subject the individual. In the same way modernist knowledge is used to control and normalize the individual, ideology is used to gain political power. Because an analysis of postmodern politics has important implications for public relations in terms of the concepts of *publics* and *activist groups*, as well as the obvious implications at the macro level in terms of *government* and *democracy*, this aspect of postmodernism requires special attention.

### *The Onslaught on Macropolitics*

It should by now be clear that postmodernists have in common an onslaught on macropolitics, i.e. an onslaught on the totalizing strategies of ideology. Micropolitics is embraced by all as the authentic terrain for political struggle, and postmodernists suggest that political struggle should be waged through smaller, more agile, political movements such as feminism, environmental activism, and gay and lesbian rights, to mention only a few, in opposition to the oppressive effects of macropolitics. Macropolitics is constituted by capitalism, socialism, the state, sexism, religion, racism, and even the family. Therefore, postmodernists do not regard the labor movement as a democratic form of political struggle because it does not address the multiple sources of power and oppression that exploit labor beyond the work contract.

Again, it was Foucault who laid the foundation for postmodern thinking about macro- and micropolitics. Foucault took an analytical rather than a theoretical approach to power (Best & Kellner, 1991). He views power as *ascending* rather than *descending*. Power is created from the bottom up by establishing power relationships in the smallest societal units, such as the family where, for instance, the father is the head of the household. From there power circulates through divergent institutional networks that make larger power structures such as class and state possible. This is an important distinction because it will explain his emphasis on micropolitics rather than macropolitics. He refers to class and state as *macroforces* and the institutional networks as *microforces*. As such then, power is diffused throughout the social field.

Foucault (1988d), however, theorizes micropolitics beyond the state and institutions, and moves it into the subjectivities of the individual. He argues that political power permeates the individual's knowledge and pleasures, colonizes the body itself, and utilizes these forces to induce obedience and conformity. There are no "spaces of primal liberty" in society, power is everywhere. "(E)very human relationship is to some degree a power relation. We move in a world of perpetual strategic relations" (p. 168). This is an important extension of power in terms of understanding Foucault, because he took power out of the external sphere of the subject into the internal sphere. This distinction becomes an important part of his resistance strategies to power. He believes that things can be changed (p. 156), and that knowledge, particularly self-knowledge, can

transform us. He does not regard power as omnipotent in the sense that people are powerless. Power can be resisted from within the individual self and he says, “as soon as there is a power relation, there is a possibility of resistance. We can never be ensnared by power: we can always modify its grip in determinate conditions and according to a precise strategy” (p. 123). This again is an important argument toward the development of an activist approach to public relations practice.

### *Engaging in Micropolitics*

Postmodernists also have in common the rejection of obedience and conformity to the state. The individual has the power from within to stand up against macro power. One tool for transforming the individual in an effort to gain individual power is through knowledge. Thus, political struggle will not only be waged by small groups, but also by the individual. Because power is spread throughout society in many, often undetectable forms, power has to be contested through many diffused groups and many “nodal points” (Lyotard, 1984) throughout society. Furthermore, the struggle for power is inherently a positive force for change. All relationships exist in terms of power relations. Power is also always dynamic and is always looking for new alliances, thereby always regrouping and reshaping itself.

As a resistance strategy to power, Foucault (1980a) calls for a plurality of autonomous struggles waged throughout the microlevels of society—autonomous because the individual has more than one identity and therefore has many opportunities to join specific struggles against oppression. He distinguishes between modern macropolitics and postmodern micropolitics. In micropolitics, numerous local groups contest the diffused and decentered forms of power spread throughout society. In modern society the *general intellectual* speaks on behalf of oppressed groups. In postmodern society the intellectual is demoted to the *specific intellectual* who assumes a modest advisory role within a particular group and form of struggle. He refers to this as a plurality of resistance (pp. 95–96). Because power is decentered and plural, forms of political struggle should also be decentered and plural.

Foucaultian micropolitics includes two key components, namely *discourse politics* and *bio-politics* (Best & Kellner, 1991, pp. 57–58). Through discourse politics, marginal groups attempt to contest hegemonic discourses that position individuals within normalcy. Although all discourses are produced by power, the individual is not wholly subservient and can use discourse as a point of resistance and the starting point for an opposing strategy. In bio-politics, individuals attempt to break from the grip of disciplinary powers and reinvent the body by creating new modes of desire and pleasure. Discourse and bio-politics are intended to facilitate the development of new forms of subjectivity and values

(Foucault, 1982). He believes Western culture views desire as a powerful force and therefore believes it has to be regulated through morality (Best & Kellner, 1991, p. 60), an issue I will discuss in depth in Chapter 2. Foucault thus extends his concept of genealogy (an analysis of institutional discourses of power) to the discourse of the self, reinventing the self as an autonomous and self-governing being who enjoys new forms of experience, pleasure, and desire, emphasizing individual liberty and the larger social context of freedom of the self (Foucault, 1985a, p. 12).

For Foucault, ethics now depends on free choice and aesthetic criteria, thereby avoiding the ethics of the normalized, universal ethical subject (Foucault, 1988c). Although he continues to hold that power and resistance characterized all social relations, he now distinguishes between power and domination. He sees domination as the solidification of power relations that limit liberty and resistance.

### *Waging the Struggle*

Despite their call for micropolitical struggle, postmodernists are against nihilism and total destruction. They suggest that political struggle should be waged from within the system and not from without. There is a point in the process of resistance where one can self-destruct and become a schizophrenic. There has to be a breakthrough without a breakdown. Deleuze and Guattari (1983, pp. 362–363) warn about “deterritorializing” too quickly, both at the macro level of destroying the state and at the micro level of destroying the individual. They agree with Foucault that a new politics requires micropolitical forms of struggle and embrace the concept of politicizing everyday life.

They warn that revolutionary struggle could fail because “groups and individuals contain micro fascisms just waiting to crystallise” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 9). Therefore political groups have to wage permanent struggle within their own ranks. They extended their micropolitics of desire by formulating the term *rhizomes*. A rhizomatic method decenters information into divergent acentered systems, and language into multiple semiotic dimensions.<sup>5</sup> Rhizomatics analyzes the various flows of society and looks for lines of escape that can be further deterritorialized in political struggle. Rhizomatics is a form of nomadic thought, as opposed to state thought, that tries to discipline rhizomatic movement through theory. I return to the concept of rhizomatics in Chapter 4 in a discussion of power in public relations and in Chapter 6 in a discussion of postmodern knowledge and public relations. The above postmodern perspectives are important in that they shape the role of the public relations practitioner as an activist. The public relations activist who is involved in micropolitical struggle and resists domination and the concept of local rather than normative action will become important arguments in the discussion on public relations as activism.

### *Politics as Language Games*

The work of Lyotard has been very influential in shaping my thoughts in the context of this book. Because postmodernists believe society is discursively constituted, hence Ermarth's (2001a) "discursive condition" (p. 34), they view politics as discourse. Political change should be brought about through a politics of discourse. Lyotard (Lyotard & Thébaud, 1985) in particular argues that power struggles are inherent in all discourse and hegemonic discourses can be resisted through multiple discourses dispersed throughout society. Although Best and Kellner (1991) believe Lyotard has little to offer in terms of social, economic, and political economy, and should rather be seen in terms of his contribution to postmodern knowledge, an analysis of postmodern political theorizing will be incomplete without reference to Lyotard and Thébaud's book *Just gaming* (1985).<sup>6</sup> Lyotard is mostly concerned with the nature of political judgment and the question of regulation inherent in justice. In *Just gaming* he argues that because political justice takes place in terms of language games, politics is a struggle through discourse. He makes a distinction between descriptive discourse as relating to that which can be described through direct observation, as in the natural sciences, and prescriptive discourse, which is value-based and therefore only can be subjective. All political discourse is bound to be prescriptive discourse. He suggests that the hegemonic political discourses of modernism should be destabilized through the use of language and rhetoric. There cannot be universal rules in language games, but one must acknowledge the basic principle of disagreement, and the right to pose questions and challenges. If no disagreement is allowed there will be terror and no justice. This is one of the most important tenets of public relations as a form of activism that can promote a just society.

### **Postmodern Theory and Public Relations**

Although I have tried to already give some indication of why I view the above theories relevant to public relations, for the uninitiated the links might not be that clear. Postmodern theory remains complex and conflicting, which is the essence of the postmodern drive for multiplicity and diversity in both theory and practice. To make postmodern theory both accessible and explain its applications and implications for public relations, each chapter in this book deals with a particular theme relevant to public relations that is deconstructed from a postmodern perspective.

Chapter 2 deals with one of the most complex issues from a postmodern perspective, namely, values and ethics. Instead of treating this issue as an afterthought, as so often happens, this book addresses this debate upfront. Instead of viewing postmodern ethics as immoral or amoral, I argue that postmodern ethics proposes the purest form of ethics, which is situated in the care of the Other.

This chapter particularly relies on the work of Bauman (1993), whose arguments I find so persuasive that it completely changed my thinking on this topic.

Chapter 3 explores public relations history from the postmodern perspectives on history mentioned before. As with ethics, postmodern perspectives on history are radical, most probably the most radical position in this book. To show how there are different historical perspectives that might inform us of public relations practice I use the history of Emily Hobhouse, the British activist who fought for the right of Boer women and children during the Second Boer War from 1899–1902. Her life also is an example of postmodern ethics and is an example of how forgotten historical interpretations can inform us of public relations practice.

Moving from history to a discussion of postmodern perspectives on power in Chapter 4 is a natural progression. Postmodern discourse links history with power and argues that history is systematically constructed for purposes of domination. In Chapter 4 I discuss the impact of power on public relations practice. This chapter focuses on the political nature of organizations and how strategic relationships and alliances are determined by conflict, power, and resistance to or desire for change (Hatch, 1997). An understanding of the political nature of public relations is essential to the postmodern public relations practitioner. I use Spicer's (1997) perspective that when an organization is viewed as a political system, power is the most important recourse. This chapter will explore how the pursuit of postmodern power, particularly through the previously mentioned work of Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari, is a positive force for organizational change.

Chapter 5 continues the organizational focus of the previous chapter and explores the postmodern turn in organization theory. Organization theory has increasingly become one of the most important theoretical fields applied to public relations. In contrast to public relations theory, postmodern theory has been well explored in organization theory and the field has a journal, *Tamara*, specifically devoted to critical and postmodern perspectives in the field. The postmodern turn in organization theory has direct application for public relations. For example, Deetz (2001) argues that a modernist approach to organizations privileges a management discourse and emphasizes upper management's goals for the organization as given and legitimate. The role of the public relations practitioner in this approach is to ensure that the power of management remains intact. In this chapter I also explore alternative organization theories, particularly in terms of new organizational structures, that might assist public relations practitioners in dispersing power and communication channels more equitably throughout organizations. I also discuss public relations roles theory in the context of postmodern de-differentiation.

In Chapter 6 I specifically focus on how postmodern perspectives on the legitimization of knowledge influences public relations' ability to build a strong

community of scholars. I also apply Lyotard's concept of performativity to public relations theory to show how the commodification of knowledge and the modernist insistence on the usefulness of knowledge for a capitalist society has affected theory building in the field. I argue for the role of the postmodern scholar as an academic activist and review research methodologies that would promote such a stance.

In the final chapter I argue that the postmodern agency of public relations is activism. The agency of public relations practitioners is one of the field's most underdeveloped areas, although it is highly relevant to the role public relations practitioners play because economic agency determines the role of practice in organizations. Chapter 7 reviews the differences between the modern and the postmodern agent and the implications of these two perspectives for public relations practice. The chapter concludes with a review of resistance strategies for postmodern public relations activists and reviews the conditions that make postmodern public relations possible. The book ends with the conclusion that public relations as activism is a necessary condition for a just society.