After Postmodernism: 
The Place of Theory in the Human and Social Sciences

Bert Kögler, Philosophy, Fellow of the Office of Faculty Enhancement (OFE) at UNF

(1) Basic Issue of the Seminar

In what sense has postmodernism changed our understanding of the human and social sciences? In particular, how has it affected the conception of theory, or ‘social theory,’ in the sciences concerned with cultural and social phenomena. What role can social theory play after postmodern objections of its traditional and established function? How can social theory, as well as the human and social sciences, reinvigorate their work and vision by taking up the challenge of postmodern theory? How does it help us to redefine the—admittedly problematic—relation between general theorizing and empirical as well as political intentions and practices in the human and social sciences?

General social theory has been conceived in at least the three following ways:

- in the somewhat traditional role of data-explanation, as synthesis and explanation of empirical knowledge (positivistic theoretical generalization);
- as an epistemological foundation and justification of social-scientific knowledge, defining its conditions of possibility, its basic concepts, major methodological strategies, etc. (philosophical grounding);
- as the mediator between public social spheres and scientific knowledge by developing a moral-political vision of contributing to social change (critical social science and theory).

‘Postmodernism’ is effective in social science and theory through poststructuralism, a position/movement in the human and social sciences emphasizing the symbolic mediation of any experience or observation, the social character of knowledge, the implication of power in knowledge finding and construction, as well as the contested nature of supposedly universal and neutral knowledge.

(2) The Conceptual Profile of a Postmodernist Social Science

Poststructuralism is not just the application of humanistic interpretive methods to the realm of all social or cultural (and even natural) phenomena (instead of an orientation at natural sciences), but a complex methodological and theoretical position implying the following four basic tenets:

1. **Linguistic Turn.** All experience and observation is symbolically mediated. No direct or immediate access to ‘reality,’ ‘truth,’ or ‘meaning.’ All understanding is mediated by language. All experience has a semiotic structure.

   Specific arguments:
   (a) linguistic contextuality of meaning (late Wittgenstein, Gadamer, Derrida)
(b) discursive formation defines truth candidate (Foucault)
(c) theoryladenness of observation (Kuhn, Goodman)
(d) indeterminacy of reference (Wittgenstein, Quine)

2. **Social Constructionism.** Linguistic and discursive practices are intertwined and embedded in social practices; social contexts form and shape the meaning expressed in language and define what counts as ‘real’, as ‘essential,’ as ‘valid.’ People, experiences, objects, etc. are not understood in terms of ‘natural kinds’ or ‘essences;’ on the contrary, those supposedly natural essences are revealed and unmasked as ‘social constructions.’

Specific arguments:
(a) (Even natural) scientists work and live in different paradigms or social-institutional worlds (Kuhn, Feyerabend, Latour/Wolgar)
(b) social practices and institutions have generated essentializing interpretations of phenomena later revealed to be social in origin (Foucault’s ‘genealogy,’ Butler, gender theory, race theory)

(Those arguments have the scientific status of ‘inferences to the best explanation,’ they claim do explain best why or how certain scientific and social beliefs got generated.)

3. **Knowledge/Power.** Knowledge, symbolically mediated and socially situated, is intrinsically linked to power. Truth and meaning become dependent on social power relations and practices (which does not necessarily imply a logical reduction of truth to power).

Specific arguments:
(a) Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish, History of Sexuality I:* different power practices make the human sciences possible because of more refined and pervasive access to human subjects.
(b) Postcolonial studies, reflexive anthropology, feminist cultural studies, etc.; analysis how specific modes of understanding ‘the other’ were only possible in the context of specific power relations between ‘The West’ and the rest or between man and woman, for example.

4. **Contested Knowledge.** Knowledge is never stable, secure, eternal; more radical than mere fallibilism, knowledge is taken to be a target of power, constantly to be fought about, renegotiated, redefined, reconstituted. There is a constant struggle over what counts as truth, argument, evidence, etc. Knowledge is seen as a feature of differently positioned social subjects (social epistemology), reflexive, rebellious, critical agency is mobilized in knowledge politics.

Specific arguments:
(a) Cultural studies trace how social struggles implied struggles over access to information, funding of research (AIDS!), inclusion (or not inclusion) of subjects in research, etc.
(b) The symbolically mediated nature of knowledge is taken to imply as well as allow different socially positioned interpretations, ‘multivocality,’ subversive knowledges, etc. (Foucault, Gramsci, Bahktin)

Basic idea (and target of interpretive efforts): the analysis of the symbolico-social, power-laden and contested ‘constructions’ of (our understanding of) social and cultural reality. Socially constructed are, among many others, ‘gender,’ ‘race,’ ‘class,’ ‘the subject,’ as well as ‘sexuality,’ ‘crime,’ ‘The Other,’ ‘the nation-state,’ ‘PMS,’ ‘woman,’ (‘man’), and also emotions, quarks, child abuse, etc. (see Hacking, chapt. 1)

Now, what are the methodological and theoretical implications of such analyses? How can the reconstruction of those social constructions claim to be valid if knowledge becomes interpretive, socially situated, perspectival, and political. What can, then, possibly be the role of scientific claims to truth, or at least justified beliefs based on evidence and research, in the human and social sciences? How can the moral-political intentions that seem to inform the rejection of essentialism and objectification be justified, or simply articulated, if all knowledge (as well as any epistemic agency) is seen as an effect of power relations? How, finally, can theoretical forms of explanations be developed if all knowledge is taken to emerge from concrete contexts and concrete struggles, thus seemingly rendering any over-arching or more ‘global’ theoretical explanation suspect?

(3) Deep Paradoxes of Postmodernism/Poststructuralism

On the one hand:

Radical rejection of Truth, Universal Morality, and Grand Theory;

On the other hand:

Commitment to truth claims, to a normative perspective, and to theoretical generalizations (seem) unavoidable.

Radical Postmodernists reject trans-contextual, general truth, deconstruct the false and historically pernicious claims of universal moralities and politics, and are highly suspicious of any attempt to develop ‘meta-narratives’ that transcend the ‘local knowledges’ (Lyotard) of situated and struggling agents.

Is this position sustainable? Can it be defended? If not, can some basic insights of poststructuralism (ones that found their way into cultural studies and social constructionism) be ‘saved’ on a different methodological and theoretical ground? What
are the arguments and possible positions that reject truth, morality, and grand theory, and what have the debates around those issues thus far brought for a renewed understanding of social theory and the human and social sciences? How can a response to the three postmodern challenges to social theory be formulated?

(4) Postmodern Challenge 1: Against Truth

Postmodernists/poststructuralists reject ‘the truth’ (as it was understood in established human, social, and natural science)—but how do they account for their own interpretations, explanations, and narratives? What, if they reflect upon their own claims to describe, capture, ‘represent,’ etc. a social and cultural ‘reality,’ do they, or can they, put forth as justifying their insights, methods, approaches?

There is no unique position, and sometimes even one author defends (or attempts to combine) several methodological positions. Broadly, and in line with (subsequently introduced) truth-theories we can distinguish three possible approaches:

1. **Theoretical or Descriptive Objectivism.** Theorist is either (a) using purely descriptive methods to account for the cultural and social facts (Foucault’s ‘pure description of discursive facts’; Bourdieu’s ethnographic data, etc.); or (b) develops general theoretical frameworks with strong explanatory power (Bourdieu’s conceptual triangle of ‘capital-field-habitus,’ Foucault’s notion of ‘disciplinary power,’ Derrida’s difference (?), etc.)

   Problems: - Positions seems to repeat precisely the strong truth claims of traditional sociological theory and science; as such, it does not reflect in its own case the symbolically mediated character of its accounts of culture and society.
   - Theorist assumes an objective standpoint, while agents are seen as captured, determined, ‘imprisoned’ by discursive formations, habitus, paradigms, etc.; it thus fails to do justice to taking the agent’s seriously, and assuming the old privileged position of ‘theory’ versus ‘praxis.’

2. **Radical Interpretationism, or Textualism.** ‘Theorist’ is seen as an interpreter ‘all the way down,’ in no way privileged or capable of giving a better or more ‘objective’ account than everyday agents—who themselves permanently construct stories about their lives, weave meanings into more meanings, create situated narratives, etc.

   Problems: - While position avoids lack of reflexivity regarding its own background, it falls to the other extreme of becoming hyper-reflexive of its own interpretive efforts (reflexive anthropology). Interpreter becomes unable to argue or defend any of its insights, knowledge becomes potentially solipsistic and relativistic.

3. **Standpoint or Social Epistemology.** Interpreter/theorist is seen as situated in the social and cultural world, but the social, cultural, historical position, combined with methodological and theoretical training and expertise, is seen as making possible insightful and adequate accounts of more or less local/general social beliefs and
practices. Interpretive and mediated nature of human and social science is not seen as making better and more adequate (even more ‘objective’) accounts of social and cultural phenomena impossible.

Problems: - Very recent and ‘middle position,’ whose precise truth-theoretical and epistemological status is not yet fully defined; different versions (cultural studies neo-Marxist accounts, epistemic truth theories, feminist epistemologies) compete for finding its best formulation.

To develop a sustainable account in terms of truth, each position would have to defend a related conception of truth. Those are:

For Objectivism: the correspondence theory of truth.

Problems: 1. The correspondence relation cannot be clarified (Berkeley, Kant)
2. Explanations of scientific success in terms of their true representation of the world are circular: to express what facts make the theories true, we have to use the very vocabulary of the theories the correspondence is supposed to explain.

For Textualism: the coherence theory of truth

Problems: 1. Truth is reduced to an inner-symbolic notion of coherence of all of our beliefs with each other, which if it really yields truth seems to imply idealism;
   2. Any new belief is judged as to how it fits into the existing set of beliefs coherently: this reveals a conservative dimension, not suitable for purposes of deconstruction and social criticism.

For Social Standpoint-Epistemology:

What is needed is a theory that account for the relational nature of truth—that truth is something that defines a relation between a statement or proposition—and as such is always symbolically mediated and thus interpretive, never pure, in nature—and a condition of the world, whether that be a social practice, belief-system, ethical attitudes, etc.

(1) The pragmatist conception of truth captures this relational aspect, but in an instrumentalist fashion. Truth is defined as what works. Obvious intuitive problem: True statements are identified with useful statements, but false statements (Nietzsche’s “On truth and lie in an extra-moral sense”) might be useful, true ones useless.

(2) Deflationist theories of truth consider truth not to be a special property of statements (or propositions or sentences); truth rather expresses assent to statements with a certain meaning. Truth is thus relative to a language in which it is intuitively
understood. This certainly captures the relational aspect with regard to the moment of language-relativity or language-dependency. But does it capture the ‘objective’ aspect? By adding the label true, we mean to emphasize external reference; can it capture the negative use of ‘not-true’ as a rejection of statements because of assumed lack of reference. Here we understand the meaning but deny the truth, so can truth be simply identified with the usual meaning we attribute to statements? (Interpretive debate whether Tarski is a deflationist or a crypto-correspondence theorist).

(3) *Epistemic truth theories* relate truth to justification, and thus capture (a) that when we make a claim to a true interpretation, we suppose that it can be justified; it is thus intrinsically linked to our interpretive position; (b) yet it also sees that being justified or having “warranted assertability” (Dewey, Dummett) is not the same as being true (a belief can be perfectly justified while not being true, or a speaker can be perfectly justified in holding a false belief) The gap between ‘being justified’ and ‘being true’ opens up the door for critical interventions, for rejection of established beliefs taken-to-be-true, for exposing belief-systems and ‘ideologies’ that justify things socially and culturally without being true. It is thus essential for a critical social science.

There are two versions of how to account for this difference from within our situated social and cultural positions (epistemological internalism):

1. Theories of idealized conditions that would converge the justification and the truth; in an ‘ideal speech situation’ (Habermas), an ‘ideal epistemic situation’ (Putnam), or ‘at the end of all inquiry’ (Peirce), all justified belief would be the same as all true belief.
2. Theories that find such idealized scenarios unhelpful for ongoing inquiry and define truth as interactive and relational verificationism, as the construction of more adequate interpretations and explanations in the encounter with phenomena (internal or situated realism). These theories show how particular positions equip epistemic agents with specific scientific and ‘veritistic’ opportunities (‘epistemic opportunities’ versus ‘epistemic privileges’).

(5) **Postmodern Challenge 2: Against Normativity**

Initially, social and human *sciences* were conceived after the model of the natural sciences, to discover and accumulate laws concerning ‘facts’ of history and society (Comte’s positivism). Yet even this positivistic picture was tied to a *normative notion* of social and cultural progress (Condorcet, Comte as the founder of sociology, still Durkheim; in Marx and Marxism the normative notion is more obvious, yet is in turn tied to a scientific understanding of society; detachment of the normative (as an attitude of the theorist) begins in Durkheim, Weber, fully with Parsons; see Seidman, Part 1).

These features define the original Enlightenment idea of a social/human science:

- positivism/empiricism as the scientific self-understanding
- an evolutionary conception of human progress (both in science and, in turn, in history and society
- an universal conception of human nature and values

For the positivistic conception of social and human science, the fact that society entails value-orientations does not mean that social science has to be evaluative; norms can be stated just as neutrally as any other thing; they are ‘social facts.’ (Weber’s distinction between Value-orientation and Value-relatedness).

Postmodernism/Poststructuralism is diametrically opposed to all three basic features of the positivistic/Enlightenment conception of human science; postmodernism is:

- anti-positivistic: there is no unbiased, unmediated, or nonpolitical understanding of meaning and social life (see challenge 1)
- anti-evolutionist: evolution-theories use their own ethnocentric standards as yardsticks to devalue others; they ‘universalize’ and ideologically justify their own contextual practices through evolutionary accounts of progress with themselves as the highest stage
- anti-essentialist: theories of ‘human nature’ are ideological and discursive constructions that turn into ‘essence’ what is shared in a particular social and cultural context.

So, this is an overall critical rejection of any universalist normativity, which is seen as symbolically oppressive, distorting, metaphysically both naïve and false, and (historically) politically devastating.

Yet this critique itself seems to imply a normative perspective—it is evaluating those positivistic or Enlightenment conceptions negatively as false, bad, and unacceptable. What, then are exactly the normative intuitions that inform the postmodern critique of reason and science? How can, from such a postmodern stance, a normative attitude be articulated and justified? There are four major positions that have dominated the discussion.

1. **Anti-Normativism.** The necessity to have an articulated normative position, or the possibility to do so, are rejected. Deeply Nietzschean in spirit, this position denies the usefulness of moral theories in practice, which is seen, when realized, as intrinsically harmful. Normative values are infused with existing power and thus never pure; they will, once expressed as universal, be used for oppressing difference and marginal voices. Major figures: (Nietzsche), Foucault, the early Frankfurt School (Horkheimer, Adorno, Benjamin).

   Problems:
   - critical intuitions and ‘values’ remain unjustified (thus leaving open why certain power-relations are worse than others, why equality (women, minorities) is better than non-egalitarian social arrangements);
- critical stance is not developed, thus remains unarticulated (possibility of alternative ethical modes, less universalist-oppressive, are not explored);
- no political-ethical orientation, no ‘regulative ideal’ as to how to change social practices (critique remains negatively tied to the status quo as that which is rejected, no utopian potential);

2. **Normative Relativism.** We do evaluate and judge, and we should, but we always do it according to our basic vocabularies and values (those of, say, the liberal Western democratic constitutional scientific etc. tradition). All is seen through our lenses, especially norms and values of others and other cultures. Major figur: Richard Rorty, who coined this position ‘frank ethnocentrism.’

   Problems:
   - leads to a relativism of values that ultimately collapses logically the distinction between ‘their’ values and ‘our’ values, because all values become constructions of our perspective;
   - others are judged and evaluated without a deep effort to understand them ‘on their own terms,’ or to see oneself with the eyes of the other; interpretive potential of perspective-taking and radical interpretive dialogue are not explored or pushed (however, Rorty emphasizes becoming sensitive for the pain and suffering of others);
   - A defense of why one should become open and sensitive to the suffering (or to the views) of others remains ultimately unjustified, because it is just ‘grounded’ in ‘the way we feel about that here,’ not because there is anything really wrong with, say, torture, political imprisonment, sex slave trade, etc.

3. **The Normativity of Otherness.** This position is concerned to develop an ethics of concern and concrete recognition for others that is consistent with postmodern rejections of universalism and essentialism; concrete experiential phenomena highlighting the ethical experience of others are articulated as entailing ontological claims to respect and recognize the other. Major figures and movements: Levinas, Derrida; feminist ethics (Carol Gilligan, Benhabib); multicultural ethics (Charles Taylor).

   Problems:
   - grounding of ethical claims remains ultimately ambiguous, because there is a certain foundationalism (Levinas: ethics as first philosophy) which is gleaned from empirical experiences (seeing the face of another);
   - references to quasi-theological foundations
   - community-based experiences (why should those be valid for members of other traditions, or ‘deviant’ members?)

4. **Moral Neo-Universalism.** This position tries to redefine a universal-normative stance that is capable of avoiding the oppressive and essentializing flaws of the classical Enlightenment conception of morality. Instead of a solitary subject, intersubjective relations like communication or socialization are taken to imply certain moral (and thus normative) structures that are universal, and still realized
differently in different social contexts. Also, those universal forms allow for recognition of differences and particularities as valid and important. Major figures: Second and third generation Frankfurt School, Habermas, Benhabib, Honneth; more politically concrete: Public Sphere theorists, Chicago Cultural Studies Circle.

Problems:
- Distinguishing what is considered only contextually valid from what is universally valid, to relate cultural values to universal norms, etc.
- Mediating between often highly abstract moral reflections and theories and concrete political theory or social science dealing with issues like globalization, democracy-theory, multiculturalism, social movements, reflexive agency, etc.

(6) Postmodern Challenge 3: Against Grand Theory

Postmodernist cultural studies and social science emphatically reject the development of grand or global theories that transcend cultural and contextual boundaries, that go beyond the concrete experiences and interpretations of situated agents, and that introduce concepts and theories entirely foreign to the agent’s self-understanding. Focused in the concept of ‘meta-narrative’ (Lyotard), any grand scheme of history or society is seen as distorting the contextually relevant forces and meanings.

Over against the abstract and misplaced general theories and narratives, we have to emphasize ‘local knowledges’ (Lyotard), ‘rationalities rather than Rationality’ (Foucault), ‘infinite traces, differences, etc.,’ (Derrida), ‘thick descriptions’ (Geertz)—instead of thin explanations—and description of particular language games, social practices, and traditions (Rorty, Gadamer).

The deconstruction of the traditional idea of theory and theoretically grounded human and social science passed through three stages, the third one currently underway and emerging as a necessary step.

1. **Deconstruction of the Subject.** (sixties) The traditional Cartesian/Kantian/Sartrian conception of the knowing subject is rejected based on (mainly) the linguistic turn (and its associated facets). Important is that the universal subject is the logical ground of a general theory, which implies a shared universal meaning independent from any contextual, cultural, or historical features. With the universal subject goes universal theory. (Classic structuralism—Levi-Strauss, Lacan, Althusser—plays an ambiguous role, since it denies the subject, but assumes the possibility of theory. Post-structuralists consequently reject together with the demise of the subject the idea of universal structures (and/or the possibility of knowing them) and, instead, embrace contextual differences.

However, it is important that in this phase, the means of deconstruction itself come from a theoretical source, Saussurian semiotics. With the subject, it seems, the concrete agent is equally deconstructed.
2. **Return of the Subject as Concrete Agent.** (seventies/eighties) There are several movements or events that have contributed to a rejection of ‘classical poststructuralism’ and to the emergence of a new, more situated and political/practical approach in the cultural disciplines.

- The politization of poststructural and cultural theory in light of May 68 student revolts. The question of politics, and the politics of knowledge, became pressing; social movements such as feminism, gay and lesbian struggles, etc. pushed toward a new concept of social agency.
- Sound internal (theoretical) criticism, partly novel, partly rediscovered, against the idea that agents are fully socially or discursively constructed. The major theoretical resources are Gramsci, De Certeau, Bakhtin, and Stuart Hall (head of the British Cultural Studies Center in Birmingham). The critique addresses the flexible, contested, and ‘negotiated’ character of social meaning and knowledge.

What happened, and still happens in the currently influential Cultural Studies, is a celebration of the agent, its powers of interpretation, rebellion, transformation, etc.

Yet a new phase is emerging, and has been prepared by discussion in general social theory, that attempts to bring general explanatory theory back into the picture.

3. **Return of Social Theory.** (nineties, now) The basic arguments for the need to re-turn to general social theory are:

- There are social structures and processes that escape the agent’s own intuitive perspective and require, due to their complexity and trans-individual status, theoretical models to be captured. The famous agency-structure debate in the social sciences, discussing the micro-makro link, stems from this issue (Giddens’ structuration theory, Habermas lifeworld/system distinction, Bourdieu’s theory of habitus)
- Social phenomena, most importantly globalization, require context-transcending perspectives to understand how particular cultural contexts are connected, what mechanisms are implied in global developments that are not perceivable from within concrete contexts, etc. The general theories are also necessary to create a shared public sphere, and to open up those structural dimensions for discussion and analysis.
- The construction of subjectivity, a major and somewhat unifying approach for cultural studies, can only fully be understood by employing some social-psychological or depth-psychological model that connects processes of internalization to general social practices and structures. (St. Hall on identity).

The important challenge in these very recent debates is that social theory is supposed to be explanatory without losing sight of the agent’s perspective, without reducing the agent to an effect of trans-subjective social systems or structures.

The general intuition is that theorists have to be reflective with regard to their own background assumptions and contexts of knowledge production, as well as sensitive to
the agent’s own interpretations, which will not only be evidence for the explanation, but also potentially contributing to the very explanation itself. In the same vein, the theoretical and human/social scientific knowledge is meant to explicate and illuminate social background conditions of situated agency, and thus does not stand in contrast to the concrete everyday perspectives, but in a certain dialectical or reflexive relation to it. The precise understanding of the theory/agency relation, both theoretically and methodologically, is currently at stake. In

In general, social theory after postmodernism has the threefold task

- To clarify the epistemic claims we make and positions we take by producing interpretations and explanations of society and culture,
- articulate the normative assumptions that are involved in this project,
- mediate between specialized scientific professions and the wider public sphere.

Basic literature to begin with:

Section (1)

(1) Seidman, Steven, *Contested Knowledge: Social Theory in the Postmodern Era*, Blackwell 1998;

A (highly selective) bibliography for the other five sections will be distributed later.

A special resource library entailing this literature will be created in the OFE Library (across form Faculty Commons in Honors Hall)!

The UNF bookstore will also have some relevant titles (such as Ian Hacking’s *The Social Construction of What?* Harvard U. P. 1999) in small numbers preordered for the seminar.