

The Death and Life of Poststructuralism - Surmounting Dilemmas in Recent American Cultural Criticism

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Abstract

My paper explores the return to the subject and the individual that has been performed over the last three decades in American critical thought. Seen as part of a renewed relationship with the concrete, social realities in the U.S., the phenomenon's more recent consequences are briefly examined in the context of what is perceived as exhausted postmodernism. I will concentrate on the changes that poststructuralism and French deconstruction were submitted to as a result of concerted pressures in American society and academe. My aim is to argue that, in a double process of redefinition of limits, a more receptive version of poststructuralism coexists with minority politics, the former reinforcing the mobile, relative character of identity.

Keywords: *identity politics, poststructuralism, dilemma, synthesis, neo-Marxism*

Introduction

Over the last two decades, with the increasing impact and diversification of cultural studies, critical attention has shifted away from poststructuralism to more politically, sociologically and ethically oriented perspectives in America. What ensued was a necessary return to a coherent, relatively graspable notion of the individual and the subject, as well as to history and society, whose existence and pre-eminence could no longer be deemed merely textual. In the face of emerging minorities and their struggle for recognition in the U.S., poststructuralism's initial critique and deconstruction of identity seemed simply misplaced. The movement was perceived as reaching a point of exhaustion due mostly to its denial of the idea of reference and its destabilization of meaning. In the mid-eighties and into the nineties, the movement was submitted to attacks mostly from the part of philosophers like Jürgen Habermas, Fredric Jameson, Alex Callinicos and Richard Rorty, amongst others. The main accusations were directed at what was seen as poststructuralism's irrationality and reactionary spirit, its destabilization of meaning and its failure to provide alternatives to the systems it criticized. Around the same time, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak herself spoke of a need to redirect deconstruction towards new issues and, without abandoning its methods, she started moving towards a critique of imperialism.

Below there are some important critical perspectives that significantly influenced the comeback of the idea of presence and the subject in recent cultural criticism.

Recuperating the subject

The return to the subject and to identity issues in American cultural criticism is the consequence of the increasing impact of multiculturalism and postcolonialism in the U.S., starting as early as the late seventies. A persistent neo-Marxist vein can also be recognized there, in the insistence on social inequality and oppressive power, in the questioning of the existing order as well as in the rejection of postmodern values effected by Fredric Jameson, for example, in his 1991 book *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. At that time, concerted accusations were blaming poststructuralism for its divorce from the problems of a growingly tense, heterogenous, divided society. Again, under the influence mostly of neo-Marxism, a general distrust in language theories as well as in deconstruction ensued.

Such a radical break occurred in the very context of literary criticism and theory as essential sources of philosophical insight in the seventies, the academia still dominated by debates about Structuralism and French poststructuralism. Attention started shifting more and more to the content rather than the form of a literary work, as neo-Marxism was gradually gaining ground. Apparently, it was content and not form that entertained closer relationships with its historical and political context. The linguistic form was being undermined from within by something that exceeded it in significance and degree of truth. I would like to discuss here very briefly Fredric Jameson's critical perspective on history in his 1981 *The Political Unconscious* as illustrative of a whole line of historical-materialist argumentation for recuperating the social and political subtext.

Highly influential of recent critical theory, Jameson was also one of the most vehement critics of postmodernism. In his 1981 book, he argued that deeply hidden within a fictional text lie the semantic matrices of past trauma and conflict that shape what he designated as the text's 'political unconscious' (13). In his view, such matrices preserve their fundamentally non-discursive character even if they are only accessible to us in narrative form, rendering the text a mere vehicle, albeit a necessary one, for the conveyance of historical and social meaning. According to Jameson, it is only through a complex process of critical enlargement that the repressed levels of signification can be brought to light. An unencumbered, yet paradoxically hard nucleus of social and historical contradictions is thus revealed to the neo-Marxist or cultural critic who is capable of retrieving it from beneath several distorting aesthetic layers. History, designated as 'what hurts' (81), plays a key role in the process. Due to its fundamentally traumatic substance which renders it forever out of reach, history is the only one capable of preserving its purity outside of all discourse, denying direct translation into form. As an 'absent cause' (35), it remains a nucleus of contestation that opposes disorienting 'late capitalism', as Jameson will later designate the end of the twentieth century. Old dichotomies between content and form are thus reactivated: while the content, rooted into the social ground of a text, retains the idea of presence, form disperses presence. Despite similarities with structuralism's 'deep structure', Jameson's specific view of history as non-discursive, traumatic and in semantic excess vis-à-vis the linguistic form still plays a key role in more recent criticism. His perspective influenced especially Judith Butler as well as other feminist critics who argue in favour of a traumatic, irreducible truth at the centre of identity. Such a theory's preeminence in gender studies, postcolonial studies or minority studies today stands proof for poststructuralism's dismissal and for the efforts to return to earlier forms of criticism.

The prevalence of neo-Marxist accusations such as those Jameson levelled at literary language for perverting a more genuine, traumatic Real coincided in America with various minority movements, themselves reproachful of deconstruction's supposed relativism and isolation from reality. This gradually led to an implicit denial of any significant role ascribed to language which, as part of poststructuralism's system of interpretation was bitterly criticized for what was seen as its allegedly frivolous, endless play of significations that undermined all idea of presence. Or, in America, minorities in particular felt understandably threatened by such a condition that could have deemed their identity 'discursive' rather than real at any time, particularly at a moment when they were fighting their way into a revised literary and historical canon. A black critic such as Huston Baker Jr., for example, reacted against "the disappearance of culture and the self announced by postmodernism" (Brooker, 1996, 177) that, in his opinion, annihilated the idea of an authentic black identity. A whole generation seemed to express their anxieties in one critic's rhetorical question concerning the condition of "writers who were people of color, feminist, working class, or poor. Confronted with lynching, rape, Jim Crow laws, land dispossession, cultural erasure, domestic violence, [...] that, despite postmodernism's claims, were hardly linguistic fictions." (Ammons, 1995, 97-98)

Consequently, the initial, abstract version of French deconstruction, perceived in America as a form of confinement to a world of infinite textuality, was being displaced there by an increased awareness of ardent social realities. What was needed instead was a more perceptive, renewed type of representation that rendered language transparent and opened it up to a context of lived cultural and economic relations. This is the reason why, starting with the eighties, language was treated as a less problematic, more reliable vehicle for social and historical meaning. The process reminds one of literary realism at the end of the nineteenth century, the move beyond poststructuralism thus seemingly echoing the past rather than assuming a riskier future. Ideas of textual density and complexity induced by a few decades of structuralism as well as the dismantling of presence that deconstruction performed were discarded, being perceived as anti-humanistic. After 9/11, the direct attacks that targeted postmodernism intensified, reproaching the movement its utter incapacity to respond to an increasingly complex American society. Literature itself triggered vehement contestation and increasing demands for conformity at the time. As the critic James Wood put it in *The Guardian* right after September 2001,

If topicality, relevance, reportage, social comment, preachy presentism, and sidewalk-smarts - in short, the contemporary American novel in its current, triumphalist form - are novelists' chosen sport, then they will sooner or later be outrun by their own streaking material. Fiction may well be, as Stendhal wrote, a mirror carried down the middle of a road; but the Stendhalian mirror would explode with reflections were it now being walked around Manhattan. (Green, 2005, 212)

In a quote reminiscent of Adorno's view of poetry's incapacity to express the traumatic modern history after the Holocaust, Wood states his own frustration at what he saw as current fiction's failure to keep pace with an agonizing reality. Yet the critic's words can also be read as an involuntary acknowledgment of postmodern's fractured, discontinuous realism as the only one functional in today's world. Such criticism might have contributed to deconstruction's reorientation towards more immediate political matters in America where it was gradually entering a process of

appropriation by minority movements. From a rarefied philosophical method of interpretation, whose impact in the U.S. was limited mostly to the academic world, it became an effective tool in the hands of scholars devoted to minority causes and not only, such as Chakravorty Spivak, Nancy Miller, Edward Said and others. The result was an institutionalized, 'engaged' (Clayton, 1993, 52) version of deconstruction, that was more responsive to issues of identity politics. Indeterminacy and the infinite dismantling of the concept of presence, which had previously formed the system's very fundamentals, were now converted into mechanisms of attack against hegemonic control and domination and employed to define ethnic or gender difference. The process marked the end of the movement's initial, 'terrible purity' (53), the cessation of its "always being a new encounter with uncertainty, a fresh engagement with the limits of metaphysics" (53). Due to its propensity to oppose institutionalized concepts, deconstruction could be easily reshaped. Having to abandon its initial, more abstract character, its borders moulded, it was tailored to assimilate ideas of a new specificity – namely of gender, race, class or age - even if it had initially opposed such determinism. In fact, this could be perfectly grafted on deconstruction's already existing ethical-juridical-political dimension that Derrida explored, for instance, in his discussions of the idea of power in relationship with sovereignty and democracy or in his analysis of justice. Thus, even if in America deconstruction's project was indeed changed, reversed even, as things moved towards a *reconstruction* of identity in an act of recuperative social justice, it would be necessary to note that certain features were there from the beginning. Justice, for example, preoccupied Derrida himself. To him, it presupposed "a finite moment of urgency and precipitation" that limited, due to its urgency, the 'horizon of knowledge' (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/derrida/>) and thus the process of deconstruction itself. It seems that it is this sense of deconstructive justice that was retained in America, where it coexists, nevertheless, with the idea of opening and thus constantly rediscussing identity. Both meanings – opening and closure - are in fact already present in Derrida's analysis of 'horizon' as "both the opening and limit that defines an infinite progress" (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/derrida/>). Perceived as anti-humanist in America due to its infinite displacement of the idea of origin and apparent neglect of the human being, deconstruction was now undergoing a process of 'rehumanization' that it had actually never departed. Firstly, it had not departed it since ethical issues and justice were some of Derrida's key concerns, as I have shown above; secondly, his criticism of metaphysics essentially dealt with the whole philosophical and historical tradition that it contested.

The reinforced return to presence and identity also involved a necessary comeback of the individual, itself subjected to critical undermining as one of the main metanarratives of the humanist tradition. Individual experience, choice and initiative were gradually reconceptualized as a result. In fact, according to certain critics, in the U.S. the individual has not even been much affected by poststructuralism, which had "only a feeble impact on the persistently individualist imagery of [the American] institutions and popular culture" (Heller, Wellbery, 1986, 12). Yet the impact must have had a rather destabilizing effect for important theorists such as David Harvey and literary critics like Peter Brooker to want to rediscuss the values of the Enlightenment as a possible alternative in the recent context of ideas. Disappointed with endless, sterile theoretical discussions that spanned almost a century without reaching a tenable consensus, Harvey and Brooker are amongst those cultural critics who, together with

Habermas, thought about reconsidering the Enlightenment in their search for more substantial, concrete grounds for analysis. Such a move towards the Enlightenment is not accidental if we take into account the actual, acute concern for social justice and minority rights that the recent cultural paradigm in America shares with the Age of Reason and, in fact, with the whole humanist tradition. Harvey and Brooker are but two of the important voices who, in the wake of Habermas, appeal to the Enlightenment either to re-analyze its historical consequences (Harvey) or to suggest its possible relevance today (Brooker). Harvey, for example, implies in *The Condition of Postmodernity* that the Enlightenment's failure might be attributable not so much to the project's system of ideas as to their improper application (1989, 14). He was here following Habermas, who, as the main sustainer of the modern Enlightenment tradition, claimed himself that the project of modernity was in fact 'unfinished' (1984, 29) and that it contained unrealized capacity for emancipatory potential. Habermas wanted to revive such a project, dismissing postmodern and poststructuralist philosophers such as Foucault or Lyotard who believed that metanarratives of progress and freedom have failed and that western rationality is exhausted. He thus entered his famous dispute with Lyotard, who saw his project as yet another abstract narrative of emancipation, hopelessly outdated at the moment of their debate. What Lyotard opposed Habermas's theory was the 'irreducible plurality' of language games, each with its own 'local' rules, legitimations and practices (Lyotard, 1984, 55).

In its own turn, Brooker's proposal of a more consistent application of the concepts of equality, justice and liberty in the present reflects his open trust in the 'continuing universal vitality' of Enlightenment's values (1996, 133), whose universalizing claims he would like to further extend. In reappropriating such an ideology, Brooker does not propose any major, substantial alteration of the Enlightenment but rather its readjustment to fit present scopes (133), even if later in the same book he shows awareness of the absolutist potential of such ideas. Thus, the postmodern epistemological crisis has tempted certain critics into reconsidering the Enlightenment, whose coherent idea of reason seems capable to lend our *Weltanschauung* more consistency and stability. Yet such a readaptation would necessitate far more profound and radical changes, as several theorists amongst whom Habermas, Charles Taylor and Harvey himself warned.

It seems therefore that moving forward, beyond postmodernism, resembles a return to the past, to the more coherent, unitary idea of self and universal ethics that preceded twentieth century modernism. The context would be that of a less problematic, more transparent language that is open to social realities and reflective of traumatic history. Such language would help in the process of recuperating identity rather than dismantling it, which has triggered the necessity of partially restoring the much contested metanarratives as structures ensuring a higher degree of relevance and generality.

The only problem is that moving beyond poststructuralism may not prove to be an easy task. Culturally, the beginning of our century is still an age of Lyotardian micronarratives whose capacity to adequately represent our alertness to difference and diversity cannot be denied. Micronarratives, which necessarily multiply criteria for defining identity, also link identity to its context, placing it within its most precise spatial and temporal coordinates. This is what makes possible the research of issues such as those debated at the Heidelberg Centre for American Studies in 2010 and available on the internet, namely, "Producing Homosexual Place, Politics, and

Personhood in Suburban Orange County, California (1970-2000)” or “Remaking Nationhood: Assimilation and Citizenship among College-Educated Second Generation Immigrants in New York and Berlin”. Both re-rooting identity and reflecting its displacement, micronarratives render it more accurate and realistic, which is the main aim of cultural criticism. As I will show below, this demonstrates the persistence of some poststructuralist key concepts in the recent cultural paradigm, while bespeaking the necessity to blunt the movement’s extreme edge.

Paradoxes at the heart of American cultural criticism

In the last decades of the twentieth century, critics thought they could detect clear signs of postmodernism’s exhaustion. Anthony Giddens, for example, openly declared it “a dead tradition of thought” (1987, 95) while Alex Callinicos stated that “postmodernism is history” (Green, 2005, 20). The main question that I attempt to answer here is whether this is truly the case, or not entirely so. Were the linguistic and epistemological foundations of the idea of presence and the subject only temporarily altered or they were undermined as a result of postmodernism? In fact a whole plethora of questions need clarifying: can we now reconceive the individual as substantial and authentic? Is the autonomous individuality at the beginning of the twenty-first century the same as that of classical representations, in spite of all attempts to dismantle it? If it is not, how should it be envisaged instead? In response to these queries, I would like to show that poststructuralism, by means of its particular view of the discursiveness of identity, continues to play a destabilising, although less acute role in the American recent cultural paradigm.

Firstly, there is no denial of the need to reconceptualize the subject while regrouping him/her into the concrete, contextualized reality of lived social, cultural and political relations. Yet, paradoxically, while the individual needs to be repositioned as a more substantive entity, the traditional basis of classical individuality, rooted in the Enlightenment thought, is no longer functional. A view of the subject as ineluctably autonomous and self-reflective can no longer apply in the recent American paradigm. The Cartesian ego and its conceptualizing as a sole, central source of reason undermine ideas of context and implicitly deny otherness. Such an autonomous self would clash with the early twenty-first century American cultural and sociological views that stress precisely the significance of the context in strong connection to otherness, and the specificity of race, gender, age and sex. The belief in reason’s capacity to change reality through its sole acting and the trust in progress and the advances of science that are its logical consequences might help coagulate meaning but such metanarratives are still strongly questionable in the actual context. In order for more contextualized, plural relationships to be instituted, the concept of an autonomous, self-sufficient subjectivity needs to make room for otherness at its very core. This would be the most significant challenge to address the unified, coherent Cartesian self while placing it in a genuinely ethical position, as Paul Ricoeur does in *Oneself as Another*. Or, it was precisely poststructuralism which, even in the absence of a clear ethical bent of its own, encouraged a return to ethics in America, through its insistence on the equal validity of different, multiple, minor discourses. Together, these traits radicalized the severe breaches already forming in classical thought as a result of Heidegger’s critique of humanism. Foucault’s criticism of ‘power-knowledge’, for instance, is the one that essentially contributed to the contestation and final undermining of the canon in

America through its questioning of instituted knowledge. Also, an ethical streak at work not so much in Lyotard as in Foucault has led to the 'engaged' American version of poststructuralism mentioned earlier on. It was Foucault's criticism of the institutions of surveillance, control and power that offered the conceptual support for a radical questioning and simultaneous enlargement of the hegemonic order in America. In the U.S., such views which still persist in contemporary critical thought enjoyed significant academic popularity even before their employment by specific theorists who sensed the movement's high potential to engage with social and political issues. It seems therefore that a deconstructive dimension of criticism has to be constantly addressed to prevent the subject's tendency towards arrogance and solipsism, to remind him of the other's right to be completely different. "*Tout autre est tout autre*" [every one is completely other] (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/derrida/>, my transl.) in Derrida's own words, in a process of opening wide the spherical, enclosing limits of self-reflexive thought. The unconditional hospitality that the philosopher mentions in *Of Hospitality* is precisely the result of an opening of the 'door' or 'border' (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/derrida/>), in order to receive the other in, careful not to appropriate him at the same time, relinquishing all sense of mastery, ownership or control over him.

Presently a dilemma stands at the core of the critical paradigm in America. On the one hand, there is the attempt to reconfigure a more coherent, less labile, unitary self that strives for consolidation and authenticity. On the other hand, we are faced with the awareness that such a self is necessarily also plural and malleable because partially constructed by various representations. Determining the self, contexts render it relative to a certain extent as they open up the limits of the self, introducing a significant element of otherness as co-substantial to it. This issue preoccupied many philosophers apart from Derrida, such as Ricoeur, with his theory of 'oneself as another', Lacan, Levinas as well as many others. The result is a rather tense, often uncomfortable paradox at the heart of American cultural criticism that seeks ontological criteria while being aware not of their impossibility, but of their fundamental incompleteness in the American society defined by plurality and difference. Therefore my contention is that the second, plural, malleable self continues to coexist with the first, unitary one, unsettling it without attempting to dissolve it anymore. These are the effects of a modified, less radical poststructuralist strand that still operates within recent American thought. It is a less aggressive, more discreet version of the initial movement that survives, even if declared "a dead tradition of thought" (Giddens, 1987, 95) or 'history' (Green, 2005, 20). Such a tamed, altered version of poststructuralism is weak enough not to radically attack and dismantle ideas of identity and the self anymore, yet strong and mobile enough to render identity still relational, situational and problematic. Actually, it was French deconstruction that induced such current notions of contextuality and relationality, significantly altering the classical view on identity and opening the way to various minority politics in America, despite certain critics' talk about its 'feeble impact' on American concepts of individualism (Heller, Wellbery, 1986, 12). As for the Enlightenment, even a neo-Marxist critic such as Harvey concludes that it could not function properly in contemporary times because of its "opposition to divergent systems of representation" (Harvey, 1989, 28).

Poststructuralism's influence is therefore still crucial at least in what concerns minorities' identities. Once assimilated at a political and social level, deconstruction does not cease to question ideas of a genetically given nature of the self. Reference is

permanently rendered problematic, allowing for the contestation of marginal positioning in history. Acknowledging a partial discursiveness of identity guarantees social or ethnic minorities the possibility of being constantly reconsidered, re-analysed and thus repositioned rather than taken for granted. This way, ideas of exclusion and marginalisation are shown to be matters of contestable convention, even if such conventions have already shaped identities in time. Simultaneously, the issue discloses yet again the tension between the necessity of ontologically stable criteria in defining race, gender or class and the partial impossibility of applying such criteria to the end, for fear they might close identity within itself yet again. In connection to this, Peter Brooker remarks the existence of a “double game of identities” marking the contemporary subject caught “between strategies based on unfixed identities” and “assertions of who women, gays, blacks *essentially are*” (Brooker, 1996, 177, underlined).

A poststructuralist strand is equally that which, even in an ‘engaged’, modified version, renders neo-Marxism more relative, softening up uncompromising Old Left critical tendencies such as those of Marcuse, Althusser or Jameson. Jameson’s neo-Marxism, for instance, is based on the belief in the total determinism of a true, traumatic, conflicting history. Seeing history as the ultimate ground of significance and the political perspective as “the absolute horizon of all interpretation” (Jameson, 1981, 17), the philosopher’s project tends to be uncompromising, radical. Taken on their own, each of the two theories has a tendency to isolate itself from its more immediate context. Taken together, each beneficially opens up its own limits, accepting the idea of change or, as it is the case with poststructuralism, accepting to have its borders reshaped to a certain extent. Thus, poststructuralism has changed under the influence of neo-Marxism and identity politics, being now more anchored in the historical and social context. Neo-Marxism’s essentialist assertions have themselves been compensated for by poststructuralism’s questioning of authority and strict rationality, as well as by its embrace of uncertainty through deconstruction and fragmentation. The neo-Marxist idealistic perspective of an alienated, inauthentic late capitalism is counterpoised by poststructuralism’s or, better said, by postmodernism’s affirmation of the impossibility to differentiate between authenticity and inauthenticity in a consumerist society that is already aestheticized, defined to a high degree by its visuality. Yet the continual effort to distinguish between authenticity/inauthenticity is in itself productive and can generate creative criticism as well as substantial self-reflection. The fact that reality is not only singular but also already pluralized by representations does not necessarily render either of them inauthentic. Nor does this support the concept of a reality entirely replaced by extensive simulacra, as Baudrillard and Jameson see it. As it has previously been the case, literary and artistic representations also safeguard society against amnesia and loss. They disclose rather than repress history’s load of trauma and conflict, thus contradicting Jameson’s limited view of the aesthetic, while making sense of, or at least problematizing, one’s social, political and ideological context. Thus, representation, discourse as well as aesthetics should continue to be granted an important place in the contemporary critical paradigm. If representations already altered the nature of reality, replacing it with their own simulated versions, then a careful perusal of such mechanisms at work would provide invaluable insights into the substance of reality. Apart from being produced by subjects, as contemporary social theory argues, discourses and representations also precede individuals, already shaping their perceptions according to the specific class, gender or race they belong to. From this

point of view, discourses and representations continue to produce individuals, in accordance with poststructuralist theories, while being also, undeniably, produced by individuals. Partial objective distance can still be attained through personal efforts at circumscribing discourses, which renders representations relative and reaffirms one's capacity to generate autonomous, independent thought. This signals the need for a return to the more stable, humanist tradition (whose inheritor neo-Marxism is to a certain degree). It seems therefore that we are much in need of a new theory that marks the necessary and possible return to ontology, while being simultaneously aware of the prerequisite to re-examine the traditional concept of ontology and the so-called "natural", unitary, universal human being that it proposed.

One of the significant attempts at designing such a theory belongs to the political theorist Stephen K. White. White is fully aware of the two conceptual poles that shape thought today and of the complexity that such a paradox generates. He consequently proposes the notion of 'weak ontology' which shares the idea of weakness with Gianni Vattimo's 'weak thinking' which the latter explained in his 1985 book *La fine della modernità* [The End of Modernity]. 'Weak ontology' affirms the need to construct foundations for the ethical and political life, while at the same time requiring that such foundations be "contestable foundations, that signal their own limits" (White, 2000, 10). Instead of the Enlightenment's 'disengaged self' (8-9), the author suggests his own concept of a 'sticky subject' (9), one that is ontologically grounded but also partakes in the contexts that define it. Such a subject would be openly determined by language, nativity and finitude.

Conclusion

The essential rupture that poststructuralism performed through its attack of the linguistic and epistemological foundations of the idea of presence is therefore permanent. All attempts to ignore it would sooner or later be confronted with the fissures that it revealed in the structure of a homogenous, universal being, in a world where there are so many differences between states and ideologies. The American cultural paradigm cannot declare postmodernism 'dead' just as it is still shaped by key poststructuralist assumptions. Also, an uncritical, naïve return to the past in an attempt to bypass the movement would fail to grasp the multiplicity of communities of meaning, the separate systems in which meanings are produced and rules for their circulation are created, implicitly denying the plurality of centres and the idea of difference.

Authenticity is partly shaped by the discourses that one belongs to, which is what gives identity its complex, problematic substance. Gender, race and ethnicity are also the result of various historical exclusions and tensions that have become in time part of the notion of identity. As such, even if contestable, such distortions can no longer be deemed 'inauthentic'. The result is a plural, malleable and dialogical self that relies as much on the idea of authenticity as on something that is more complex and richer than that. Although discourse, language and image may indeed alter reality, creating 'inauthentic' versions of it, in the contemporary society these are quickly assimilated, contributing to the expansion and constant redefinition of the 'real'. This is one more reason why language and its complex mechanisms should still be granted an important place in contemporary cultural studies, just as ideas of minority and difference are widely accepted in an enlarged, more tolerant version of society. Language remains a crucial dimension not only of poststructuralism but of the social structures themselves,

one that performs a constant rethinking of all foundations, generating a more complex, revised notion of ontology.

Concerning the individual, we are obviously not attending to the same relatively autonomous and substantial concept before deconstruction. Without being annihilated, the self is at the same time an 'other', both literally and metaphorically. This presupposes taking distance from oneself and delivering oneself to the other but also, simultaneously, acknowledging one's own ontological condition as self and other, as authentic and partly constructed, discursive - which adds to the notion of authenticity, expanding it.

Thus, poststructuralism continues to operate within a more solid, reconceptualized notion of reality and the individual which are deeply rooted in their social, political and economic contexts, as neo-Marxist ideology asserts and as poststructuralism itself implies. Having in fact many features in common - the contestation of the idea of hegemonic power, radicalism, a certain revolutionary spirit - neo-Marxism has assimilated deconstruction, altering it, but by definition deconstruction can never be assimilated to the end, continuing to render all systems problematic. Each of the two paradigms has contaminated the other, relativising it and at the same time adding to the other's initial complexity. Each of them has weakened the other, which has increased their degree of objectivity and credibility. The language of poststructuralist critics has permeated ideas of a social, political grounding, while neo-Marxist concepts of ideology and the social are in their turn discussed in a context of dislocation, dissemination and conflicting meanings permanently in the making. Theory perceives the social and political arena in general as mutable, contingent and constantly negotiated in what might be called neo-Marxism with a consistent poststructuralist twist.

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Moartea și viața poststructuralismului – dileme ale criticii culturale americane recente

Lucrarea de față își propune să exploreze reîntoarcerea la subiect și la individ care a avut loc în gândirea critică americană din ultimele trei decenii. Parte a unei relații reînnoite cu realitățile sociale din Statele Unite, consecințele mai recente ale fenomenului vor fi examinate pe scurt, în contextul a ceea ce a fost văzut ca o epuizare a postmodernismului. Mă voi concentra mai ales asupra schimbărilor pe care le-au cunoscut în America poststructuralismul și versiunea originală a deconstrucției, din cauza presiunilor concertate din societatea și din universitățile americane. Scopul meu critic este acela de a argumenta că, într-un dublu proces de redefinire a limitelor, o versiune mai receptivă a poststructuralismului coexistă cu politicile minoritare, poststructuralismul continuând să accentueze caracterul mobil și relativ al identității.