



CROSSROADS

Since at least the mid-1980s, the paradigm wars have raged throughout organization studies, as they have in most of the social sciences. Normally the dichotomy is framed as one of postmodernism versus positivism—and the debate has, in my opinion, become quite hackneyed. The series of Crossroads articles takes a different approach: Richard Weiss, who has rallied against the functionalism often associated with positivism, attacks postmodernism from a nonpositivist vantage point. Stanley Deetz rebuts Weiss's arguments, but without abjuring the possibility of reason, as some postmodernists do. Finally, Rose-May Guignard—an ardent postmodernist—and I—who have been accused of “pomophobia”—conduct a dialogue on the relative merits of Weiss's and Deetz's positions, in an attempt to pinpoint commonalities as well as distinctions between the two. The debate that evolved between Rose-May and me is not the important one, however: The goal of this series of articles is to spur many further debates among *Organizational Science* readers, and to invite you to reconsider the paradigm wars from a fresh perspective.

Carroll Stephens

Taking Science out of Organization Science: How Would Postmodernism Reconstruct the Analysis of Organizations?

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Abstract

Postmodernism, an intellectual movement that originated in the humanities, has received considerable attention in the organization theory literature. Because many scholars remain uncertain as to just what this controversial perspective is, the present article offers a straightforward explanation of postmodernism's basic themes. Additionally, the author attempts to provide some balance to the overwhelmingly sympathetic presentations of postmodernism in the organization theory literature by offering a critical assessment of how it would redirect the study of organizations. Consistent with an intellectual divide dating to the Enlightenment, while those engaged in “normal science” are

concerned with the question of what is true, it appears that those who sympathize with postmodernism are addressing the question of what is good. Postmodernists, it is argued here, wish to engage in advocacy for values and preferences that they view as putting them in radical opposition to the status quo. To facilitate such advocacy they call for the repudiation of “modernism,” in particular the key modernist notion that there is an objective truth that can be sought out rationally and systematically. Postmodernists adopt, instead, a relativist philosophy, which contends that “truth” must be considered merely subjective, such that one's view of truth is only relative to one's circumstances. Although taking the position that no one can say

what is or is not "true" puts them in opposition to mainstream science, it supports their ability to discredit views they oppose, and simultaneously provides a defense against those who would claim that the postmodernist's view is not "true." Whether the postmodernist approach has the potential to enhance our understanding of organizations is addressed here by examining its philosophical and historical roots, the research and theory that it has so far inspired, and the critical commentary on our field that its adherents have offered.

(Organization Science; Postmodernism; Deconstruction)

Introduction

In May of 1996 the scholarly journal *Social Text* published an article by a physicist, Alan Sokal (1996a), who argued that his field's methods and perspectives should be supplanted by those used in literary analysis. What initially was just an intellectual curiosity became front-page news in the *New York Times* when, soon after, he published another article (Sokal 1996b), in which he announced that his *Social Text* paper had been a purposeful fraud. Sokal revealed that his argument had been nonsense dressed in esoteric but empty language; he now stated, for example, that he had employed terms such as "transformative hermeneutics" purely as parody. He contended that the editors had accepted his article—which had stated its goals as helping to develop an "emancipatory mathematics," a "liberatory science," and concrete tools for "progressive political praxis"—because it appeared to support that journal's ideological agenda. Their credulousness, he argued, demonstrated the vacuity of "postmodernist literary theory."

Several days later, the *Times* devoted half its Letters to the Editor page to rather contentious debate over Sokal's gambit, in which he was both attacked as the perpetrator of an evil trick and defended as a hero. In its full-page article on the affair (Begley and Rogers 1996), *Newsweek* noted that Sokal was receiving 100 e-mail messages per week. In January of 1997, *Scientific American* described Sokal as a notable, but by no means solitary, participant in a reaction against postmodernism and various other forms of "anti-science" ("Science versus antiscience?" 1997).

Those among us who are familiar with the term "postmodern" from its more typical uses, as a characterization of the era in which we are said to be living, or as a style of architecture that eschews the plainness of "modern" architecture, may wonder what it has to do with this political and philosophical debate. Reviving styles of an earlier era has been commonplace in architecture, but it is not obviously associated with any political agenda, nor with any

particular conception of organization. And in discussions of how organizations might best adapt to the new circumstances of our times (e.g., Clegg 1990), the usual description of the "postmodern" organization makes it seem merely like the now-familiar "adhocracy" proposed by Toffler (1970) more than a quarter century ago.

How did the seemingly innocuous term "postmodern" attain such stature, and engender so much controversy, in the field of organization science? What the fuss appears to be about is postmodernism, described by many (e.g., Binzagr and Manning 1996, Parker 1995) as a subjectivist or relativist theoretical perspective. But this wouldn't seem to be very controversial either. During this century many social science theories (e.g., Mannheim 1936, Berger and Luckmann 1967) have had as their core idea that what we usually take as objective knowledge of what is true, or as absolute notions of what is morally right, may instead be merely subjective understandings that vary from person to person and according to one's culture, language, and so on. In resensitizing us to the idea that what seems "real," "true," or "right" to us may not seem so to those in different circumstances, such approaches as "symbolic interactionism" in the 1930s, "social constructionism" in the 1950s, and "ethnomethodology" in the 1970s have been valuable in reminding us of perhaps the most basic foundation of modern social science—the idea that, as pointed out by Max Weber (1978; orig. 1922), all social action involves behavior to which the individual has attached subjective meaning. Although each of these earlier perspectives waned in popularity (Mullins 1973) as its advocates attempted to move beyond caveats about these uncertainties concerning knowledge and ethics, in the past this never led to the vituperation that has characterized the current debate over postmodernism.

The far more controversial issue appears to be the call by postmodernists for us to reject the "Enlightenment project" of "modernism," the hallmark of which is the systematic search for truth—i.e., science. Consistent with their view that there is no such thing as a single "objective truth," many postmodernists argue that anyone who claims that possession of it is possible (e.g., a scientist) is engaging merely in a rhetorical strategy to advance not just his or her own preferences, but very possibly the interests of socially and politically repressive forces. Postmodernists therefore have offered characterizations of modernism such as "DEFINITION: Modernism is excluding the stories and voices of the dominated by ignoring anything that does not fit the progress myth which institutionalizes privilege and marginalization" (Boje and Dennehy 1993, p. 6). Some (cf. Burrell 1994) have even blamed modernism for the Nazi Holocaust.

Kilduff and Mehra (1997) have given readers of management and organization theory literature a sense of the controversy that surrounds postmodernism in U.S. organization theory, acknowledging some of the criticisms with which postmodernism has been met in other fields. However, they cautioned against prematurely dismissing postmodernism's potential contributions, and offered a somewhat kinder and gentler version in an effort to rescue it from this "chorus of negativity." Specifically, in addition to avoiding a characteristic writing style that some regard as unnecessarily obscure, they acknowledged (in contrast to most other postmodernists) that it is not entirely impossible to determine what is true, and they accepted scientific methods such as experimentation and statistical analysis as potentially useful.

If their philosophical and methodological positions sound fairly conventional, Kilduff and Mehra's calls for "revolutionary undermining of assumptions," "radical reinterpretations," and a storming of "the Bastille of conventional thinking" link them to the postmodernist mainstream. However, although it is not unusual for postmodernists to describe themselves as rebels, it often is less clear precisely against what they are rebelling. Although advocates of postmodernism most typically express sympathies associated with the political left, its direct forebears (e.g., Nietzsche 1968b, orig. 1886) appear to have had an opposite orientation, and many current postmodernists take a stance that is avowedly radical, but less readily pigeon-holed.

As a basis for responding to Kilduff and Mehra's call for "an ongoing conversation concerning the potential of postmodernism for revolutionizing organizational research" (1997, p. 453), this article begins by offering a plain-language answer to the difficult question: What, exactly, *is* postmodernism? Following this description of postmodernism and its philosophical roots, it attempts to provide some balance to the overwhelmingly favorable reception that postmodernism has received in the organization theory literature. It critically examines postmodernist organizational analysis and describes the relationship of current work to postmodernism's highly controversial origins. Finally, by detailing the responses to a scholar who expressed doubts about postmodernism's usefulness, this article offers a concrete illustration of postmodernist theory in practice. We start with three fictional anecdotes.

Understanding Postmodernism

Imagine that you are a member of your community's Town Council, which is holding hearings on the potential environmental impact of a proposed industrial facility

that would help the town's tax base, but which has been criticized by Native Americans who live downstream as likely to ruin the fishing in which they traditionally have engaged. In an earlier session, two witnesses testified that the facility would harm water quality, but two others testified that it would have no such effect. The council has hired an independent consultant to evaluate the diverging views, but when you ask him whom he thinks is correct, he replies that all four witnesses had expressed worthwhile positions. When a dismayed fellow council member blurts out, "Yeah, but who's telling the truth?" the consultant replies: "Well, what do you mean by 'the truth?'" [holding up and wiggling the index and middle fingers on each hand as he utters the last two words]. All four were telling "the truth" as it appeared to them." Increasingly frustrated, you ask: "So will this factory pollute the water or won't it?" His retort is: "Some people may perceive it to be polluted and others may not." You try again: "The witnesses who argued that it would *not* harm the water provided graphs and statistics to make their case, and the two who claimed that it *would* just appeared to be giving their opinion. Doesn't that suggest *anything* about whom we should believe?" The consultant's answer is that although the statistics and the technical language may have given some witnesses a "scientific aura," all we can know for sure is that "people whose ancestors lived here for centuries before *our* ancestors stole their lands say it will end their way of life." He concluded that "If you're waiting for *me* to tell *you* that their view is a less "accurate" [wiggling his fingers again] representation of a reality that you think is "out there," then I'm sorry." You are now too confused to keep challenging him.

When you get home that evening, you really want to "ventilate" about this strange meeting. But your spouse, a doctoral student in literature, can't wait to tell you about today's seminar. He starts out by explaining that a very well-known scholar (whose husband was also in town, on a consulting job) had sat in today. Everyone had been assigned to analyze a passage from *Moby Dick*, and they asked the scholar's opinion of the first few students' analyses. After she had noted that one was much like that offered by Melville himself, and that others were new to her, they encouraged her to say candidly which she found more plausible. Explaining that the "correct" interpretation is not amenable to "rational" analysis, she pointed out that even if we could interview Melville, or if the correspondences discovered in 1983 had included an interpretation he gave many years after writing the book, that still wouldn't determine a single "true" meaning of his story. Nevertheless, when the next student's interpretation described Ahab as a capitalistic entrepreneur and

his crew as the proletariat, she described it as nearly identical to Calverton's argument, which she characterized as an outmoded Marxist view.

Over breakfast the next morning your daughter says that her biology teacher had told the class that they need not take Darwin's theory of evolution as the only "true" understanding of the development of diverse life forms. He said that his own perspective necessarily was limited to that of a white, male heterosexual, and that many cultures' written and oral traditions contained equally valid "metaphors," any of which would be equally acceptable on the upcoming exam. When a classmate asked about Creationism, your daughter couldn't quite follow the teacher's response, but he appeared to be disapproving of it, describing it as something like "a nonself-reflexive, marginalizing totalism that valorizes hegemonic, eurocentric knowledge/power relations." She tried to ask him about this after class, but he had left to meet his brother and sister-in-law who were in town for the day.

We now have met some members of the postmodernist family, fictional representatives of an intellectual movement that is difficult to define, at least in part, because its proponents criticize attempts at categorization as inherently modernist and scientific. According to DiMaggio (1995, p. 391), a postmodernist whom he asked to define her paradigm retorted that doing so "would be unfaithful to the theory." Not surprisingly, therefore, few definitions have been offered by advocates of postmodernism in the organization theory literature. In perhaps the most prominent exception, Alvesson and Deetz (1996, p. 205)—while acknowledging the variation among versions of postmodernism—put forth an "on the whole interrelated, set of ideas [that] is often emphasized." Alvesson and Deetz list the first two as: (a) the centrality of discourse—textuality—where the constitutive powers of language are emphasized and "natural" objects are viewed as discursively produced; and (b) fragmented identities, emphasizing subjectivity as a process and the death of the individual, autonomous, meaning-creating subject where the discursive production of the individual replaces the conventional "essentialistic" understanding of people (p. 205).

These and other elements of their analysis (characterized by Zammuto (1998) as "a bit cryptic") that emphasized the subjectivity of knowledge may sound esoteric, but the language is not empty. Rather, these ideas appear to cover roughly the same interesting territory as did symbolic interactionism and social constructionism—that reality, rather than having an objective existence, is a construction of two or more humans interacting through an abstract symbol system called language. Alvesson and Deetz (1996, p. 205) explained: "Focusing on language

allowed a constructionism which denied the objectivist claim of certainty and objective truth."

The first six of Alvesson and Deetz's points are largely consistent with Parker's (1995, p. 555) assessment that "the contemporary version of this relativist social constructionism is postmodernism." However, their last point, that postmodernist "research aims at resistance and indeterminacy where irony and play are preferred to rationality, predictability and order" (p. 205), addresses a theme not included in Parker's brief characterization: that postmodernists view themselves as resisting conventional, rational scholarship in order to champion radical change.

This article suggests that this last theme in Alvesson and Deetz's definition—advocacy for particular values and preferences that postmodernists see as being at odds with those of the mainstream—is what animates postmodernists' efforts, and that the other definitional elements amount to a strategy for advancing that goal by providing a philosophical position from which postmodernists may discredit conventional views, yet defend against opposition to their own.

The philosophy that postmodernists have adopted carries on a long tradition of social science perspectives that take the side of "idealism" (e.g., Hegel 1977, orig. 1807) in perhaps the most central debate in Western philosophy: the mind-body problem. Contrasted with "materialism" or "realism," which argue, for example, that trees are real and make a noise when they fall whether or not someone hears it, the idealist view is that trees (and, for that matter, their products, such as the pages of this journal) exist only as ideas in one's mind.

More typical among social scientists than this pure form of idealism, however, are corollary perspectives that contend that if reality is merely a mental construction, values concerning what is moral and knowledge concerning what is true must necessarily vary from one individual's mind (or perhaps one symbolically interacting dyad or group) to another. That is, rather than our understandings of what is good and what is true being universally agreed upon, they are subjective (i.e., they depend on the individual) and relative (i.e., they are conditioned by each individual's unique set of affiliations, and so on). That subjectivist and relativist versions of idealism are widely subscribed to in the social sciences is suggested by, for example, the decades of research on the determinants and consequences of individuals' attitudes.

Whereas Alvesson and Deetz took the position that these idiosyncratic perspectives on reality are shared by at least two persons—a position referred to as intersubjectivity—many postmodernists appear to favor a more extreme relativist perspective: Rather than arguing that

there are different views of what is true, or that reality is what two or more persons agree it is, they eliminate the possibility of objective knowledge of the world by taking the radically idealist position that *nothing* is more than an individual, subjective mental construction. Morgan (1989), for example, endorsed the view that truth is merely an illusion, and Gilmore, discussing the poststructuralist wing of postmodernism, noted (1994, p. i) that many of its adherents consider "truth" and "lying" concepts "to be seen through, moved beyond and rendered obsolete," because they have been "participants in long-worn-out modes of thinking." Thus, although Lawson (1989, p. xi) was intending to be entirely critical when she characterized postmodernism as "an attack on truth," many of its supporters largely agree.

However, at least since the writing of Karl Mannheim (1936), perhaps the best-known sociological proponent of intersubjectivity and the social construction of knowledge, social scientists have recognized that a pure relativist perspective, in which *any* difference among people causes their views to be tainted, leaves us with an "infinite regress" in which there is no means by which to establish that *anything anyone* says is more than a very subjective view. Thus, for example, in deciding whom to believe regarding a factory's impact, not only could we question each witness's technical expertise or their financial interests in the matter; one could argue that their testimony was influenced by what each had eaten for breakfast.

As Phillips (1997) has noted, the idea that reality is nothing more than a subjective mental construction was discussed as far back as Plato, and its refutation has been a staple of introductory philosophy classes. In making their case for postmodernism, Kilduff and Mehra acknowledged its tendencies toward the most extreme subjectivist position—referred to as solipsism—that the "self" is the only thing that can be known and verified. Philosophers regard this stance as especially untenable and, following Rosenau (1992), Kilduff and Mehra argued that it is not characteristic of postmodernism in general, but of "skeptical" postmodernism. To avoid the trap of solipsism they advocated an "affirmative" postmodernism, which acknowledges reality.

Kilduff and Mehra's view of what postmodernism *is*, if not just a contemporary version of relativism, is consistent with, as argued here, the two elements of Alvesson and Deetz's definition: Kilduff and Mehra contend that what remains as postmodernism's core once relativism is stripped away is "the rigorous pursuit of radical interpretations." That idea is reiterated in Connell and Nord's (1996) similarly favorable assessment of alternative (as postmodernist, critical, and related views often are de-

scribed) management theories; in their view, what differentiates postmodernists from those taking conventional positions is not simply their relativist philosophy, but that the latter often emphasize such criteria as "precision," whereas the former advocate values, such as "emancipation."

Is this desire to engage in political advocacy the reason that many postmodernists adopt a philosophy that has fared so poorly among philosophers? The opportunity provided by relativism for discrediting views one opposes and deflecting criticism of one's own position is considerable, and its use is certainly not restricted to postmodernists. Consider how the majority of *Organization Science* readers might react to attempts to apply the literature on "status congruence" (Sampson 1963, Adams 1953), research that indicated that work groups were more effective to the extent that the relative status of individuals within the group paralleled their status in society. It seems likely that if told that groups perform better when led by old, white males, many would find the implications of this research incompatible with their values—and would be more skeptical of its accuracy than of research that was not inconsistent with their preferences. To lessen the likelihood that these findings would lead to consequences that oppose our values, we might be tempted to characterize them as not generalizable beyond the people, subcultures, and so on, on which they were based, and as subject to multiple interpretations.

That such biases enter our work from time to time has long been recognized. As Weber (1949 p. 54, orig. 1904) noted: "It is true that in our sciences, personal value judgments have tended to influence scientific arguments without being specifically admitted." As will be detailed here, some postmodernists have taken this idea much farther. They have argued that not only have value judgments *tended* to influence scientific arguments; such biases demonstrate that the *primary* motivation, for *all* of us engaged in scientific debate, is advancing our own values and preferences. Taking the relativist stance that nothing can possibly be a more valid basis of "truth" than anything else, postmodernists contend that anyone who argues that science gives special access to "objective truth" and invokes it to legitimate their views is engaging merely in the language games in which we all take part to advance our interests. This argument, which seems to attack the concept of truth in order to undermine the credibility of others' views, is essentially that "scientific" evidence be given no more credence than any other rhetorical device.

Relativism not only provides postmodernists with a basis for saying that others have no right to claim they have the truth, but as Lehman (1991) and Thompson (1993) both have pointed out, it also provides a basis for saying

that others have no right to claim that postmodernists do *not* have the truth. That is, by employing relativism to eliminate or diminish the role of truth, postmodernists deflect criticism of their own position by undermining the very ideas of "evidence" and "truth;" this can be useful if others point out an absence of evidence for one's preferred view. For example, one postmodernist (Jacques 1992, p. 584) criticized a participant in a debate in a management journal—who had defended his position by offering evidence of its veracity—as merely falling back on "referential expertise and notions of accuracy."

As useful a rhetorical tool as relativism might be in these situations, if postmodernism *is* about advocacy of political preferences, its advocates would invoke relativism only selectively. As Mannheim (1936) noted, when applied to one's *own* statements, the argument that nothing is true severely limits one's ability to engage in advocacy. In the fictional anecdotes above, the environmental consultant, the Melville scholar, and the biology teacher all took positions that were somewhat relativistic, but that were conditioned by, or sometimes abandoned for, advocacy of their preferences. The consultant was able to use a relativist argument to advance his preferences by refusing to "privilege" scientific testimony—which might lead to consequences he did not favor—over nonscientific testimony. The Melville scholar, however, abandoned her relativism when asked about one view she disliked, which she dismissed as outmoded. Similarly, the biology teacher encouraged accepting all views as equally valid, until confronted by one that opposed his values, at which point he became judgmental rather than relativistic—although the fairly impenetrable language in which his judgment was couched might have made it difficult to tell that he was doing so.

Scholarly advocacy for views that question whether the status quo is a *good* status is by no means a new development. However, it is something of an innovation to combine ethical certitude with skepticism over the possibility of knowing the truth. Wallerstein (1997) has suggested that the longstanding conflict between those attempting to gain knowledge, and those endeavoring to promote their preferences, is best understood as a product of the Enlightenment, at which time people were deemed capable of rational judgment and theologians began to lose their authority over the questions, "What is Good?" and "What is True?"

Up for grabs, authority over these two questions fell to very separate camps. The latter question came under the control of Science, which, with the application of systematic reasoning, began to unlock previously mysterious aspects of the world, creating the technical basis for modernity. Those pondering the former question, of values

and preferences, became associated with the fields now known as the Humanities. Certainly, not all humanists challenge convention, but there are a number of suggestions that postmodernists are fairly direct descendants of those who have focused on issues of values and preferences and who have desired to advocate theirs. Harold Bloom (1992), for example, has characterized postmodernist literary work as "The School of Resentment," associating it with advocacy for groups considered victimized.

Although scientists sometimes have been able to proceed with their search for what is true by leaving issues of values to others, when science has been applied to understanding human societies, the intertwining of facts and values has been difficult to disregard. Perhaps more significantly, science's examination of humans can be seen as an incursion onto the intellectual turf staked out by the Humanities. Thus, it is in the study of human behavior that those concerned about facts and those concerned about values seem to have come into conflict most frequently.

The *Methodenstreit* in turn-of-the-century Germany, in which Humanities-oriented historians clashed with scientifically oriented economists and sociologists, exemplifies this conflict. Indeed, the distinction offered by Wallerstein was proposed at that time by Weber, who noted that the argument was essentially between those who sought "existential knowledge," i.e., knowledge of what "is," and those who sought "normative knowledge," i.e., knowledge of what "should be" (1949, p. 51; orig. 1904). The humanists, concerned with values and matters of "what 'should be,'" demonstrated both the subjectivist philosophy and the focus on advocacy that still characterize the position of those who pursue the question of what is good. They argued that because people, uniquely, possess consciousness, genuine understanding of social phenomena is not accessible through the simple concepts and mechanical methods used by scientists studying nature. Rather, it requires a deep comprehension of each individual's highly subjective worldview. Substantively, their work was marked by partisan political advocacy. Methodologically, their opposition to the scientific ethos manifested itself as a predilection for qualitative over quantitative research. This is not dissimilar to the various politically toned challenges to normal organizational science over the past few decades, such as "radical organization theory" from the left, and prescriptive writing on "organizational culture" (with its emphasis on getting employees to internalize management's values) from the right.

The alternative approaches to the analysis of organizations are, of course, not the only evidence that the same

issues debated in the *Methodenstreit* have been a continuing source of divisiveness; at midcentury, C. P. Snow (1959) caused a stir when he rediscovered the division between the groups searching for what is good and what is true. He described "the two cultures"—literary intellectuals concerned with ultimate values, and scientists concerned with factuality—and lamented the gulf in mutual understanding and lack of sympathy between them.

Weber did somewhat more than lament the *Methodenstreit*; his statement that all social action involves behavior to which the individual has attached subjective meaning was part of a carefully wrought compromise between the two factions, in which he attempted to make room for human subjectivity as a proper topic for scientific investigation (see Oberschall's [1965] discussion of Weber's persistent encouragement of empirical research on employee attitudes). Although Weber's own career spanned qualitative and quantitative research, theorizing, and active pursuit of political influence, he nevertheless argued that science, the realm of truth-finding, could never be capable of resolving differences of values, preferences, and interests, and must be kept separate from politics, whose domain was precisely such issues.

Thus, the central message of postmodernism for organization theorists, that we should abandon the futile search for "objective truth" in favor of advocacy for particular values, is very much that of those who disagreed with the individual considered the founder of our field. That Weber's ideas may be relevant to prosaic as well as purely theoretical matters, and that postmodernism would seem to offer an especially clear alternative perspective, is suggested by our fictional Town Council meeting. The council members were perplexed when a consultant, hired to clarify matters that those without his specialized scientific training could not, responded to their narrow technical questions by discussing the history of relations between Native Americans and European settlers. Weber's view about the distinct roles of science and values would suggest that, as political representatives of their community, it was the council members' job to address relevant values and interests, while it was the consultant's to provide the technical advice that was a necessary but not sufficient input for their decision.

The Potential of Postmodernism for Revolutionizing Research

Assessing postmodernism's potential for inspiring research that has revolutionary consequences for organizations requires going beyond both intellectual history and fictional anecdotes. Nevertheless, the most obvious means of doing so, reviewing extant postmodernist con-

tributions, faces certain hurdles. First, as Bloland (1995, pp. 521–522) has pointed out, postmodernism presents critics with a moving target: "Currently, many scholars who have been influenced by it distance themselves from the term, asserting that it identifies others, but not them." Another dilemma is that there are so many "brands" of postmodernism that criticism can be explained away as having disregarded the *real* postmodernists or not having included *all* of the postmodernists. Additionally, in light of this article's expressed intention to balance the favorable assessments of postmodernism, studies chosen for review here might be suspected of having been picked as easy targets. To avoid such suspicion, this article examines each of the studies discussed in Kilduff and Mehra's (1997) commentary on postmodernist organizational analysis, as examples of "work that responds creatively to postmodern problematics."

Studies Illustrating Postmodernist Practices

Kilduff and Mehra's first description was of Burt's (1987) secondary analysis of Coleman et al.'s classic study (1966) of the diffusion of the use of tetracycline. Burt's findings supported a "structural equivalence" explanation for innovation diffusion over an earlier "cohesion" model. He found that doctors did not start prescribing tetracycline as a result of conversations with other doctors, but on the basis of concern that if they did not do so, patients might go to doctors who did.

According to Kilduff and Mehra, Burt's study "exhibits some postmodern characteristics without any explicit claim to a postmodernist label" (p. 468) and "as a passionate statement of advocacy for a particular perspective, his work succeeds in communicating the excitement of personal discovery rather than the dullness of objective analysis" (p. 469). In a footnote, Burt had mentioned that copies of the data set were available to anyone interested in conducting further analyses. Kilduff and Mehra stated: "Thus, the project is left *unfinished* in a typically postmodern gesture of inclusion of the audience [in which Burt] brought the reader into the project of science rather than insisting on a rigid demarcation between scientist and audience" (p. 468). They described his study as a "radical reanalysis" that "radically challenged" a classic, resulting in "a revolutionary undermining of assumptions that go far beyond the particular data set in question" (p. 469). They praised Burt as having deconstructed the original study and having "succeeded, like Derrida, in challenging the accepted practice of enquiry" (p. 469).

Their second example was a book by an anthropologist (Kondo 1990) that, according to Kilduff and Mehra, presented an "ethnographic examination of the conflicted

organizational production of the self" (p. 470). They argued that her work demonstrated that "fiction, therefore, applies not just to the world outside the self, but also to the constitution of the self" (p. 470).

Next was an article from an anthropology journal (Cassell 1996) that Kilduff and Mehra described as having examined "how women surgeons embodied themselves in a career dominated by "aggressive, macho male peers" " (p. 470). They characterized it as postmodern "in possessing personal certainty and convictions, but eschewing dogmatic claims to verity" (p. 471), and as an example of feminist postmodernism, which "is political in its challenge to the status quo in patriarchal society" (p. 471).

The fourth example was an article by 87-year-old Robert Merton (1995), perhaps the world's best-known sociologist. To expiate his seeming guilt in a circumstance in which he had appeared to deny credit for a famous statement to the female coauthor of the book in which it is found, he reproduced materials, including the letter from the second author clearly stating that her coauthor, and not she, had come up with the statement. Kilduff and Mehra praised this article as "an aesthetically pleasing text that masquerades not as science but as finely wrought fiction" (p. 473).

Finally, lauding the work of Schachter and Festinger, they described, as an example of research that responds to postmodern problematics, the well-known experiment by Schachter and Singer (1962) that demonstrated the differentiability of affective from cognitive aspects of emotion, because it makes "an explicit appeal to classic references in the field" (p. 474) and because it is "a masterpiece of double-coded, hilarious drama" (p. 474).

Thus, of the five scholarly contributions chosen by Kilduff and Mehra to exemplify postmodernist practices, the first was deemed exemplary because it passionately advocated its position, thereby avoiding "the dullness of objective analysis." The second was considered postmodernist because it illustrated the broad relevance of fiction. The third was included because it expressed strong feminist opinions and made no claims to be telling the truth. The fourth was praised for reading as fiction rather than as science, and the fifth for its humor.

Consistent with Wallerstein's differentiation between those who focus on the question of what is good and those who focus on what is true, it appears that what Kilduff and Mehra regarded as postmodern was the emphasis on things they (along with many of the rest of us, in certain contexts) regard as good—passion, excitement, finely wrought fiction, and humor—rather than what is true. As they stated it: "postmodernists prefer the interesting over

the obvious and place a high value on paradox, contrast, counterintuition, and humor" (p. 473).

Postmodernist Organizational Studies

Although none of the studies detailed by Kilduff and Mehra are from the organizations literature, and only two are avowedly postmodernist, it was not their view that no postmodernist organizational research yet existed. Noting that such work "has begun to appear" (p. 462), they cited three studies, by Kilduff (1993), Martin, (1990), and Boje (1995), to which we now turn.

The first of these (Kilduff 1993) appeared in the *Academy of Management Review*, which publishes theory rather than empirical research. Although it may seem, therefore, an odd illustration of postmodernist *research*, the author's choice of outlets helps to demonstrate how a perspective that views the world as largely illusory translates into research practice. It would be pointless to systematize knowledge about a world that is *entirely* illusory, and postmodernists do not quite do so. Whereas playwrights might see all the world as a stage, for Jacques Derrida, the French postmodernist whose method, "deconstruction," is Kilduff's inspiration, all the world is a text: "il n'y a pas hors texte" (Derrida 1976, p. 158). Kilduff explained (p. 14) that "Deconstruction offers a way of examining human behavior as a textual production, a kind of writing. For Derrida, writing includes not only language but "all that gives rise to inscription in general" (1976, p. 9)." This definition of writing gives a broad purview to deconstruction—a typical example of which involves reanalyzing a book to expose its internal inconsistencies and its author's unstated assumptions. Consequently, a critical analysis of previous literature, an appropriate type of contribution for *AMR*, is also appropriate postmodernist research.

Kilduff's article did not provide *data* about organizations, but was instead a critique of *Organizations*, March and Simon's 1958 book. As one of "those who dare to deconstruct a text" (Kilduff 1993, p. 28), Kilduff maintained that although March and Simon rejected Taylorist models of organization as mechanistic, all they did was replace Taylor's model of a laboring machine with their own model of a computing machine.

Kilduff and Mehra's second illustration of the value of postmodernist organization analysis was a frequently cited deconstruction by Martin (1990), in which she described the techniques and assumptions undergirding deconstruction in rigorous detail, and also forthrightly expressed reservations about this method. Acknowledging that some have argued that deconstruction is politically conservative rather than revolutionary, and that much deconstructionist writing has mystified rather than clarified

its principles, she nevertheless said that she hoped to demonstrate in a clear manner what she believed were deconstruction's advantages for studying organizations.

The text deconstructed in this twenty-page article consisted of three sentences from a transcript of a conference at which an executive told about an employee who had scheduled the Caesarean birth of her child around a product introduction. The executive began by saying: "We have a young woman who is extraordinarily important to the launching of a major new [product]" (Martin 1990, p. 339). Martin argued that his use of the phrase "we have a young woman" rather than "a young woman works for us," was a highly significant sexual "double entendre" that (among other things) "supports men's dominance of production in the public arena" (p. 350). She stated that this woman's pregnancy was one means of revealing "organizational taboos": "This, then is the sexual taboo that a pregnant employee violates: Sex is happening and the high ranking male employee is getting none of it" (p. 349). She concluded that her deconstruction "revealed that the primary beneficiary of this apparently well-intentioned effort to 'help' was the corporation—not the woman or her child" (p. 356).

The last of the postmodernist organizational studies cited by Kilduff and Mehra was "Stories of the Storytelling Organization: A Postmodern Analysis of Disney as 'Tamara-Land'" (Boje 1995). Boje described a play, *Tamara*, in which audiences follow actors through various sets so that, depending on whom one follows and where, the play has as many as 479 million alternate story lines. Using previously published accounts and archival data, he retold the familiar story that Walt Disney was not universally regarded as a nice person. He contended that, as in *Tamara*, there is more than one way to look at something, and argued that to uncover such multiple meanings, we should "heed Pondy and Mitroff's advice and move to discursive metaphors, such as Lyotard's (1984) 'conversation,' Bakhtin's (1981) 'novel,' and Thachankary's [*sic*] (1992) 'text'" (p. 1000).

To show that Disney allowed only his voice to be heard, Boje noted that Disney referred to his musicians as "my musicians," his artists as "my artists," and that "Walt even referred to his wife, Lilly, as 'Mrs. Disney'" (p. 1020). To demonstrate that Disney "ruled with an iron fist," he stated (p. 1026) that "If an employee disagreed with Walt, he or she could get fired. Employees who broke a rule of Walt's would be fired. Everything was owned by Walt Disney Productions. Walt was everything, including all people." As evidence for this statement, he retold a previously published story about Disney dressing down one of his executives for having berated a gardener.

The study regarded the current CEO of Disney's company more favorably because, in contrast to Disney, Eisner has "given identity to other human voices"—specifically, to those of George Lucas and Michael Jackson. Although not explaining why it is good that Eisner gave identity to Michael Jackson, the author's admiration for Lucas was evident from his disappointment that "In the Star Tours ride at Disneyland, the signs and symbols of *Star Wars*, the film, have been uncoupled from the historical referents and spirituality of that story" (p. 1017).

These three contributions, much like the previous five, highlight postmodernists' emphasis on scholarship that advocates their values, interests, and preferences. Kilduff criticized the March and Simon model because he considered it partly responsible for the continued design of jobs that treat employees as less than fully functioning humans. Martin wished to demonstrate that corporations, despite their rhetoric, were not exhibiting sensitivity to the concerns of women in the workplace. Boje likes storytelling, novels, the spirituality of *Star Wars*, and bosses who treat subordinates respectfully.

Alternative Readings of Postmodernist Studies

This article has examined the examples of postmodernist work offered by Kilduff and Mehra—advocates of postmodernism—to assess its value for enhancing our understanding of organizations, and to make the case that postmodernism is best understood not simply as a relativist perspective, but also as motivated by authors' concerns to advocate their preferred values. Taking the relativist position that each of us has a different, though equally valid, viewpoint, postmodernists generally acknowledge that any reading of a text is necessarily a subjective one, and that alternative readings are always possible. To examine further the contribution of postmodernist research to our understanding of organizations, this article will follow that tradition and reread these texts.

Many of us may share Boje's view of Walt Disney as having been somewhat monomaniacal and often unkind—but with what new insights can his postmodernist approach be credited? Boje's appropriation of humanist subject matter as a methodological innovation for organizational research, offering a theatrical experience as a model for how to think about things, made the familiar point that there are, indeed, many ways to think about things. The theatrical metaphor provided reading that diverged from "the dullness of objective analysis," but regrettably, broke no new ground beyond what was already in the published literature. And the evidence he mustered, such as the story of Disney defending a gardener, would seem more appropriately to support a fairly opposite story line.

Martin's skepticism about corporate management's altruism also is a sentiment many of us share; we, too, may be appalled at the executive's unembarrassed recounting of how his employee subordinated her child's birth to a product introduction. Martin's application of deconstruction might at first appear to have followed Derrida's description of that method, stated by Kilduff and Mehra as "an exploration within strict boundaries of the indeterminacies to be found in texts, indeterminacies that open up radical reinterpretations of such texts" (1997, p. 456). However, Kilduff and Mehra also quoted Derrida as saying that deconstructionists who want, for example, to examine Rousseau's work must "know the corpus of Rousseau as well as possible, including all the contexts that determine it . . . otherwise one could indeed say just anything at all" (Derrida 1988, p. 144).

Particularly because focusing on only a three-sentence passage would seem to make it a bit too easy to find things that appear to have been left indeterminate, providing evidence from somewhere in the text of the speech to support the radical reinterpretation would seem to have been crucial to Martin's argument. But there is no evidence, for instance, that a pregnant employee violates a sexual taboo that "Sex is happening and the high ranking male employee is getting none of it" (p. 349). Martin was admirably candid in admitting that she was going beyond the data, but did this widely cited deconstruction yield insights that justify this admittedly tenuous link to actuality?

Because Merton's article paralleled the form of the epistolary novel, at least in the literal sense of reproducing letters, it might be appealing to those of humanist sensibilities. However, Merton, who—rather than being a postmodernist—is a structural-functionalist, was specifically *critical* of contemporary relativist perspectives, as evidenced by his (1995, p. 390) expression of hope that "even in this postmodern age of deconstruction, evidentiary truth can still prevail."

The study by Burt, like Merton, a structural-functionalist sociologist, analyzes the diffusion of scientific innovations; this study, frequently cited for its quantitative contribution, is usually read as an exemplar of normal science rather than postmodernism. From the normal-science perspective, repeating important studies is a "basic philosophical tenet" (Mone and McKinley 1993, p. 293); the reanalyses that Burt conducted and further encouraged by making the data available to others strongly suggest his commitment to the progressive cumulation of data and to the determination of truth—no matter how that might reflect on his own preferences. Kilduff and Mehra offered no evidence to support their view of Burt as passionately advocating a position; the present author could identify none, and Burt (personal communication,

July 1997) indicated surprise at Kilduff and Mehra's characterization. And rather than contributing to "a revolutionary undermining of assumptions that go far beyond the particular data set in question," Burt had carefully cautioned that his findings might have resulted from the idiosyncrasies of his particular data set.

Kilduff and Mehra undoubtedly were correct in characterizing the work of Schachter and Festinger, perhaps the most significant progenitors of modernist social psychology, as more interesting than current laboratory experimentation in the study of organizations. They described as hilarious and revolutionary the classic Schachter and Singer (1962) study that involved injecting subjects with a powerful psychoactive substance, misinforming them about its nature and effects, and provoking extreme and negative emotional reactions, to satisfy the researchers' curiosity about a seventy-year-old theory. However, had human subjects committees existed at universities at that time, would the committee to which Schachter and Singer submitted their proposal have shared Kilduff and Mehra's enthusiasm for research that is interesting and fun, or might they have required that such desires be balanced with a sense of responsibility to those under the researchers' power?

The ethnographies summarized by Kilduff and Mehra clearly are compatible with a postmodernist perspective; this impressionistic, qualitative form of research historically has been an alternative to normal science. Consequently, earlier relativist perspectives could equally have provided a theoretical framework for this type of study; Manning (1995), for example, suggested that ethnographies can be seen as falling into both postmodernist and symbolic-interactionist traditions.

Their purpose in presenting these studies, according to Kilduff and Mehra, was to give scholars confidence to pursue the postmodernist practices that they illustrated. It may well be that, with enhanced self-confidence, scholars could be more like the anthropologist Kilduff and Mehra admired for "possessing personal certainty and convictions, but eschewing dogmatic claims to verity" (p. 471). Greater self-confidence may indeed encourage scholars to consider their own views as more valuable than whatever could be learned from the "objective analysis" that Kilduff and Mehra find "dull." Nevertheless, this re-reading of the studies that Kilduff and Mehra offered as examples of postmodernism's potential indicate that each could as easily have been conducted without either the intellectual or emotional support of postmodernism.

Postmodernism's Unfinished Crusade

That Kilduff and Mehra were unable to muster a convincing demonstration of postmodernism's revolutionary

potential would not surprise even postmodernism's advocates, who concur that it has had meager payoffs so far. Martin and Frost (1996) acknowledged that there hasn't yet been much work from this perspective that actually attempts to help employees take action. Boje et al. (1996, p. 8) discussed the need for "essays that not only review and explain postmodern perspectives and concepts but that also actually apply these postmodern concepts and ideas to emerging managerial and organizational issues."

Alvesson and Deetz (1996) noted that "there is a lot of talk of resistance in the postmodernist industry, but it is highly theoretical and generalized and remains quite esoteric." Yet these scholars maintain their view of postmodernism as a source of hope for a radicalized future. Martin and Frost (1996, p. 601) explained that as a result of joining postmodernism's "revolutionary vanguard"—because they shared its view of the mainstream as "arid and fruitless" for reasons such as its "love of numerical analysis"—they found that "it was now potentially ok to do qualitative research, to be playful . . . I [sic] experienced a sense of the fun and the theoretical potential of looking at organizations that way." They stated that research fulfilling such potential "is starting to emerge," but supported their view with only one citation, to an unpublished paper from 1991.

Boje and Dennehy had declared that their book is "a rebel's guide for post-bureaucratic, post-exploitation, post-racism, post-colonialism, post-sexism, and post-complacency. **"Postmodern Management!"** is our revolutionary battle cry for breaking the shackles of these exploitations" [emphasis in original] (1993, p. xxi). Boje has cautioned (Boje and Dennehy 1993, p. xii) that the use of postmodernist concepts might not be appropriate for everyone, stating that "I'm not sure you can be a postmod unless you ride a Harley" and that "we're all just racing with the wind and me, I'm born to be post-mod!"; however, he and his colleagues maintained that they had produced scholarship demonstrating postmodernism's applicability to organizational and managerial issues.

Perhaps more familiar with the historical roots of postmodernism in European social theory and philosophy (e.g., Derrida 1976, Foucault 1978, Lyotard 1984, Nietzsche 1968b, orig. 1887), Alvesson and Deetz viewed postmodernism "as part of a broader critical tradition which challenges the status quo and supports silenced or marginalized voices" (1996, p. 193). While acknowledging that postmodernist "researchers can still be faulted for doing many conceptual essays without extended field experience" (p. 212), they stated optimistically that "recently, more empirical work has been done"

(p. 212). Nevertheless, they identified only two examples of authors who had published such empirical work—Martin and Deetz—and, as was the case in Kilduff and Mehra's review, these were U.S.-based rather than European scholars.

Once again focusing on work that has been put forward as exemplary by advocates of the postmodernist perspective, let us consider whether the published studies endorsed by Alvesson and Deetz (1996), and by Boje et al. (1996) demonstrate postmodernism's value for organizational analysis more successfully than did those cited by Kilduff and Mehra.

Deetz (1998) spent four months talking with a company's computer systems engineers, who had been gathered from their usual corporate staff roles into a relatively autonomous, self-managed profit center that marketed itself to the entire corporation as a provider of integrated consulting services. These engineers were extremely pleased with both the intrinsic and extrinsic rewards resulting from this new arrangement; they enjoyed the greater choice of interesting assignments, the highly positive feedback they now received from their clients, as well as the potential for higher remuneration. Deetz contended that "a more careful analysis" questions this seemingly enviable situation. He characterized the increased autonomy and self-management as a "Faustian bargain" that "created a condition of domination," reinforcing these employees' subordination by placing "the dictator" inside the body of each of them.

Although all the evidence reported indicated that for both the company and its employees this new arrangement was an improvement over the old, Deetz disagreed. Relaxing the usual postmodernist insistence that no one can claim to possess the singular truth, he declared that: "In fact the presence of subordination hampers the accomplishment of self and company goals" (p. 159). He characterized the increased financial rewards the company was giving these employees as an insidious ploy to strengthen its domination over them: "the more an expensive life-style is encouraged, given, or required for the job, the greater the control that can be exacted from pay systems" (p. 167).

To argue that, despite very favorable customer satisfaction data, company-level goals nevertheless were suffering, Deetz appeared to take on views that might be mistaken for those of an especially picky mainstream social scientist, complaining that: "No evidence is given that clients are being treated better, rather the clients' self-reports are uncritically accepted" (p. 161). In addition to discounting data that did not fit his preferences, Deetz claimed that evidence contradicting his views actually supported them: His subjects were "constantly anxious

(though imaged as confidently certain)" (p. 168). He also averred that "Employee pronouncements of autonomy sound vaguely like some adolescent males' treatment of sexual identity: the certainty speaks insecurity" (p. 168).

Deetz was very open about what drove his negative spin; he resented this shift to greater self management because it "reproduced a conservative political ideology" which fosters beliefs such as: money motivates effort, and business decisions are best made on economic rather than political criteria. Although claiming that no one was allowed to challenge the market economy perspective at the core of the new approach, Deetz apparently engaged his subjects in debate on this matter, seeming both disappointed that they disagreed with him and surprised at their reaction: "If I were to raise questions of voice, to suggest that their experience or identity might be socially constructed and working against their own reported interests, my questions would be seen as political" (p. 169).

Boje and his colleagues (1996, p. 8) stated their intent to go beyond "reflective essays on the potential of postmodernist thought for reconceptualizing management theory" to actual applications. Nevertheless, the analysis they offered was a deconstruction of *Administrative Science Quarterly*, making the familiar argument that postmodernism had great potential, but was continually subjected to repression. As evidence that since its founding *ASQ* has favored quantitative over qualitative work, they reprinted a table from a 1958 *ASQ* article by Boulding, which showed that in the four issues in its second volume, *ASQ* published fewer pages of history and description, and more pages of quantitative and empirical research, than in its inaugural volume in 1957. Admitting that Daft's (1980) analysis, looking at *ASQ*'s 1959, 1964, 1969, 1974, and 1979 volumes, came to a different conclusion, they nevertheless rejected his findings as having used too small a sample of years. *ASQ*'s rejection of two of their submissions served to confirm this repression; they concluded (1996, p. 86) that "it is clear that anything postmodern or nonstructural-functionalist/logical positivist is unwelcome."

The Politics of Postmodernism

It is not unusual for postmodernists to claim that as a result of championing the oppressed, they are themselves victims of repression. Kilduff and Mehra commented on a negative reaction among conventional organizational theorists at the mention of Derrida's name. Discussing the flap over an academic appointment he received, they viewed his difficulties not as the result of weaknesses of postmodernist scholarship, but as further evidence of the

repression to which its adherents are subjected because of their "threat. . . to the status quo" (1997, p. 460).

While concurring with the advocates of postmodernist organizational analysis who note that efforts to present postmodernism to mainstream theorists have not resulted in a favorable reception, and that postmodernism has not yet yielded much research with "emancipatory" consequences, this article questions whether these failures are attributable to repression, as advocates suggest, or rather to the substance of its ideas. Following Kilduff and Mehra's recommendation that classic works ought to be taken seriously, it considers the possibility that postmodernism's difficulties may have to do with the controversial views inherited from a number of its founders. Although a discussion of the troubling political associations of a number of these individuals unavoidably raises questions of character, this is not done for the purpose of discrediting postmodernism on the basis of *ad hominem* attack. Rather, as a response to the contentions of postmodernism's supporters that the unwelcome reception to postmodernism results from the inherent threat it poses to the status quo, it is intended to suggest that there is nothing a priori emancipatory about postmodernist philosophy.

Relativist philosophies have developed from a variety of sources, but the most significant source of postmodernism, in particular, is Nietzsche (West 1981). Clark (1990, p. 2) noted that by citing a (nearly solipsistic) perspective in Nietzsche's early writing, which he consistently disavowed in his mature works—that there are "no facts," but "only interpretations" (Nietzsche 1968a, orig. 1901)—"many assume that Nietzsche has demonstrated that there are . . . no truths, but only . . . "different perspectives" on reality." Clark contended that, ironically, "such claims have made Nietzsche, once associated with the political right, a rallying point for the epistemological left—for those who attack with revolutionary fervor traditional beliefs and attitudes concerning truth [and] science."

To the continuing embarrassment of Nietzsche's contemporary epigones, foremost among his right-wing admirers were Hitler and Mussolini (Aschheim 1992). Hitler actively represented his political philosophy as closely linked to Nietzsche's, which advocated "the establishment of international racial associations whose task will be to rear a master race . . . in which the will of philosophical men of power and artist-tyrants will be made to ensure: a higher species of human beings" (Nietzsche 1968b, orig. 1886). Although Nietzsche's criticisms of anti-Semitism and nationalism make his link to fascism questionable, the fact that some postmodernists blame modernism for the Holocaust may be seen as part of the debate over whether this historical link to Nazism

should make us wary of postmodernism's frequently political focus.

The resurgence of interest in Nietzsche's ideas is attributable especially to Michel Foucault, perhaps the most important founder of postmodernism, and a proponent of Nietzsche's views. Foucault examined social institutions, such as hospitals and prisons, in liberal democratic societies. Reflecting Nietzsche's concern with power, and inspiring postmodernists' interest in analyzing oppression, Foucault argued (as have a number of contemporary critical organization theorists, e.g., Jermier 1998, Ezzamel and Wilmott 1998) that power and domination in such societies is subtler than in more overtly oppressive ones, but not less oppressive.

As Alvesson and Deetz (1996) have noted, the other preeminent founder of postmodernism (particularly in terms of influence on organization studies) is Jacques Derrida (1976), whose major contribution has been his methodology, "deconstruction." As with Foucault, however, the influences on Derrida have provided fodder for the debate over postmodernism's connection to Nazism. Derrida's greatest influence was the German philosopher Heidegger, on whose concept of destruction the idea of deconstruction was based, and whose involvement with the Nazis has been a matter of debate. Although scholars disagree on the extent to which Heidegger's participation represented ideology or merely opportunism (Farias 1989, Rorty 1988), Nazism does have many consistencies with his philosophy, which advocated strong German nationalism and echoed Nietzsche's contempt for democracy and Judeo-Christian ethics.

This is by no means to say that contemporary proponents of postmodernism are antidemocratic, anti-Semitic Nazis. Such an argument would be wholly fallacious; however, left-wing and right-wing admirers of Nietzsche and Heidegger do have in common a relativist approach that, by denying the possibility of a singular truth, allows for interpretations that fit with whatever view one is advocating. Perhaps the best-known example of the implications of this view's radical version, in which the distinction between fiction and reality is questioned, has to do with Paul de Man, a highly influential deconstructionist. He argued:

It is always possible to face up to any experience (to excuse any guilt), because the experience always exists simultaneously as fictional discourse and as empirical event and it is never possible to decide which one of the two possibilities is the right one. This indecision makes it possible to excuse the bleakest of crimes because, as a fiction, it escapes from the constraints of guilt and innocence. (1989, p. 26)

Four years after de Man's 1983 death, information unexpectedly became available that many scholars regarded

as highly relevant not only to the nagging question of postmodernism's relationship to Nazism, but also to the more important issue of whether postmodernism facilitated interpretations that might be more convenient than illuminating. An admiring doctoral student stunned the literary world with his inadvertent discovery of 180 articles that de Man had written for two Nazi-run newspapers in occupied Belgium, a number of which reflected enthusiastic espousal of pro-Nazi and anti-Semitic views (Hirsch 1991). But, once again, the uproar over these revelations was not simply a result of having found that a major proponent of postmodernism actually had been a Nazi collaborator.

Rather than focusing on de Man's behavior some 50 years earlier, this controversy centered on his more recent behavior, as well as that of fellow postmodernists. Collins (1989, p. 131) has pointed out that an assertion (such as de Man's, quoted above) "that all reality is a piece of literature . . . is understandable as a professional ideology, elevating literary theorists' own field." In this case, however, the denial of the distinctions between fiction and reality and between guilt and innocence seemed conveniently advantageous for someone who, as the details of the story made clear, engaged in behavior that others around him had not: opportunistically collaborating with the Nazis. This impression that having something to hide led de Man to espouse the view that guilt is always excusable was reinforced when it came out that during the 1950s he had denied that the events—only rumored at the time—had ever occurred.

Criticism was directed at Derrida as well, when he defended de Man (1989) by arguing that to attack him was tantamount to reproducing "the exterminating gesture which one accuses de Man of not having armed himself against sooner," and when he called critics of his essay defending de Man "ignorant," "obtuse," and "murderous." Searle (1993a, pp. 178–179), noted that Foucault once described Derrida's prose style to him as "*obscurantisme terroriste*: . . . The text is written so obscurely that you can't figure out exactly what the thesis is (hence "*obscurantisme*") and then when one criticizes it, the author says, "*Vous m'avez mal compris; vous êtes idiot*" (hence "*terroriste*")."

In some ways Derrida's behavior was consistent with postmodernist theory. Although his characterization of criticism of his friend as the moral equivalent of the Holocaust served to trivialize genocide, that view is consistent with the relativist perspective that lies at deconstructionism's core—that nothing is more or less true, right, or important than anything else. In other ways, Derrida's behavior appeared theoretically inconsistent. Lehman (1991) suggested that insistence on the indeterminacy of

fact and fiction now seemed self-serving and was applied only when convenient. He contended that Derrida's response illustrated "the deconstructive double standard: the theorist feels free to exempt himself from his own strictures . . . Criticize the deconstructionist, and this advocate of multiple interpretations and indeterminate texts suddenly behaves as though there is one right interpretation" (pp. 257-258).

But the reason that de Man's writings as a young man, and Derrida's defense of him, became such *causes célèbres* in the literary world appears not to have been that de Man's actions reflected either anti-Semitism or a lack of personal courage—many heroes of European High Culture (Picasso, for example) are known to have been less than heroic during the Nazi occupation. Primarily, when Derrida defended de Man by attributing his collaboration to extenuating circumstances, he dramatically undercut the claim that postmodernism was a weapon against oppression. Some critics contended that these events demonstrated that postmodernism was at least as likely to be used for totalitarian purposes as against them. For example, Todorov (1989) pointed out that getting others to deny objective reality had been a primary purpose of Big Brother's use of torture in 1984.

Perhaps the most frequently cited (although not the most severe) critic of the politics of postmodernism has been Jürgen Habermas (1981), a leading proponent of critical theory. Habermas belies the notions, common in organization science, that modernism is consonant with oppression and postmodernism with emancipation, and that critical theory and postmodernism are close to synonymous. In a famous 1980 speech, Habermas said that while postmodernism was not itself a fascist ideology, it was—despite the leftist pretensions of its advocates—cut from the same Nietzschean cloth as the increasingly prominent neofascist and antidemocratic movements in his native Germany. Having dismissed Derrida and Foucault as "Young Conservatives," he later explained (Habermas 1985) that as the intellectual descendants of Nietzsche, they shared his anti-Enlightenment rejection of reason, and indeed of any objective moral standards. The result, Habermas argued, was that postmodernists were left with no basis either to advocate for any particular view or to reject views they opposed; in sum, their philosophy justified no action other than passive acceptance of the status quo.

It seems, therefore, that those who have recoiled at the mention of Derrida's name may be recoiling from something other than postmodernism's threat to the status quo. Rather, the evidence suggests that it may well be a negative reaction to a perspective, as illustrated by de Man (1989, p. 26), that excuses "the bleakest of crimes be-

cause, as a fiction, it escapes from the constraints of guilt and innocence," and may thus be employed to legitimize behavior that emancipates us not only from oppression but from responsibility.

Echoes of Postmodernism's Controversies in Contemporary Organizational Analysis

Do the controversies that have surrounded postmodernism provide much insight into what even some of its proponents among contemporary organization theorists (e.g., Martin and Frost 1996, Alvesson and Deetz 1996, Boje, et al. 1996) acknowledge to be its failure to produce much research that has emancipatory consequences? Addressing this question may suggest whether postmodernist organization theorists will forever remain not quite ready to launch their assault against the entrenched forces of conventionality, or whether the extreme views and unfortunate histories of its founders merely paint an unflattering caricature of an otherwise promising perspective.

Contemporary postmodernist organization theorists by no means concede the association of their perspective with fascism. Burrell (1994, p. 13) argued that "guilt by presumed association with Heidegger's incipient Fascism is not enough" (although Heidegger's enthusiasm for Hitler was more than "incipient" Fascism, and this "presumed association" is far from being postmodernism's only link to Nazism). Burrell proceeded to throw the accusation of Nazism right back at postmodernism's critics, stating that "there is a view gathering support which claims that the modernist project created Auschwitz" (p. 13). The contention that modernization has advanced means-ends rationality at the expense of human values has been a part of the antimodernist argument, and Burrell has adopted it for organization theory as follows: "the logic resembles this; modernism → organizations → organization theory → technicist solutions → the final solution. It is not a logic which leaves one untouched" (p. 13). Burrell may indeed be touched, but others may be less impressed with the historical impact of organization theory than to posit it as a crucial link in the causal chain leading to the Holocaust.

Although contemporary postmodernists' antipathy to fascism may come as no surprise, one still might question how a perspective that denies objective reality could ever produce the emancipatory, radical challenge to organizational theory and practice that its proponents say is their goal. For example, why would Hassard and Parker, who stated (1993, p. 81) that "there can be no real world against which to argue or on which to base critical com-

mentary," care about promoting change in a world they do not believe exists? Similarly, Van Maanen's argument that organization theory is merely (1995, p. 134) "a matter of words, not worlds; of maps, not territories; of representations, not realities" seems a bold call to inaction.

The affirmative postmodernist position offered by Kilduff and Mehra does not deny reality, yet seems to evidence an even more extreme relativism than that of postmodernism's founders. Paul de Man's view was that "facts" are not distinguishable from—and therefore are not superior to—fiction; Kilduff and Mehra's discussion of research they regarded as demonstrating postmodernist practice evinced a *preference* for fiction over fact. Nor is this preference theirs alone; Alvesson and Deetz (1996) described their accounts of postmodernism and critical theory as "purposive fictions," explaining that "the point of social science is not to get it right but to challenge guiding assumptions, fixed meanings and relations, and to reopen the formative capacity of human beings" (p. 211).

While this disdain for getting it right is consistent with this article's contention that the postmodernist challenge to normal science represents the latest incarnation of the split between those seeking to promote consequences they consider good and those pursuing the question of what is true, it may not be consistent with postmodernists' avowed concern with emancipation. In a commentary regarding a debate in a management journal (Beyer et al. 1988, Weiss and Miller 1988) concerning whether corporate alcoholism programs are aimed at social control or at bona fide aid to employees, Jacques (1992, p. 586) stated: "I am not helped by an argument over whether the model of alcoholism-as-disease is "correct", " and explained that from his perspective, "the primary goal of assessing knowledge shifts from determining proper methods by which to reflect objective truth, toward an emphasis on the ethical/moral issues of creating a critical practice reflecting the values, beliefs and social goals of the research(ed) community(ies)" (p. 595). In arguing that truth is not helpful, and should be replaced by values, beliefs, and social goals, Jacques' goal appears not to have been convincing us that truth is an impossible grail, but rather that it doesn't get him where he wants to go—that is, to a position from which he can advocate the particular consequences he is convinced are good.

In the debate on which Jacques commented, however, it would seem that who was "correct" would be important in "creating a critical practice." One side had offered evidence that, in some companies, calling alcoholism a disease—the primary "symptom" of which was poor work performance, and primary "treatment" for which was threatening poor performers with firing—was a tech-

nique by which employees (addicted or not) were scared into higher performance lest they be given "treatment." The opposing side asserted that the concept of alcoholism as a disease was a well-accepted fact, and that company programs helped victims of this illness. These opposing views present plausible, but largely contradictory, positions concerning what organizational practices will be more emancipatory. But Jacques, having committed himself to a position of indifference to the truth, was unable to take any position at all.

The writings of postmodernist organization theorists are consistent with the tradition of skepticism about both the importance of truth and the validity of truth claims, of which Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, and Foucault are a part. Although there certainly are other sources of relativist philosophy, in some cases the influence of these leading postmodernist figures on organization theorists can be identified specifically. In his book *Creative Organization Theory*, Morgan, perhaps the most influential advocate of the Nietzschean skepticism at the core of the postmodernist position in organization theory, used the following quote from Nietzsche, along with a cartoon, as the entirety of a one-page chapter titled "What is Truth":

What is truth? A moving army of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms, in short a summa of human relationships that are being poetically and rhetorically sublimated, transposed, and beautified until after long and repeated use, a people considers them as solid, canonical, and unavoidable. Truths are illusions whose illusionary nature has been forgotten, metaphors that have been used up and have lost their imprint and that now operate as mere metal, no longer as coins. (Morgan 1989, p. 22)

The line of thought that proceeds from Nietzsche to Heidegger and then to Derrida is evident in organization theory as well. Cooper (1989) observed that for Derrida "language is a structure of material marks or sounds which are in themselves "undecidable." " Gergen, similarly, argued that theorizing is merely a language game with no relationship to reality; after listing a variety of organization theories he stated:

By viewing these accounts as forms of language, not in themselves derived from what is the case, achieving their impact through rhetorical artifice, my aim is not at all derogatory. In my view, the value of organization theory does not lie in its accuracy, how well it matches or reflects the way things are. (In what way can words be matched against visual images, sounds, and the like?) Theory cannot be evaluated by its capacity to predict, for words in themselves are simply sounds or markings, lifeless and inert; words in themselves do not predict. (Gergen 1992, p. 210)

Although Alvesson and Deetz (1996) and Martin and Frost (1996) expressed disappointment that postmodern-

ists have not yet produced much emancipation, from the viewpoint illustrated by Gergen, doing so seems futile. Why devote one's efforts to composing "lifeless," "inert" "markings" to change organizations that do not even exist? Rather, the implication of postmodernist theory seems to be that we should not take scholarly work seriously, and Gergen offered precisely this logically consistent message:

We should view these bodies of language we call knowledge in a lighter vein—as ways of putting things, some pretty and others petty—but in no sense calling for ultimate commitments, condemnations, or profound consequences. We should rather be more playful with our sayings. (1992, p. 215)

Similarly, Hassard (1996, p. 51) stated: "The forms of language we call knowledge should be viewed in a more humble way. Knowledge bases are things that are either more or less interesting to us, but no more than that. They are not the stuff of which ultimate commitments are made."

These views seem to leave such a modest role for organization theory that one might wonder why a postmodernist organization theorist would bother to write at all. Jackson's answer (1995, p. 572) was: "I write because I desire to write—it is pure self-indulgence."

Jackson's notable frankness aside, most postmodernists appear to favor a politically engaged, rather than a self-indulgent, organization theory. Perhaps the work with the greatest potential to contribute to the goal of political engagement is that of Foucault. Burrell noted (1988, p. 228) that according to Foucault, "all organizations are alike and take the prison as their model." In response to Giddens' criticism that this idea largely restated the familiar notion of total institutions from the symbolic-interactionist writing of Goffman, Burrell argued that Giddens was missing the point. Foucault's contribution, he explained, was the idea that we are not just part of one organization, but that "we confront a world organized for us by telephone companies, furniture manufacturers, publishers and clothes designers" (Burrell 1988, p. 232).

The emancipatory potential of Foucault for organizational analysis has not been limited to insights about the prisonlike effects on our daily lives of organizations that make furniture and design clothing. Deetz (1998) offered his study of computer consultants, described earlier, as an illustration of Foucauldian organizational research. Burrell (1988) has pointed out that Foucault's ideas are not intended as science, but as antisience; thus we should not expect that his basic contention—that all organizations are prisonlike—would follow the form of a testable scientific hypothesis. Nor should we expect that Deetz's conclusion would do anything other than confirm the

Foucauldian perspective that he advocates—that although institutions of modern, democratic societies might give the appearance of being less oppressive than traditional forms of power, they are simply employing more subtle forms of dictatorship. What is nevertheless striking is the contrast between Deetz's admirable candor in reporting so much data that contradict his view, and his tortured efforts—arguing that the employees he studied were constantly anxious even if they *acted* confidently certain, and so on—to convince his readers to disregard it all.

The form of investigation embodied in Deetz's (1998) paper, which appears to proceed from a predetermination of what answers are acceptable, no matter what the data show, seems especially compatible with advocacy for particular social goals or consequences. Although Gergen (1992) argued that knowledge does not justify profound consequences, he nevertheless contended that the adoption of postmodernist theory furthers the cause of human emancipation. Indeed, he insisted that it is *more* applicable than modernist theory, because while modernists meekly shy away from applying their theories, feeling they "should be fortified with years of research" before being applied, in postmodernism "theory and practice are inseparable."

The specifics of how postmodernism's advocates would apply this perspective can be difficult to discern through the fog of postmodernist jargon. Jeffcutt (1994) declared that by "connecting a Derridaian philosophical praxis (i.e., deconstruction-overturning-metaphorization) with a Foucauldian critical historical practice" (pp. 243–244), this perspective "would be characterized by the 'serious play' of marginality and double coding" such that "the understanding of organization is inseparable from the organization of understanding" (p. 244). As a result, "the intertextual flow of paradox incisively and creatively reinvigorates the openings of possibility and opportunity from closures that are prejudicial, disciplinary and untimely" (p. 244).

Exactly how all this would affect organizations is, at the least, ambiguous. Although postmodernist jargon has been criticized for obscurantism since Foucault accused Derrida of the shortcoming (Searle 1993a), Gergen (1992) was *somewhat* more clear than Jeffcutt regarding the consequences of applying his views, arguing that "means must be sought for opening the organizational doors to alien realities" (p. 223). Gergen's most specific recommendation was that employees "be encouraged to master alternative argots, from various fields of study, politics, sports, the arts, foreign cultures, specialty clubs, and the like" (p. 223).

In light of Gergen's comments that theory should not be taken so seriously as to provide a basis for "profound"

consequences, it seems likely that the clubs and so on that he advocates are intended to facilitate the playfulness he values rather than to revolutionize organizations. Having taken a radically subjectivist position, his answer to the question of whether one can care about promoting change in the real world in the absence of belief in its existence seems to be that one *can*, but only when the consequences are relatively trivial. And although focusing on how clothes designers organize our world is not a surprising choice of concerns in light of Burrell's explanation that Foucauldian "genealogy is interested in the superficial," we may still wonder whether the concerns of scholars pursuing the postmodernist approach lie in fashioning an emancipated world, or in keeping up with intellectual fashions.

Postmodernism as Critique

Postmodernism may not have provided revolutionary alternatives to mainstream organizational research, and the dilemmas discussed above suggest that its prospects for doing so are not clear. Might it nevertheless still provoke needed rethinking of how we study organizations? Because the strength of relativist philosophies has always been in debunking established views rather than in developing alternative research paradigms, it is not surprising that postmodernists have been more successful in raising doubts about truth and objectivity than in providing roadmaps—however value laden—for new avenues of research and practice.

Critiquing the Field

Martin and Frost (1996), who argued for postmodernist methods by criticizing modernist methods, appear to illustrate such a case. Attempting to cast doubt on the validity of mainstream research, they stated that "in organizational contexts, behavior is often constrained by managerial preferences or career ambitions and cannot be assumed to reflect an employee's true attitudes," and thus that respondents "may give answers that seem socially desirable" (pp. 606–607). However, rediscovering concerns that researchers have spent decades addressing—such as social desirability response set and attitude-behavior correspondence—and contending that they prove the worthlessness of modernist research, certainly does not prove the worth of postmodernist research. Rather, it leaves postmodernists open to criticism, such as Snow's comment (1959), in his famous essay on the cultures of literary intellectuals and scientists, that the former "are natural Luddites."

Marsden and Townley's critique of mainstream organizational research illustrated the advocacy for the leftist

political values with which some postmodernists now associate themselves. However, it is not clear that their critique met Kilduff and Mehra's criterion (1997, p. 473) for postmodernist work: that it should be counterintuitive and interesting. They stated that, "Although normal organization science is replete with references to organizational "members," it has never given equal weight to workers and managers. It is very much a theory of, and for, management" (1996, p. 666). Their claim of an emphasis on management in such publications as the *Journal of Management*, *Academy of Management Review*, and *Journal of Management Studies* is difficult to refute. However, in response to Barley and Stern's (1996) similar claims of a managerialist emphasis in the management literature, Scott (1996) noted that the research they called for was being done, but was reported in journals whose titles did not include the word *management*.

Two postmodernists have directed critical analyses not at mainstream research, but at mainstream researchers' professional association, the Academy of Management. Stating that "modernism in the university has created untold misery," Burrell (1993, p. 73) illustrated this misery with an analysis of the Academy's annual meetings, which he characterized as the modern version of the medieval fair, at which "we are all likely to be bought and sold—unless we are very, very careful" (p. 76). Jacques (1992), a feminist poststructuralist postmodernist, described the Academy as "an environment where normative masculinity, the values of "good" research, and the dominant characteristics of organizations are one and the same" (p. 591). Discussing problems of feminist researchers (rather than of women in general), his example of the oppression to which they are subjected by the institutions of modern organizational research quoted a female friend as warning that "the imperative to be nice is extremely oppressive" (p. 91).

Critiquing a Critic

In 1993 the *Academy of Management Review* gave its Best Article award to an essay by Pfeffer that: (a) reviewed empirical evidence demonstrating that the academic fields to which power and status accrue tend to be those that maintain a consensus concerning their central goals and how to achieve them; (b) characterized organization theory as in a rather opposite state, in which "fundamentally any theoretical perspective or methodological approach is as valid as any other" (1993, pp. 614–615); and (c) raised the question of how organization theorists might best "strike an appropriate balance between theoretical tyranny and an anything goes attitude" (1993, p. 616). Throwing off the shackles of the imperative to be nice, a number of postmodernists took exception to

Pfeffer's position. Having looked at postmodernists' contributions to organizational analysis and at their critiques of the mainstream, let us consider, finally, what light this well-known confrontation might shed on how postmodernists differ from mainstream theorists, and on how they actually behave.

Consistent with the present article's characterization of mainstream thought as focused on accumulating knowledge to bring us closer to understanding "the truth," Pfeffer expressed disappointment that, in the years since Burrell and Morgan's (1979) widely cited presentation of multiple theoretical approaches, rather than progress being made "in evaluating the relative usefulness of these different theoretical foci and winnowing down the avenues to be explored . . . the field is more fragmented and diverse than it has been" (1993, pp. 607-608). Also consistent with mainstream social science, as described here, Pfeffer attempted to follow Weber's injunction to distinguish between statements of empirical fact and expressions of his values and preferences. Nevertheless, as noted earlier, Weber (1949, p. 54; orig. 1904) pointed out that "personal value judgments have tended to influence scientific arguments without being specifically admitted" and, like many others, Pfeffer seems to have allowed that to happen. For example, although stating that he would discuss the trade-offs between high levels of consensus and pluralism within an academic field, he focused almost exclusively on the advantages of high consensus and the disadvantages of pluralism.

Because postmodernism is a part of the proliferation of theories about which Pfeffer is skeptical, its advocates would be expected to oppose Pfeffer's view of the field; after all, one person's "fragmentation" may be another's "openness to innovation." Beyond that obvious conflict, the present article's analysis suggests a number of other likely reactions of postmodernists to Pfeffer's thesis. For example, rather than sharing his concern with accumulating evidence to assess the relative accuracy of theories, postmodernists would be expected to advocate for preferred consequences; testing or evaluating theories runs the risk that the consequences they consider good may not be vindicated. Thus, they would be likely to employ one or another relativist philosophy so that they could argue that there *is* no objective world against which theories might be "tested," or "evaluated." Also, like their predecessors during the *Methodenstreit*, postmodernists could be expected to interpret Pfeffer's reporting of the empirical relationships connecting paradigm consensus and success as reflecting his view of what *ought to be*, rather than simply what *is*. Thus (particularly because he was less than perfect in separating facts from value judgments in his analysis), they might see Pfeffer as saying

that the research shows that access to publication *should be* restricted to those who toe the line established and enforced by a cabal of political conservatives. In light of their likely opposition to such a consequence, this might well be a situation in which postmodernists would choose to treat the concept of "truth" as "obsolete."

In their attack on Pfeffer, Cannella and Paetzold (1994) appeared to follow this pattern. Proclaiming a constructionist philosophy, they denied the possibility of objective truth, stating that "knowledge is socially constructed and, thus, scholars are unable to make unambiguous claims on some absolute truth" (p. 331), and that "Both art and science are socially constructed. Science is but one of many ideologies that exist within society; no "scientific methodology" can separate science from art or from any other ideology" (p. 335). As expected, they then claimed that Pfeffer had argued for zero tolerance for deviation from the rules of a conservative elite, portraying him as stating that:

Organizational scholars should place control over publication into the hands of a comparatively small elite group who would force a consensus by excluding views that diverge from a dominant paradigm. (p. 331)

Those who depart from established paths should be ostracized "regardless of their power or the validity of their ideas." (p. 336)

If we do not begin to ignore scholars who have divergent ideas, our field will "remain ripe for a hostile takeover from within or from outside." (p. 337)

Describing the last statement as antithetical to their ethical code, Cannella and Paetzold argued that they should not have to be made to stand before "high priests . . . who proclaim what is right and wrong" (p. 338).

Cannella and Paetzold's contentions reflect the expected lack of interest in factual accuracy. The context of the passage they quoted demonstrates that Pfeffer did not, for example, advocate ostracism for nonconformists. Rather, the quote they excerpted to support that accusation is from a statement in which he described—in disapproving terms—the criticism to which dissenters are subjected in the high-paradigm field of economics (Sections quoted by Cannella and Paetzold are italicized.):

Members of high-paradigm fields enforce theoretical and methodological conformity. They do this by reserving the most desirable places only for those who conform to the disciplinary orthodoxy and criticizing, *regardless of their power or the validity of their ideas*, those who depart from the established paths. (1993, p. 614)

Although Pfeffer clearly did argue for a degree of paradigmatic convergence that is antithetical to postmodern-

ists' freewheeling conception of truth, he did not—as critics contend—suggest that divergent ideas must be ignored to avoid a hostile takeover; indeed, as can be seen from the context of the excerpt Cannella and Paetzold used to argue this point, Pfeffer appeared to endorse theoretical and methodological pluralism:

Without a recommitment to a set of fundamental questions—perhaps pursued in a multitude of ways—and without working through a set of processes or rules to resolve theoretical disputes and debates, the field of organizational studies will *remain ripe for either a hostile takeover from within or from outside*. In either case, much of what is distinctive, and much of the pluralism that is so valued, will be irretrievably lost. (1993, p. 618)

This was not Pfeffer's only expression of openness to alternative viewpoints. He contended that "A diversity in ideas and methodology can be useful to the field as long as the diversity can be resolved at some point" (1993, p. 616), and he called for merely "some minimal level of consensus about research questions and methods" (1993, p. 611).

Despite Pfeffer's efforts to avoid one-sidedness, however, not only Cannella and Paetzold, but many others writing from a postmodernist perspective offered versions of his position that suggest a greater concern about the political consequences of his statements than for the truth about them. Reed (1996, p. 32) contended that Pfeffer's "conservative" reaction may also demand an enforced and tightly policed political consensus . . . to reestablish the theoretical hegemony of a particular research paradigm," that he was falling back "on a worn and outmoded consensus, sustained through intellectual surveillance and control" (p. 33), and that his "call for paradigmatic consensus and discipline around a dominant theoretical and methodological orthodoxy" was intended to serve the "political interests of policy-making elites." Clegg and Hardy denounced (1996, p. 6) Pfeffer's article as "an overt attempt to reestablish the old elite's dominance over organization science" that "advocates the establishment of a nexus of powerful gatekeepers (or perhaps "bouncers" would be a better term) to screen out undesirable elements."

Perhaps the most remarkable response to Pfeffer was that of Van Maanen (1995), who expressed concern that Pfeffer's goals were to "control the field" and "impose a paradigm." Taking the relativist position that there is no singularly true view of the world, Van Maanen argued that we therefore "must be willing to listen to each other and to listen with respect" (p. 140). However, much like Derrida attacking those who didn't listen respectfully enough to agree with him, Van Maanen called Pfeffer's article a "shrill plea" that proposes "a Stalinist purge"

intended to impose "a high consensus paradigm—or better yet, a Pfefferdigm." In Van Maanen's opinion,

this sour view of our field is—to be gentle—insufferably smug; pious and orthodox; philosophically indefensible; extraordinarily naive as to how science actually works; theoretically foolish, vain, and autocratic; and—still being gentle—reflective of a most out-of-date and discredited father-knows-best version of knowledge. (p. 133)

If the debate over Pfeffer's article illustrates that whereas normal science is concerned with what is true, alternative perspectives are concerned with advocating for what they believe to be good, it would lend some credence to the claim (e.g., Burrell and Morgan 1979, Gioia & Pitre 1990) that postmodernists' views are so different from that of the mainstream as to be "incommensurable" (i.e., that postmodernists and mainstream scholars are talking past each other). However, if the legacy of Max Weber still matters for contemporary social science, it may be inaccurate to say that only the alternative approaches are concerned about values and consequences. Weber (1949, orig. 1904) argued that concerns with truth and goodness are complementary, rather than mutually exclusive. He did *not* say, as is often misconstrued to be the case, that science is neutral—only that we should do our utmost to be aware of value biases that might intrude into our work, and thereby to endeavor to keep the investigation of "what is" separate from our opinions of "what should be."

Pfeffer by no means restricted his focus to facts; in a comment that appeared to be directed to the radical tendencies of postmodernism he addressed the issue of political commitments, asking whether the "particularistic advancement of separate agendas, often with explicitly political undertones" (p. 616) should be encouraged. He did not oppose addressing issues of political consequences; quite the contrary, he challenged organization theorists to examine openly the political question of whose interests our field should be serving. Nevertheless, his comments did allude to what is, arguably, a norm among mainstream theorists and anathema among postmodernists: the Weberian idea that the searches for what is good and for what is true should be kept separate.

Similarly problematic for the incommensurability thesis is that postmodernist organizational theorists do not consistently restrict their attention to matters of values rather than of truth. Lehman (1991) and Ellis (1989) have pointed out that postmodernists do not shy away from making factual assertions when it advances their preferences, and that they relativize only when it suits their rhetorical purposes, such as when the facts do not favor their position. Searle (1993b, p. 186) has argued that they

“commonly use the heads-I-win-tails-you-lose form of argument.” For example, Van Maanen (1995, p. 133) first attacked Pfeffer for implying that there might be objective facts about how science works, and then attacked him for ignorance of “how science actually works.”

Van Maanen helped us understand how he can attack Pfeffer for resorting to facts and then pronounce his own, when he stated (as fact) his opinions on what motivates not only him, but all of us, to participate in scholarly debate. What is at stake, Van Maanen asserted, is ego; scholars’ motivation is not desire to get at the truth, but “is of course the perception that one’s discipline, sub-discipline, or sub-sub-discipline is under attack. That someone else is defining the field in such a way that one’s own work is being denied legitimacy” (1995, p. 134). His attack on Pfeffer was not based on principle, according to his own report; rather, it “must then be understood as moves in a language game, an understandable and necessary effort to defend my work” (p. 134).

The evidence from the clash between postmodernists and mainstream organization theorists suggests at least a partial answer to Pfeffer’s question of whose interests organization scholars serve. Postmodernist organization theorists have acknowledged that they have produced little in the way of work that helps employees take action. Rather than working to remedy that situation, however, their effort appears to have been channeled into complaining about how unfairly they are treated. One critic of Pfeffer even announced that his remarks constituted a move in a game played for the purpose of maintaining his standing in the academic status hierarchy. Postmodernist theorists appear to have demonstrated that their central concern is with what is good—in particular, what is good for postmodernist theorists.

Conclusion

The frequent reappearance of relativist perspectives such as postmodernism is understandable; they facilitate parrying criticism of our own work, as well as derogating or even misrepresenting others’ work, untroubled by those “obsolete” concepts, “truth and lying.” Treating truth as knowable, on the other hand, runs the risk that preferred consequences could be shown not to be good. An additional disadvantage to actually distinguishing truth from falsehood and right from wrong is that it takes time and effort. For example, determining who was or was not accurate in their remarks about Pfeffer’s article would involve careful reading of the sources cited. But saying that there are no fixed, objective realities, so that no one has the right to “privilege” their “truth” over anyone

else’s, obviates the laborious gathering and checking of “facts.”

In spite of the “chorus of negativity” directed toward postmodernism, to which this article admittedly has added voice, it may be unwise to reject it entirely. Abrahamson (1996, p. 271) has maintained that all management fashions fade as they “ineluctably become old and common with the passage of time and with the growing number of adherents”; we can expect that postmodernism will meet that fate in the study of organizations, as it already has in other fields. Nevertheless, the frequency with which relativist theories emerge suggests that they serve a need, perhaps to remind us of Weber’s observation that all social action involves behavior to which the individual has attached subjective meaning.

A number of other messages conveyed by the collection of ideas and techniques that fall under the rubric of postmodernism also would seem to be of use for improving scholarly discourse about organizations. Should we listen to and learn from, rather than merely rebut, our colleagues? If we believe what we teach our students about the value of feedback and participation, we certainly should. Is it worthwhile to be aware of our biases and to consider widely diverse voices? Certainly, if we believe what we teach about the detrimental effects of perceptual biases and about the often salutary effects of diversity in groups. Should we blithely accept the idea that science is value-free, or should we take its consequences and ethical implications into consideration? The Academy of Management’s code of ethics asks us to do the latter.

Nevertheless, although many of us sympathize with the values that postmodernist organization theorists say they are advocating—such as justice for women and minorities—substituting advocacy for scientific analysis usually raises at least one of two dilemmas. First, by denying the existence of objective truth in order to legitimize one’s preferences, we legitimize *any* agenda: as acknowledged by Martin and Frost (1996, p. 611), not only are some postmodernists “leftist refugees from the political activism of the 1960s,” but others “have been accused of fascism.” Secondly, this article’s review of postmodernism’s origins and current applications suggests, as Weber had forewarned, that advocating values, no matter how laudable, could get in the way of illuminating reality: Postmodernists’ relativism, it appears, not only is equally facilitative of advocacy for noble or ignoble political objectives, but for advancing personal agendas as well—such as substituting fictions for a sordid past, or for disparaging competitors.

In response to postmodernism’s challenge to scientific reasoning, the “hard” sciences seem to have taken a dis-

tinctly hostile position. For example, when the National Academy of Sciences floated a draft of their national science education standards that included a section on the philosophy of science that described science as a "social activity" of "constructing knowledge" and emphasized the "tentative nature of scientific knowledge," the furor over this "bizarre postmodern notion" led to an immediate apology and rewrite (Culotta 1994, p. 1649).

Postmodernism has yet to win over many physicists or biologists, and Knights' (1997, p. 1) assertion that "Modernist social science is currently struggling to survive against a tirade of questioning stemming from deconstructionist and postmodernist discourses" is probably something of an overstatement. Gergen (1994, p. x) has admitted that when, a quarter century ago, he raised the same criticism of social psychology that he more recently has put forward in organization theory, questioning assumptions regarding rationality and truth, his colleagues "rapidly tired of the discontent, castigated me for nihilism, and returned to business as usual." That the psychologists whom Gergen hoped to convert returned to what they had been doing, rather than reshape their research in response to his exhortations, illustrates a typical problem with relativist approaches: While their original appeal is based on an interesting criticism of mainstream work, their advocates tend not to be interested in actually carrying out the work necessary to provide the evidence that would build support for their view. In the absence of such research evidence, they are left merely to repeat their critique; they run out of things to do or say and eventually seek yet newer alternative positions from which to criticize the rest of us.

Social scientists' comparative tolerance for postmodernism, as evinced in parts of Pfeffer's (1993) article and noted by Agger (1991), may result from their having seen relativist theories come and go. Organization theory has less experience with such critiques than more mature fields; as a result, although the evidence reviewed here suggests that postmodernism will not revolutionize organization theory, Gergen might expect to have relatively good luck with us.

Our tolerance for postmodernism may have to do, as well, with the awareness that, as its sympathizers have acknowledged, their philosophical and theoretical posture is simply a rhetorical pose. It seems unlikely, therefore, that postmodernists will take their assertions seriously enough to endanger anyone. Not many of our colleagues will concur with Burrell that only abandoning rational thought can save us from future Auschwitzes, or that "we are imprisoned by our knowledge and made freer by our ignorance" (1988, p. 233). And even if Hoshmand and Polkinghorne (1992, p. 59) declared science merely "a

reflection of particular masculine and European values," and Cannella and Paetzold (1994, p. 335) declared science indistinguishable "from art or from any other ideology," they probably still have their children inoculated.

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