

**Political Ideologies Contexts, Ideas, and Practices**  
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**Recap on problems in Derrida and Foucault. Postmodernist theory. Worked example 1**

**41:40**

Well good afternoon everyone. We're continuing with our NPTEL Ideologies course 2019 – '20. We're coming towards the end of our eighth topic, that is, Poststructuralism and Postmodernism. I'll start with a brief recap on the major problems in the two main post-structuralist thinkers we've looked at, that is, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault; and we'll then go on to a sort of worked example on postmodernism and the nature of postmodernist theory, with examples of postmodern phenomena, of what might well count as postmodern phenomena, and wind up by looking at the, as part of that we'll wind up by looking at the consequences of the Sokal hoax which I, Sokal hoax, which I described at the end of the last lecture.

Well, we need to recap briefly on the main problems in the major poststructuralist thinkers that is Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. We'll start with Derrida. Now, the main problems, I argued last time, in his work were, first of all that if anything is potentially pertinent to any text - and it doesn't mean written text, it could mean a work of art, it could be a historical account of something, it could be even our sense of our particular historical period or something that somebody's done or political events or whatever - If anything is potentially pertinent to a reading of that, and we can remember Derrida says we can only understand the text if we include what got left out in our understanding of the text - one consequence is that we seem to lose, the text seems to lose all boundaries, and Derrida himself says, "il n'y a pas de hors-texte" in effect there is nothing outside the text or no outside to the text.

But this immediately causes a major problem. Derrida seems not to realize that we need some sense of a criterion for pertinence, there is of course going to be no one criterion for pertinence, but Derrida even seems not to recognize that this is an issue. We have to show how some extraneous or external factor makes a difference to our reading of a text. It might have been the weather, it might have been a period in the author's life, it might have been political events around, it might have been anything.

And yet Derrida seems not to see that we need to show that such factors make a difference - even the bits that fell on the floor or were discarded or crossed out - we need to show that they make a difference to our reading of the text. Derrida seems not to realize that this is an issue, seems not to.

Secondly, well, is any work self-contained in the way that Derrida seems to think it has been claimed it is self-contained? Well, who's has ever made that claim? Yes, the new critics I. A. Richards or possibly Leavis, between the wars at Oxford wanted their students to focus on the text irrespective of anything else - but that immediately created a problem for students who perhaps hadn't the same educational background, perhaps came from a less elite class, and might have struggled with some of the cultural nuances and references and allusions in the text, as indeed we would if we were reading a novel even translated into our own language from another historical period or another vastly different culture. And that does happen. But Derrida seems never to show, that anyone has actually made the claim that a text is a completely self-enclosed or self-substantive entity, that is the second major problem in Derrida.

What about Foucault? Well, three or four major problems that I went through last time and I will recapitulate them briefly here. First of all, Foucault seems to think that we are untroubled about the ways we encounter the world and that this assumption needs to be, so to speak, rendered problematic or investigated or interrogated. But surely that claim simply cannot be taken seriously. Is it really the claim that we are untroubled, that we have taken the world as a given, socially, psychologically, personally, politically, economically, scientifically, surely mighty scientific discoveries have taken place precisely because people, so to speak, looked beneath the surface or saw disjunctions, radical disjunctions even, in their own experience of what people said and did, and so on. Within psychology and psychiatry, R. D. Laing created a sensation by taking the patient's lived experience seriously and not treating them as an object of scientific curiosity. He raised questions about what it was about their experience that actually *did* make sense.

Now that's just one example and of course with the sciences, well, think of the possibly apocryphal story of Newton's discovery of gravitation. Did he really have to reach the conclusion he did, that there is something wrong with the way we explain falling. A cartoon of Newton once showed, showed him sitting under an apple tree, an apple falls on his head and the next cartoon shows him wearing a rather strong hat to protect his head - but the point is that he asked a

question. Now, the claim that we have always been untroubled and that fact itself needs interrogating, is surely not to be taken seriously, that we have been untroubled about our experience and our knowledge of the world.

Secondly, that claim, implies the further claim, which Foucault does make, he seems to think, he thinks that our previous methods of inquiry and investigation are in some way inadequate. Well, what's new about that? That kind of thing runs through philosophy, through the humanities, through the sciences, and so on. We've always queried our methods of inquiry and queried the kinds of worlds that different methods of inquiry depict to us, we've always questioned theories of human nature, and so on. Again Foucault seems not to realize that he needs to show in what ways his own proposed method of inquiry is so superior to the others - that's an old philosophic task, people are always doing that, or at least were until they started, perhaps following Hegel and Wittgenstein, they started thinking that formulaic methods in philosophy themselves are highly problematic. But Foucault never shows how it is or why it is that our previous, the previous methods of inquiry that he wants to reject are, themselves inadequate.

Thirdly, Foucault certainly says and tries to show that what we consider to be a search for knowledge is no more than a search for power. This then means that discoveries, the communication of discoveries, the application of knowledge and so on, whether scientific knowledge or not, are no more than expressions of a lust for power or an attempts to impose our power on other people.

But that is profoundly self-contradictory. It means that we cannot tell what is and is not the operation of power. Even my explaining or attempting to explain, Foucault to yourselves becomes not an attempt at an explanation of the work of Foucault, which you can then check by reading Foucault by, you can check it by reading what other people said about Foucault, what I've said about Foucault, and you can query this rationally by saying, "Well, you've said x, y and z," or X says "P, Q and R about it, about Foucault. Now, is that right? I've read a passage where...and so on so forth." But no, if we take Foucault really at his word that even my attempt to explain something or even telling you the truth that, say the building is on fire and we need to leave in a great hurry is not the communication of knowledge to you, it is just the expression of power.

This, as Peter Dews says, he says it most wonderfully well, makes power a completely metaphysical principle, because power pervades everything we say and do. We cannot tell what

is an expression of the search for power and what is not? It becomes a completely metaphysical principle. It also loses its explanatory, literally loses its explanatory power, because everything becomes some kind of power operation or not, some kind of power operation. And I should correct myself, some kind of power operation and nothing else, even telling the truth, showing the evidence, all that disappears.

In effect Foucault is trying to give us a rational argument to tell us that rational investigation is no more than a search for power, and he is, as I have said in print before now, rationally requiring of us that we abdicate rationality. He's requiring us reasoningly to abdicate reasoning; that is a contradiction in any, no matter which, way we look at it.

Foucault's, work as I've said in print before, said elsewhere, is enormously troublesome and problematic, and there we are, being required reasoningly to abdicate reasoning, it is not something we can actually do, unless we throw, abandon all reasoning. Are we prepared really to do that? I gave some examples last time of, say, you, being on the stretcher in the operating theatre, when a surgeon comes in says, "Yes, I think you need so much anaesthetic today. No, no we'll give you a bit more," instead of calculating our weight, looking at the condition of our health, our previous medical records and so on.

We also looked, I also mentioned the example of say ground crew refuelling an aircraft: 'Oh, we think that's enough. That' will get you 5,000 kilometres." "Will it? Have you calculated the aircraft's consumption, right, and how much fuel it will need for this distance and so on?" "Oh no, we just felt like it." Right. Now that is an implication. A further implication, as I said, was that our banks might cease to calculate our accounts, they might just - estimate the figures.

It is those consequences that seem to have occurred only very belatedly, if they did at all, to the more enthusiastic proponents of both structuralism and, later, postmodernism in literary and literary theory and other theories in the humanities. But we need to look at postmodernism and its manifestations in the world. They're not unintelligible; we do see examples of them and there is some very good work detailing examples of activities which they quite reasonably characterized as post-modernist - and they demonstrate the kinds of problems in them.

We'll look at three items today and as usual I can't put the items on screen but I can put the titles on screen and you'll get them in a PowerPoint. These are the three items; the first is a paper by Eric McGuckin, written in 2005; the title is 'Travelling Paradigms: Marxism,

Poststructuralism, and The Uses of Theory', published in a journal called *Anthropologica* - I think it's the *Canadian Journal of Anthropology* - in 2005.

Another one is by Aaron Hanlon, who is a professor of philosophy if I'm not mistaken and the title is 'Postmodernism did not cause Trump. It explains him.' That's in the *Washington Post*, the 30th of August 2018. It's a, the kind of thing that the high quality press in most parts, most democratic countries, do carry from time to time. The *Washington Post* incidentally is the paper responsible for the exposure of the Watergate scandal and the really thorough, determined lengthy investigation into it later by Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein.

But this piece in *The Washington Post*, written by an academic philosopher, is very direct and extremely well informed. The third is on the impact and implications of the Sokal hoax. It's a paper by Michael Bérubé, dated 2009. It's called 'Post Hoax, Ergo Propter Hoax'; the title is taken from a Latin saying, 'Post hoc, ergo propter hoc', which, literally translated, says 'after that, therefore, on account of that', - or therefore, because of that - published in the *American Scientist*, 2009.

So we'll look at these three, Eric McGuckin and Aaron Hanlon and Michael Bérubé, these are all freely accessible. Well, let's take a look at this one first, at the Eric McGuckin paper. Right, I'll get this up, here we are. Okay, published by the Canadian Anthropology Society, to give it its correct title, in 2005 and I'll summarize the key points. The author is, if I'm not mistaken, an anthropologist, and he says, he was in Dharamshala, as he says, drinking a beer, reading a copy of *Newsweek*, when he spotted an advertisement by the Boeing Aircraft Corporation.

And it said, "Travel." - as an injunction or command. "Flight turns the world into a single marketplace." [Well, I'll just pause there, can I expand this is it possible to, okay, I'll pause there.] "Flight turns the world into a single marketplace." Well, the author was sitting in Dharamshala, the seat of the Tibetan government-in-exile; and he was looking at, he was doing research on, the impacts of ethnic and spiritual tourism in Tibetan crafts.

So this, this advertisement struck him immediately. And there was a two-page spread in reds and browns, displaying exotic goods and so on, all artfully arranged around a tattered Union Jack or Union Flag, more accurately - the flag of the United Kingdom; as he says, "A nostalgic icon of a long benign colonialism, an imagined benign colonialism that resonates" - does have an impact on - many travellers from imperial or former imperial nations.

He also mentions, McGuckin also mentions, 'ethnic tourism', which he calls a strange new form of economic imperialism; finished goods and memories are carried from the periphery, the former imperial territories, to the centre - that is the former imperial, imperialist countries, where many people, as he says, "hungry for handmade, in quotation marks "authentic" in quotation marks, "authentic goods or imagery" - and these goods seem to escape commodity status in the minds of many consumers.

They're are authentic, they're real, they're handmade, they're not commodities. So, what happens? Inevitably many communities around the world attempt to cash in on this explosion as he calls it, of world travel, McGuckin calls it an 'explosion'. We're familiar with that, the enormous expansion in world travel, and this transforms domestic crafts in to effectively factory production, into factory-manufactured souvenirs - sacred objects, ritual performances, even people's bodies, become marketable commodities.

Household and sweatshop craft production is growing, this was written nearly 15 years ago now. Rates of exploitation increase. So, well, McGuckin recognizes that there has been scholarly work on this; some recent anthropological literature as he says "deploys the terminology of travel and the Internet as general metaphors for postmodern disjuncture and displacement." He could have said "dislocation" - the idea of location seems to, seems to lose its force, lose its meaning.

Supposedly "modernist," he quotes, puts the term in inverted commas "modernist," "modernist" critiques of the destruction of authenticity have therefore been displaced by more pluralistic, as he says "dialogic" approaches influenced by recent theorists - Bakhtin and Baudrillard. He mentions the Canadian philosopher, I think she was Canadian, Vincanne Adams, who posits virtual identities - and these are constructed in dialogue with the purchasing observer, with the - with the touristic buyer.

Yes, this discourse is locally named, but like all discourses it's always partial. It foregrounds consumption in this case and brings particular intersections of discourses and desiring bodies, wanting bodies, that is the tourists or visitors into high resolution, into close focus. Well, McGuckin is cautious here; he says he's not putting forward a materialist account as if materialism is superior as a vocabulary or a method of explanation, and he's not claiming that class as the, as he says, "the master key to all social relations."

What he *is* saying is that the kind of approach he's taking provides, as he says, "the more useful lens for an engaged anthropology." Why's that? Because he says, "It facilitates global comparisons and policy recommendations amidst" what he calls a "proliferation", a plethora of discourses around, surrounding, postmodern tourism.

So, what are the implications then? Yes, McGuckin says the Boeing advertisement made him laugh out loud. But it also struck him, it tempted him. He attempted to use a relatively narrow focus, as he says, on the production of Tibetan exile crafts and commoditized ritual objects as an entry into a broader description of the tourism economy, a kind of way in, a doorway in and not just a tourism economy but shifts in ethnic class and gender politics. Here he says he followed Appadurai, presumably Arjun Appadurai and Kopytoff, 1996. And he aims to construct so to speak biographies of artifacts, of particular things, so that he could link these to more global economic pressures as found in other work as well, June Nash in particular. But as McGuckin himself says, the impacts, the causal forces, the impacts of tourism, on craft production are very diverse and they are far-reaching and they weave together a complex as, he says, dialectic, a hand-in-hand relationship between practice and ideas, "a complex dialectic of cultural consumption and material production."

Perhaps, as he says, the Boeing advertisement was an easy target, but he goes on, he does not stop there. McGuckin develops his theme and he says well is this an example, you know, he offers it as an example of Marx and Engels' prediction that capitalism would, he quotes, "nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere." We have already seen in our account of Marx that once we accept commodity production in one system we have to, anywhere in the system, we have to, well, it has to permeate the entire system, otherwise it cannot survive. For example, if we work eight hours a day, we have to make, we have to have supplies available on our days off or when we are on our way home outside of work, we can't simply disappear from work because we need to get potatoes and onions and garlic and whatever on the way, you know, to take home later. The system collapses, if we, if everyone, doesn't participate in it. So here we are, Marx and Engels predicted that capital would, I repeat, "nestle everywhere, settle everywhere and establish connections everywhere."

What would it create? As they themselves say, Marx and Engels themselves say, "a world after its own image." Well, they, McGuckin quotes again from them, they saw, Marx and Engels saw that "in place of old wants satisfied by the productions of the country, we find new wants,

requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes.” The “exploitation of the world market,” again a quotation from Marx and Engels, would lead to a, again he quotes, “a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country.”

These passages remind us of the transnational character of their own consumerism. McGuckin here seems to be referring to his own students, but we are, should be reminded of this, the transnational character of our own consumption and consumerism, all the time. Think of the sources, the truly international global sources of things we use every day, such as mobile telephones.

Well, McGuckin says that when students discover that working conditions in the sweatshops producing their jeans rival the brutality of Marx's time, when they see that wages in Northern California are tied to those in Mexico, and that rising tuition fees and shrinking course offerings are tied to the political and corporate discourse as well as regressive tax structures, when they start - when they make these connections - McGuckin says, “they begin to discover mutual interests with working peoples across differences of culture, ethnicity and gender”, perhaps also location.

Well, what about McGuckin? His own work led him to query the very category of tourism. He says that too must be interrogated. He tried to differentiate between types of foreign consumers. He drew upon Cohen here, who's given us a classification of mainly psychological types of traveler - recreational diversionary, experiential, experimental, and existential - well, I'm sure we've met people around the world who fit any or all of these categories or more than one of them, or perhaps none at all.

And McGuckin says he finds these categories useful for thinking about motivations for travel and thinking about demands for authenticity in crafts - is this real is, this what they really do out there? But - he says he's also found that motivation itself didn't predict consumption patterns in any simple way. Demands for authenticity themselves vary between and within categories of consumers, and between different types of goods and cultural production.

Well, we shouldn't be surprised that the category of different types of traveller is perhaps a simplification, we shouldn't be surprised that motivations for travel and demands for authenticity do arise, or thinking about motivation becomes a question, but motivation itself doesn't predict

consumption patterns and demands for authenticity do also vary across consumers and across goods and cultural productions.

So, where does this, where does this take us? McGuckin continues his investigation, his reflections. What he says is that, well, handicrafts, he finds that handicrafts may be appealing in part because of their apparent status as products of non-alienated, that is non-commodity-produced labour. These allow, according to McGuckin, consumers to imbue these artifacts with personal meanings, so to speak to singularize them.

And these can be imbued with personal meanings more readily than say mass-produced goods, oh, I happen to see that it was one of ten million or the production line in such-and-such a place and I got it. Well, we might say that about headache pills that we might buy from a local chemist in just about any part of the world, any chemist or pharmacist, but that does not apply to the kinds of goods McGuckin is talking about, he's talking about art and craft objects, which seemed to be produced in non-alienated and non-alienating systems.

And, well, we can singularize these more readily than we can mass-produced goods. But according to McGuckin, the ways we do this is through often imaginary and idealized histories of the ways the goods were produced and exchanged - produced and sold. One suggestion by Miller, whom McGuckin draws upon here, is that - in these types, with these types of object, production itself becomes a fixed, a reified concept with a separate connotation, a different meaning.

And what's important is not the actual process of manufacture, but the object's ability, the fact that the object can stand for a particular type of production and its attendant social relations, symbolize a particular type of production and the relations that attend upon, that go to making up that system of production. Miller says here, he utters a cautionary word: an object, therefore, may proclaim one technological origin while it actually derives from another.

"With tourist arts, objects rapidly produced by piece workers paid at piece rate with little control over cultural motifs, may masquerade as the products of artistic care, and invented traditions may signify timeless essences." Well, yes, in the global handicrafts trade, as McGuckin says "certain types of motifs of logos or images, function as signifiers," he puts in question marks the word trademarks, "trademarks" question mark. In this example of Tibetan identity, even as these cultural motifs are grafted on to foreign objects and thrown into, as he says, surreal

combinations with other goods. Ritual daggers become letter openers for New Agers. Tibetan Buddhist icons are stitched by Indian labourers on to woven backpacks otherwise indistinguishable from those for sale in the craft markets of Cuzco or the East Village, the East Village, of course, Manhattan Island in New York.

The transnational market, as McGuckin says, celebrates and profits from difference, just as it obliterates it. And this is where McGuckin says, the theory really must start to - start its explanatory work. Well, he is aware that this is not quite as straightforward as it might look. Some intellectuals are contemptuous of foreign projections; they think that these might trivialize their own domestic third-world or developing-country struggle, cultural and political struggle.

And they may well be in a situation in which they are simultaneously alienated from and yet seek ownership over both myth and, as McGuckin says, its deconstruction, both myth and its reexamination as to what went into it and what was left out. And he says, "if the postmodern condition entails a hyperactive transnational circulation of things and meanings such that cultural boundaries and identity and authenticity are increasingly impossible to define, then this by no means", entails an end to the quest to construct and, as he says, "solidify a self, a status, a commodity" and to stake those claims, to make those claims.

Well, McGuckin has shown us how the production of, so to speak, ethnic or craft artifacts isn't quite as simple as it looks. We do end up with perhaps, partly in response to an existing to a new demand or a new market, we do end up with what are effectively commodity-produced goods, produced at piece-rate payment rates for consumers, buyers who seem to imbue these with their own meanings, almost certainly in ignorance of the productive systems in which these goods were manufactured.

Well, yes, McGuckin recognizes that designs may be quite innovative, targeted at the tastes of external consumers, profits go to capitalists and vendors, the employers of the craftspeople, artisans are therefore alienated from, well, from the artistic form of the goods, I won't say what McGuckin says, he quotes a labourer who says what the goods looked like and they were extremely blunt, I can't possibly repeat those words here, or I could - at risk.

And they're also alienated from returns on their labour, this is surplus-value in a classic Marxian sense, but the low-budget market also provides opportunities for small merchants who have not

a lot of capital to sell petty goods in competition with larger producers and vendors - another, well another of the complexities of merchant capitalism.

So, what about the buyers? They're trying to find meaning in a deeper experience of one locale, so longer-term travelers and volunteers, dharmas - that is presumably existential travelers - and researchers are more likely to buy relatively expensive commissioned goods, have things made for them on the stalls in the street, and perhaps, those have to be manufactured more, have to be manufactured more closely in accordance with, in this case Buddhist iconographical canons and principles.

But for many consumers, artistic or technical authenticity is not as significant as the origin of the producers - are they Tibetan and do they benefit from the exchange? Money from commissioned goods seems to flow more directly to the producer, innovations may be introduced by the artisan or the consumer, rather than indirectly through the vendor who controls the work of the actual person manufacturing the thing, but nevertheless this brings its own tensions. It has created tensions in Dharamshala between, well, parents of Indian children who work as domestic workers, but who also, well, didn't seem to work as child labour in the domestic industry, but ethnic tensions between those of Tibetan descent and those of Indian descent in Dharamshala, Indians in Dharamshala seem to have intensified.

But remember this. Were children employed in the Dharamshala cooperatives trading, selling to tourists, it is quite likely the tourists and students and volunteers would certainly raise an outcry, and McGuckin says this. Well, McGuckin does raise further questions for us. He notes analyses of mass leisure and critiques of the kinds of things he is doing, critiques which suggest that we can't simply, we can't make sense of modernity simply by studying class, status, and power and similar sociological antiquities.

Sightseeing, according to MacCannell and some of the other critics of this approach, becomes a "kind of ritual played to the differentiations of society." Well, the point here, as MacCannell, whom McGuckin seems to be disagreeing with, MacCannell says very strikingly, what we face in craft markets such as those that McGuckin has described in Dharamshala or anywhere else embody a form of staged authenticity. This is an authentic object which I produced ten minutes ago, or an authentic object that I've produced in accordance with traditional iconographic rules, but it has got nothing to do with, so to speak, my expressing a belief or a faith or some sort of

participation in an iconic craft. I'm manufacturing this to sell it to you, but do not tell anyone, right? In effect that's what I take staged authenticity to mean.

Well, that is McGuckin's argument - that we need a much closer analysis of what's happening in this kind of trade. He does seem to say that a form of modernism, Marxism, has been faulted for offering grand generalizations and is therefore, and always under suspicion. Marxists are being accused of fetishizing production and neglecting the imagery and consumption which are central to industrial production. Marx is not quite as crude as that, he does note that production and distribution and consumption form a perfect connection, precisely the kind of connection that McGuckin has been outlining.

But could it be, and here McGuckin cites Umberto Eco, talking about his *Travels in Hyperreality* in the western United States, we go through the roadside attractions and theme parks and theme parks and so on, Eco according to McGuckin reads these as attempting to simulate a history that's already disappeared. Now, if that is not postmodern, we might want to think what is?

So that really is McGuckin's argument - and this would also apply to identity. Adams, whom McGuckin has already cited in a book called *Tigers of the Snow and Other Virtual Sherpas*, cautions us against thinking of Sherpa identity as anything *sui generis*, that is, of its own kind. Sherpas, according to Adams, have become virtual through the imitation of what the other takes to be their natural self. Now, that - in effect McGuckin's arguing that kind of reimagining and in effect, effective reconstruction of the identity of the goods also applies to those who produce the goods, the craft vendors and artisans in what we might very roughly perhaps crudely call third-world markets for tourists from other parts of the world or even other parts of their own countries.

Now, McGuckin ends quite correctly by saying it becomes increasingly difficult to decide just what is our culture and their culture. We noted *that* in respect of multiculturalism, our concluding topic in liberalism. The question ultimately is - What then is a culture? But it's not clear that we have to abandon - in order to understand what a culture is, it's not clear that we have to abandon all sense of production relations, of markets, of production, productive activities, whether they are alienated and alienating or not. We can't abandon those, and that, I suggest, is McGuckin's great contribution, he's reminded us just how important production relations are even in this world of apparently postmodern symbolism and production. And what he says is that an

engaged anthropology can focus on how artisans are at once alienated from material and cultural capital and how they might regain control over both.

So there we are, the practices McGuckin quotes Bruner here, “The practices and behavior of the tourists and the native are defined for them by the dominant story.” Presumably the dominant story is the production relations that we identify as, so to speak, an essential element in our understanding of the relation between the tourist, the craftsperson, and the imagined or real authenticity of the transaction, of the artifact, and of the producer and consumer. So that’s McGuckin.