The Postmodern Condition of Knowledge in Computerized Societies

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Abstract. This study explores Jean-François Lyotard's contribution to the debates about postmodern condition of knowledge in post-industrial societies by examining his most influential book, *The postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. It also aims to discover underlying trend and relationship between knowledge and power, and to trace out as clearly as possible the development of knowledge in highly-developed societies which constructed the lives and identities of people in contemporary structures of knowing. So the focal point here is the nature and status of knowledge: what knowledge is, and how it is generated, organized and employed in contemporary societies. The study investigates which sorts of knowledge deem valuable, how that knowledge is communicated, who has access to it and what it is used for, who determines and controls the flow of knowledge, and how it shapes our lives and experiences of the world.

Keywords: Metanarrative, Legitimacy, The Postindustrial Age, Power, Knowledge, Lyotard.

1. Introduction

In his "Introduction" to *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge,* Lyotard states his objective clearly: "The object of this study is the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies." (Lyotard, 1984: p. xxiii). Lyotard, then, terms this condition "postmodern". For him, the word "postmodern" designates:

The state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature, and the arts (Ibid).

According to Lyotard, a convenient way to perceive "these transformations" is to "place these transformations in the context of the crisis of narratives" (Ibid).

"Science", Lyotard wrote, "has always been in conflict with narratives" (Ibid). By Judging narratives with its own touchstone, science proves the majority of them to be fables. But as far as "science does not restrict itself to stating useful regularities and seeks the truth, it is obliged to legitimate the rules of its own game" (Ibid). It, then, gives life to philosophy, "a discourse of legitimation with respect to its own status" (Ibid). For Lyotard, the term "modern" here is "to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth" (Ibid). In order to clarify the point, Lyotard gives a clear example:

The rule of consensus between the sender and addressee of a statement with truth – value is deemed acceptable if it is cast in terms of a possible unanimity between rational minds: this is the Enlightenment narrative, in which the hero of knowledge works toward a good ethico-political end – universal peace (Ibid, xxiii, xxiv).

Then he prompts to conclude that:

If a metanarrative implying a philosophy of history is used to legitimate knowledge, questions are raised concerning the validity of the institutions governing the social bond: these must be legitimated as well. Thus justice is consigned to the grand narrative in the same way as truth (Ibid, xxiv).

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By now, Lyotard defines "postmodern" as:

Incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it (Ibid).

For his part Lyotard claims that the decision makers are only obsessed by the thirst of power in the postindustrial age:

They allocate our lives for the growth of power. In matters of social justice and of scientific truth alike, the leaitimation of that power is based on its optimizing the system's performance – efficiency. The application of this criterion to all of our games necessarity entails a certain level of terror, whether soft or hard: be operational (that is, commensurable) or disappear (Ibid).

Lyotard believes that inconsistency in "the logic of maximum performance" especially in "the socioecnomic field" does not assert to resolve conflicts and contradictions in some ideal Hegelian synthesis and Marxist structure:

The logic of maximum performance is no doubt inconsistent in many ways, particularly with respect to contradiction in the socio-economic field: it demands both less work (to lower production costs) and more (to lessen the socil burden of the idle population). But our incredulity is now such that we no longer expect salvation to rise from these inconsistencies, as did Marx (Ibid).

2. The Status of Knowledge in Computerized Societies

Section one, "The Field: Knowledge in Computerized Societies," describes the emergence of new forms of social and economic organization "since at least the end of the 1950s" (Ibid, p. 3). As such, its reference point and point of departure is the movement of modernization which characterized the early years of the century, with the growth of industry, the rise of the mass market, and the accelerations in automation (technology), travel, and mass communication. Therefore, "the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age" (Ibid).

Lyotard ascribes particular importance to language, "a single feature, one that immediately defines our object of study" (Ibid).

Scientific Knowledge is a kind of discourse. And it is fair to say that for the last forty years the "leading" sciences and technologies have had to do with language: Phonology and theories of linguistics, problems of communication and cybernetics, modern theories of algebra and informatics, computers and their languages, problems of translation and the search for areas of compatibility among computer languages, problems of information storage and data banks, telematics and the perfection of intelligent terminals, paradoxology. The facts speak for themselves (and this list is not exhaustive) (Ibid, p. 3, 4).

He insists that these economic and cultural transformations have great influence upon knowledge, especially upon its two principal functions, namely "research and the transmission of acquired learning" (Ibid, p. 4).

Lyotard crystallizes the vital principles of the nature of knowledge" within this context of general transformation" (Ibid). He, then, immediately adds that, "the hegemony of computers comes a certain logic, and therefore a certain set of prescriptions determining which statements are accepted as "knowledge' statements" (Ibid).

Lyotard regards this new principle of the acquisition of knowledge as:

The relationship of the suppliers and users of knowledge to the knowledge they supply and use is now tending, and will increasingly tend, to assume the form already taken by the relationship of commodity producers and consumers to the commodities they produce and consume – tat is, the form of value, Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange. Knowledge cases to be an end in itself, it lose its "use-value" (Ibid, p. 4, 5).

Viewed like this, Lyotard's opinion is remarkably cohesive about the stated aims of knowledge in the postindustrial age. A postmodern pattern of economic organization is much more decentralized; today a product will not be manufactured in one factory in one location, but in a variety of locations and by a number

of different workforces, both of which are subject to sudden and unpredictable variation, in the pursuit of efficiency or for political reasons. These transformations join forces with the other key defining condition of social and economic postmodernity, namely the shift from an economy based on goods to one based on the supply of information.

Transformation in the nature of knowledge changes the status of "the existing public powers, forcing them to reconsider their relations (both de jure and de facto) with the large corporations and, more generally, with civil society" (Ibid). Lyotard, then, sets out to mention such significant reconsiderations as:

The reopening of the world market, a return to vigorous economic competition, the breakdown of the hegemony of American capitalism, the decline of the socialist alternative, a probable opening of the Chinese market – these and many other factors are already, at the end of the 1970s, preparing States for a serious reappraisal of the role they have been accustomed to playing since the 1930s: That of guiding, or even directing investments (Ibid).

For Lyotard, here it is quite rational to view "learning circulating" form the perspective of "money":

The pertinent distinction would no longer be between knowledge and ignorance, but rather, as is the case with money, between "payment knowledge" and "investment knowledge"— in other words, between units of knowledge exchanged in a daily maintenance framework (the reconstitution of the work force, "survival") versus funds of knowledge dedicated to optimizing the performance of a project (**Ibid**).

We may "imagine flows of knowledge traveling along identical channels of identical nature, some of which would be reserved for the 'decision markers,' while the others would be used to repay each person's perpetual debt with respect to the social bond" (Ibid).

3. The Legitimation of Knowledge in Computerized Societies

Section two devoted entirely to "the question of the status of knowledge" (Ibid). Commenting on "the computerization of society," Lyotard observes: "the scenario of the computerization of the most highly developed societies allows us to spotlight (though with the risk of excessive magnification) certain aspects of the transformation of knowledge and its effects on public power and civil institutions – effects it would be difficult to perceive from other points of view" (Ibid, p. 7). Lyotard emancipates his "scenario" from explicit and subordinate relation to banality:

But only to the extent that it fails to challenge the general paradigm of progress in science and technology, to which economic growth and the expansion of sociopolitical power seem to be natural complements (Ibid).

For him, "that scientific and technical knowledge is cumulative is never questioned" (Ibid). What has been recognized here is that, "at most, what is debated is debated is the form that accumulation takes- Some picture it as regular, continuous, and unanimous, others as periodic, discontinuous and conflictual (Ibid).

Lyotard first summarizes these "truisms" as "fallacious" one and then examine them in more detail. First, "scientific knowledge doses not represent the totality of knowledge; it has always existed in addition to, and in competition and conflict with, another kind of knowledge, which I will call narrative in the interests of simplicity" (Ibid). Second, "the scientists' demoralization has an impact on the central problem of legitimation" (Ibid, p. 8). Lyotard is tempted to say here that:

The question of the legitimacy of science has been indissociably linked to that of the legitimation of the legislators since the time of Plato. From this point of view, the right to decide what is true is not independent of the right to decide what is just, even if the statements consigned to these two authorities differ in nature. The point is that there is a strict interlinkage between the kind of language called science and the kind called ethics and politics: They both stem form the same perspective, the same "choice" if you will – the choice called the Occident (Ibid).

While Lyotard demonstrates the importance and value of "scientific knowledge" and "the new technologies" as the representation of "the prevailing power," he also examines the possibilities for their misuse:

For it appears in its most complete form, that of reversion, revealing that knowledge and power are simply two sides of the same question: who decides what knowledge is, and who knows what needs to be decided? In the computer age, the question of government (Ibid, p. 8, 9).

4. Conclusion

In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Lyotard illustrates that science and knowledge are not separate from politics and ethics, but are political through and through. The transformation in the status of knowledge that are now developing there for mark a transformation in the nature of society and human experience.

He takes the view that the sort of grand narratives that used to organize knowledge, cluster its use fullness for humanity and direct it towards a goal have lost their power in thd postmodern world.

All that remains as an organizing principle are proclaimed by capitalism's global markets. So he seeks new ways of analyzing art, culture and society in order to discover various possibilities for thought and action that just might make the world a little more just and fair (language games). For Lyotard, then, the key task of a postmodern philosopher is to challenge both the noticeable loss of values in "anything goes" consumerism and the apparently uncontrollable power of the market driven economies of the West that place profit before other values.

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