Webster: A modernist lens over a postmodern vision

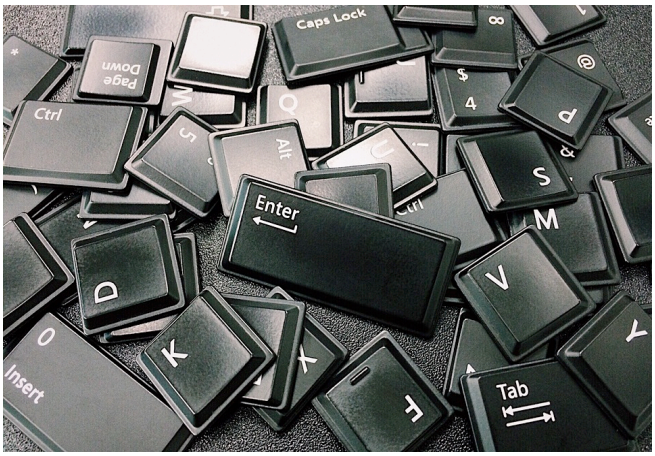
Joseph Backhouse-Barber, Sociology

In probing the many renderings through which theorists have sought to de facto validate the concept of the information society, Webster (2006) casts doubt on the viability of diagnosing such a state on the basis most provide. For him, the shift from a quantitative analysis of the proliferation of information in a single sphere (e.g. the economic), to qualitative speculation on the form of social organisation at large, is unconvincing. What is more convincing to Webster, indeed to the point of being self-evident, is something we can deduce not from the contents of the theories he presents, but from their collective existence. That there has been a pervasive 'informatisation' of contemporary life appears as the scarcely questionable precondition to an otherwise divergent set of theories. This, broadly, informs Webster's (ibid) conclusions. By placing these different interpretations, and the phenomena they describe into "the ruck of History" (Ibid: 273) something substantive can be drawn out. There has been a discernible 'information explosion', with a specific character. However, this is only understandable in terms of its historical context, and as such is as much about continuity as it is about rupture.

Now, it is not the intent of this work to question this assertion per se, rather I wish to engage specifically with Webster's (Ibid) use of postmodernism. My reason for doing so is that I think the terms on which Webster chooses to represent postmodernism constitutes a problem, and indeed an unhelpful presentation of 'the

postmodern question' (see Lyotard, 1984 & 1993) at large. For Webster (2006), the postmodern question should be looked at in terms of a possible *effect* of informational proliferation, and as such only as supplementary to the larger question of an information society more generally. I contend that this is a woefully inadequate response to what the postmodern question offers. It would seem that his choice of thinkers to analyse could go some way to explaining this, though there is not sufficient space for me to offer reasons specific to each here. Rather, I will simply present my own selection and hope the difference is evident.

To begin, as I have already alluded, the premises on which Webster opens his engagement with theoretical postmodernism broadly are, to me, indicative of his failure to fully comprehend the ramifications of what is being offered. What Webster (Ibid) attempts to do (and this is a tendency shared by many) is conceive of postmodern thought through a thoroughly modern[1] paradigm. He imagines that it is possible to approach the point being made in a strictly historical sense, as an objective break with modern society. This is not the point at all,[2] and neither is the 'subordinate' difference between modernism and postmodernism. For example, the force of Foucault's (1988) theorising of the implicate relationship between power and knowledge lies in the fact that it is distinctly anti-representational. Thus, for Foucault, the question cannot be whether or not postmodernity is a significant departure from modernity, but must be a question of the status of modern knowledge in the first place. That Foucault (1990) referred to his own work as 'fiction' is testament to the fact that that this question implies itself, and thus the immediate profundity of it being asked. In the work of Foucault, as in the work of Lyotard (1984), Derrida (2001), and interestingly Luhmann[3] (1996), among many others, what we



[1] To be clear I am referring to 'modern' thought here as synonymous with 'enlightenment' thought.

[2] Though I have already said I will not have space, I am compelled to single out the use of Baudrillard (e.g. 1993) here, since his seemingly scandalised reaction to the phenomena he describes can understandably be construed as supportive of such a position.

[3] Interesting for many reasons, not least because the tradition in which he is generally placed is most often seen as at odds with the subversive politics of Foucault, Lyotard and Derrida.

have is the introduction of a reflexivity that refuses to remain exclusively within the purview of 'the object'. Instead, epistemological uncertainty is accepted as a perennial condition.

What does this mean for Webster's (2006) information society? Firstly, it does not mean that one must desist from engaging in the kind of broad scale speculation that an analysis of the information society concept requires. Neither does it mean that one can simply make anything up as they see fit. Anyone familiar with Foucault's work will know that it is nothing if not genealogically rigorous. However, it is no longer controversial in any way to accept that one is— to whatever degree— a product of their environment. This is the simplest beginning of the postmodern question. An observation of societal 'informatisation', whether continuous or not, is thus also a diagnosis of change in the apparatus that observes it. What this means is that the question of the information society must be looked at not in terms of an objective diagnosis, but in terms of *how* such a description is an option in the first place. In other words, by observing the act of observation itself.[4] This necessarily entails self-reference, and often, paradox.

These are the terms on which Foucault (2008) investigates the neoliberal art of governance that he calls 'biopolitics'. Biopolitics is, for Foucault, a means to describe the at once productive and regulative modulation of a population through their 'organismic' life. It would not be possible without, and indeed can be looked at has wholly in keeping with, the conditions provided by the scientific method as it characterises 'modern' thought, since science was instrumental in hollowing out the ethical component of *belief,* in favour of a plethora of apparently neutral 'information'.[5] Neoliberal biopolitics (Ibid) takes as its target the modulation of this information, as it has been constituted through, and into, the subject. The 'informatisation' of life that Webster (2006) describes is thus, along this line of thought, simply the exercise of biopolitical power; that is, a way of relating the

[4] What Luhmann (1996) would call 'second-order' observation.

[5] See Habermas (1987) on the differentiation of rationalities that occurred within the 'linguistifaction of the sacred'. It must be noted that in this context this is a somewhat subversive reading of Habermas.

world in the apparently 'neutral' scientific terms biopolitics favours. Yet the contingent recognition of biopolitics, and the 'informatisation' of life that it entails, is also completely at odds with the modern scientific paradigm, practically and conceptually, because it places the production of knowledge firmly outside of the 'rational' capacity of any observer (Wolfe, 2009). Instead, biopolitical neoliberalism inscribes itself in the reflexivity of individuals in a broadly posthumanist fashion, according only to its own dynamic pragmatism. The opposition between the subject and power that is necessary for the designation of truth, and thus the operation of the biopolitical paradigm, becomes the circular reintroduction of a form of knowledge that conditions its own production. Still, its recognition *is* possible. The conditionality imposed by biopolitics is, evidently, not complete. The circularity is likely to become dizzying when it is acknowledged that the postmodern question re-enters the terms of this argument as a product of the process it is ostensibly being used to analyse.

The transfer of social complexity into psychic complexity that Foucault calls subjectification (Wolfe, 2009) is also the introduction of a great deal more improbabilities, and thus possibilities (Luhmann, 1996). Beck (1992) noticed this—many new potentials for incongruence accompany an increase in complexity. In order to account for this, he also highlights a crucial element of biopolitical functioning. The transfer from social to subject that transpires through 'scientific-technical' society (Beck, 2006) shifts the mechanism of action from *expectation* to *choice* as a means of enlarging the scope of possible actions available. The paradox that this mobilises is that the autonomy of subjective self-knowledge is biopolitically conditioned. As Beck puts it

> "The irony of risk here is that rationality, that is, the experience of the past, encourages anticipation of the wrong kind of risk, the one we believe we can calculate and control, whereas the disaster arises from what we do not know and cannot calculate." (Beck, 2006: 330)

In other words, risk is necessarily to be taken into account through the reflexive operation of a rationality that is likely to show the inadequacy of its own operation. The biopolitical 'informatisation' of our lives requires inscription in the subject, which in turn requires the management of risk. Yet this process implicates itself as something the subject is able to take into account, and thus question! In short, we grasp the conditions of our own knowledge by realising the futility of trying. Perhaps this is most decisively summed up by Niklas Luhmann in his characteristically elusive dictum, "Reality is what one does not perceive when one perceives it" (1991: 1).

This is why, for Foucault (1990), resistance must always happen *within* the grasp of power, and why Webster's attempt to 'classify' postmodern thought in the way he does is exactly the kind of naïve observation that draws his ire. More broadly, it is why the postmodern question cannot be contained within the Kantian question of the limits that knowledge cannot transgress (Foucault, 1978); that is, within a structure that places certain things (even its own validity) beyond the scope of enquiry. Every assertion (including this one) brings with it the Derridean (2001) deconstruction of its central difference. This is not a flaw, rather it is the self-referential necessity of enquiry that takes its own position seriously. For this reason, asking the postmodern question means that one cannot give any definitive answers. However, it also means that one becomes free to ask many more questions!

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