Poststructuralism ◧

Katerina Kolozova

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter offers an account of central issues and themes in feminist philosophical engagements with poststructuralism, reflection on examples of important contributions to this discussion, a discussion of the extent to which feminist work has engaged and critiqued the mainstream of the field, and feminist poststructuralist theorizations of the subject, identity, and culture. It also offers a critical genealogy of the epistemological paradigm poststrustructuralism has come to represent, in search of its continuities and breaks from its foundations furnished by French structuralism, psychoanalysis and tangential links with Marxian critical theory. It argues that the anglophone appropriations of structuralism in postmodern context, as it would have been termed in the French academe, have veered away from the original and purely formal conceptualization of the subject by resorting to what might be called, in Marxian terminology, identity centered reifications. This chapter puts forward the claim that poststructuralist discourse and the neoliberal discourse of individual and social mobility, transformativity and the concomitant proclamation of "the death of ideology" (and history) have established numerous and mutually opportune discursive and ideological correspondences.

Keywords: subjectivity, discourse, identity, anti-essentialism, culturalism, neoliberalism, constructivism, postfeminism, posthumanism

POSTSTRUCTURALISM in its intellectually most potent forms has been heralded primarily by feminist philosophers. Judith Butler, Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, and Drucilla Cornell are just a few of the most influential feminist theorists whose work has often been associated with French feminist and poststructuralist philosophers, such as Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray. Nonetheless, this association should be taken with caution, because in spite of the fact that Kristeva's, Irigaray's, and Cixous' work have become important (if not foundational) elements of feminist poststructuralism, they themselves have been persistent in expressing reservations toward poststructuralism (as a distinct method from structuralism) and/or feminism.

Poststructuralism

The writings of Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze, and Jacques Derrida; the feminist receptions of Jacques Lacan present in the works of Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous; and the unique critique of speculative reason proffered by Luce Irigaray constitute the corpus of indispensable texts grounding the school of thought called "poststructuralism." Feminist poststructuralist critiques of the subject, identity, and culture have made significant contributions to both poststructuralism and feminism. While the founding figures that will be referred to in this chapter are mostly male, it is important to stress that poststructuralism has to a great extent consolidated its epistemic project thanks to the contributions of feminist philosophers. Indeed, the academic prestige that poststructuralism enjoys today can be attributed to the force of feminist philosophical work in the field. By first focusing on some of the founding figures to present a brief genealogy of ideas taken to be poststructuralist, the connections with the main features of some central feminist poststructuralist contributions will become more readily apparent.

The feminist poststructuralist concept of gender as a discursive construct rejects the notion of sexual difference as a given, as a fixed meaning or "essence" and, as will be discussed later, has led to the development of a more general critique of "essentialism." To presume that there is an immutable essence of gender (or sex) outside the world of language implies the possibility of an independent idea "living a life of its own" in a world of ideas or immutable truths—something not unlike Plato's world of ideas. By way of Derridean deconstruction, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Foucauldian theorization of the (p. 100) subject, and other means of radicalization in philosophy's linguistic turn, poststructuralism demonstrates the radical constructedness of identities and the discursive or linguistic determination of the political. In short, the corollary of poststructuralism is that power is discourse (and vice versa), and therefore *epistemes* (i.e., scientific paradigms) are discourse and political power too.

The absence of essence implies the absence of unity for the subject, insofar as it has been declared multiple, transformative, and productively unstable. The instability, nomadism, and mobility celebrated by poststructuralism are constitutive of subjectivity, whether collective or individual, and are contingent upon culture as the discursive conditioning par excellence. Poststructuralists have abandoned universalizing meta-narratives of history, class, and other central categories of classical political theories and Marxism in the same way that grand or master narratives have been replaced by small and personal ones, as Jean-François Lyotard (1984) recommends. One could say that the feminist maxim "The personal is political" is also a central principle of poststructuralist moral and political philosophy. Thus, the epistemic shift poststructuralism brought forth has also been a political shift, and the entanglement of the two categories, that is, of epistemology and the political (enmeshed in the moral), seems to be constitutive of poststructuralism. The central themes of consideration for feminist poststructuralism have become the subject, identity, and culture. Culture has replaced the classical categories of society, politics, and history by way of fusing them into a single concept (i.e., culture). Always already individually subjectivized, culture has become the central political category in feminist poststructuralism as the result of the endorsement of Lyotard's axiom that the grand narratives are re-

placed by the small and personal ones. Gender is contingent on—or rather conditioned by—culture and its inevitable subjectivization (Butler 1990, 273–80; 1993).

Structuralism, Postmodernism, and Poststructuralism

Poststructuralist emphasis on the fragmentation of the self and its critique of all essentialisms led to the emergence of posthumanism and Donna Haraway's figure of the cyborg (1991, 149–82; 1985). Either as a construct of power, an external reality to be subjected to analysis, or an epistemological-methodological instrument, structure has been abandoned in the name of fluxes, rhizomes, and networks as forms of political-economic organization as well as explanatory models. It should be noted that in spite of the epistemic break from structures and static categories in favor of rhizomes and fluidity, and in spite of the abandonment of universalism in favor of particularisms, most of the explanatory potential of poststructuralism, as well as its concepts and methods, has remained indebted to the legacy of structuralism.

When looked at with rigor that focuses on epistemological matters rather than thematic preoccupations, it is not an easy task to establish a difference between poststructuralism (p. 101) and structuralism. The fact that the term originated in the academic institutions of the United States and was never really accepted in France, where all of its major authorities were active at the time of its growing intellectual influence, is indicative. Historically speaking, it is perhaps most accurate to characterize the school of thought called "poststructuralism" as the product of transatlantic reception of French structuralism designed for the postmodern politico-economic era. I am referring here not only to the theory of postmodernism and its academic influence but also to a certain philosophy that pervaded and justified the processes of neoliberal globalization and resonated with the arguments and the vocabulary of the postmodern debate.

It is, in fact, the proliferation of academic commentaries on the works of French structuralists during the postmodern era that marked the beginning of the field of poststructuralism. It is not easy to determine an exact date of a beginning of an intellectual era, but if we are to choose a particular moment of origin I would say postmodernism begins with the publication of Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* in 1979. Postmodernism has coincided with the rise and the reign of neoliberal globalization. Consequently, we can claim that in 2020 we are still living in the "postmodern condition." In short, we call postmodern an era that consists of a particular political economy, civilizational and technological transformations defining of it, whereas the epistemic paradigm that supports the era in question is what we call here poststructuralism. The notion of poststructuralism is, nonetheless, neither self-explanatory nor univocal. Michel Foucault famously remarked, "As far as I can tell the problem underpinning what is called structuralism has, to the greatest extent, been that of the subject and its reproduction [*re-*

monte]. I fail to see what the common problem of those called postmodernists and post-structuralists is" (1994, 1266, my translation).

Postmodernity describes an era of accelerated globalization of capital, the loosening of the structures and authority of nation-states, the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, and the substitution of the concepts of class and history with that of "culture." These processes began at some point in the 1980s. Through global media, cultural eclecticism has spread on a planetary level dominated by Western outlets and Western popular culture. The intellectual foundation for it was paved in the 1970s and 1980s mainly by the French structuralists who nowadays hold the status as the founding authorities of post-structuralism. Lyotard came up with the name of postmodernism and declared the death of master narratives (1984), but the contributions of Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Jacques Lacan were, I suggest, far more important.

Rhizomes, Fluidity, and the Fragmentation of Self

Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* ([1972] 1983) and *A Thousand Plateaus* ([1980] 1987) are perhaps the works most exemplary of the philosophical-political turn that occurred in the 1980s and spanned through the 1990s and the turn of the twenty-first (p. 102) century. The structures of the psyche—for example, the Oedipal triad as per Lacan (Mother, Father, and Child)—were transformed into traces of "affirmed difference." Difference and its multiplication through fluxes build rhizomes that are endlessly transformable proto-structures or, in fact, nonstructures (Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 1987, 21).

Deleuzian ontology is, perhaps, best suited for an ideological justification of the global digital age and the accompanying form of capitalism. Combined with other forms of radicalization of structuralism that have served as the foundation of poststructuralism, the Deleuzian critique of philosophy has furnished an intellectual basis for post-1990s global capitalism. "Rhizomaticity," a procedure of deconstruction or radicalization of the structuralist premise in French philosophy as conceived by Deleuze and Guattari, corresponded with the globally promulgated modes of organization, such as networks, platforms, and horizontality; the multinational expansion of capital transcending the boundaries of nation-states or enacting "deterritorialisation"; and the liberation of the finance industry from the constraints of the "arborescent" real economy. Since the 1990s, abstraction has ruled independently from the territorial or the physical, in spite of the fact that, according to Deleuze and Guattari, it originates in concrete acts of signification. Abstraction as conceived by Deleuze and Guattari constitutes a "machine," that is, an automaton of signification abstracted from the material that is purportedly independent from physicality and is self-sufficient, even though it is engendered by material acts (Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 1987, 148). The ontology of the rhizome acts and presents itself as a politics of emancipation (15, 21 ff.). After the collapse of the Eastern Bloc in Europe, rhizomatic ex-

pansion of neoliberal capitalism and global "democratization" has been marked by an exuberance of optimism concerning its liberating potential.

Following Deleuze and Guattari, the transformation of structures into rhizomes results in networks of traces of power understood in a Nietzschean and Spinozian vitalist sense. There remains some materiality, but its laws of abstraction become reified into "differences," "unilateral affirmations," and structures dissolving into fluxes where matter practically disappears through attenuation, transformed into a translucent web whose connecting dots of signification are the only reality that matters. I am referring here to the Marxian concept of reification in which abstraction (of a social relation) is substituted with a material reality that is supposed to embody it, similar to the notion of fetishism in the creation of money and commodity—"turning an abstraction into a thing" (Marx [1887] 1956, chap. 1 sect. 4).

Once the structure is canceled, what remains is the potentiality of matter and sign. This is essentially a nihilist position: the emptied space of the vanishing concept (and of matter too) is glaring. The rhizome seems to be endowed with the inherent possibility for the auto-accelerating work of the "abstract machines" of capital, communication, and pleasure.

Rosi Braidotti's feminist appropriation of Deleuzo-Guattarian ontology is a dramatic intervention into the original project of the two French philosophers: she upends the tendency of unbridled abstraction by reintroducing materiality as the substance of immanence and, hence, of rhizomaticity, fluidity, and transformativity. In her book (p. 103) *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (2002), the body remains the plane of immanence, including the immanence of sexual difference: the female sex and sexuality are determined by bodily morphology, fluxes, and physicality. In *The Posthuman*, Braidotti insists on materiality or physicality, including the machine and the animal in the purported continuum of matter as immanence (2013, 136–38).

Similarly to Braidotti, and, in fact, preceding her work on the topic of posthumanism, in "A Cyborg Manifesto," Donna Haraway advocates a posthumanist world, one that has left behind the ruins of the Oedipal triad and that also relies on the strong affinity between the machine and the animal (1991, 150–52). An anthropomorphic expectation at the center of the account of the self and its context, of subject and discourse, can initiate a phantasm of origin, birth, authorship, and demiurgic creation. However, the origin is nameless; there is no father, no mother, no Oedipal triad; and the human is but a cyborg, a hybrid of biology and signification, that is, of technology as signification, pure artificiality enmeshed in physicality that does not produce a binary but rather endless multiplicity (153). Haraway's metaphor of the cyborg marked the birth of posthumanism. If we look at the epistemic origins of posthumanist and cyber-feminist argumentation, it becomes clear that they are neither anti-physicalist nor anti-humanist but rather nonanthropomorphic and nonanthropocentric in their explanation of how self and society interact. These ideas are indebted to poststructuralism.

By insisting on the relevance of physicality and sexual difference, Braidotti retains a certain continuity with second-wave feminism. By recourse to the Marxist and socialist commitment to materiality and by putting forward the argument about women's impossibility of attaining the image of the human, Haraway simultaneously remains conservative by sticking to the materialist legacy of second-wave feminism while propelling the concept of the subject into the unknown of radical posthumanism or inhumanism (Haraway 1992).

The feminist poststructuralist subject is nonunitary: it is fundamentally fragmented due to having no essence, no stability, and no fixity. In her pursuit of that "glue that holds the subject together," incited precisely by her materialism, Braidotti repeatedly states her adherence to the idea of the "non-unitary subject." Unity or oneness are disavowed, as granting them relevance would sound like a betrayal of the central belief of poststructuralist feminist philosophy—the subject is multiple, transformative, and in its essence unstable. Thus, she proposes nonunity on the conscious level of subjectivization, whereas the unconscious proffers "*identifications* [that] *play the role of magnets, building blocks or glue*" (Braidotti 2002, 40).

The Subject and Power

Another founding poststructuralist theorist is Michel Foucault, who himself, as noted earlier, never endorsed the term or, for that matter, the concerns of the poststructuralists. Nonetheless, his concepts of the subject and discourse (i.e., (p. 104) discourse-as-power and episteme-as-political-power) have been foundational for feminist poststructuralism.

Foucault's analysis of the subject as an instantiation and effect of discourse qua political power is the result of taking the structuralist method to the level of the pure abstraction or full formalization of the argument: the subject is determined and effected by society as signifying structure. Society is but a signifying chain, a language in its own right—it is discourse, and the subject is simply the effect of the discursive process of subjectivization. Both Foucault and those feminist theorists who have appropriated his concept of the subject (e.g., Judith Butler) have been accused of determinism precisely because of the argument that discourse (or language) determines the subject. In other words, some feminists contend that reducing the subject to an effect of discourse deprives the subject of agency (see Seyla Benhabib's "Feminism and Postmodernism" in Benhabib et al. 1995, 17–35). Nonetheless, the argument that the subject is a discursive construct should not be understood as a position in favor of fiction at the expense of the real. The conditioning constrictions of the ruling discourse and the formative delimitations of the signifying universe we inhabit constitute the real in a Lacanian sense (Kolozova 2014, 79–98). The limit itself is the productive real that is outside signification but nonetheless engenders it (Cornell 1992). In *"Speech and Phenomena"* (1973) and *Of Grammatology* (1976), Jacques Derrida takes the linguistic argument to its extreme by explaining that the voice of the philosopher and his text are indistinguishable from one another in terms of their "authenticity" or realness—all is trace, artifice of signification; all transcendence is language; and

language is in fact text, the craft of signification. Nonetheless, this reality is no less real and, moreover, no less material.

We must not forget that Foucault subscribed to the structuralist method according to which there is no primacy between the structure and its elements and there is no "doer behind the deed" (Butler [1990] 2006, 195), just as there is no hierarchy between individual phonemes and the structure of signification in linguistics: each element creates the structure just as much as the structure determines the element. The materially determined possibilities of the interaction of individual elements create a finite system of signification, which in turn delineates the possibilities of individual action or the margin of agency. As an effect of discursive power, the subject is a dynamic rather than static, a temporal (becoming) rather than spatial category. Structuralism has served poststructuralism in its critical investigations of subjectivization within a culture, within capitalist society, and, especially for feminist poststructuralism, within the patriarchal signifying automaton of gendering.

Gendering the Subject

Within feminist poststructuralism, the theory of the subject as proposed by Foucault is transformed into a project of "anti-essentialism." Judith Butler has been one of its most influential proponents and founding authorities. Butler transforms the rather dry and (p. 105) abstract Foucauldian subject into an embodied reality, one inhabited by an endless number of identities. In *Gender Trouble* ([1990] 2006) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Butler further elaborates Foucault's philosophical proposal, but she also seems to prompt a couple of other consequences that are critical for the aforementioned processes of culturalization of the political. As Butler argues, the subject is an effect of discourse infused with heteronormative power. Discourse as norm is underpinned by the norm and normality of heterosexuality. Norm or normality is inherent to culture, argues Butler, and, therefore, heteronormativity too. Moreover, culture is what conditions gender and heteronormativity ([1990] 2006). Foucault, however, writes of structural and institutional biopolitical violence that is always already subjectivized but never referred to as "cultural"—it is sociopolitical, military, economic, and embedded in robust structures of governance (1997, 73–79). In Foucault, these structures are neither reduced nor reducible to culture. Butler, however, resorts to the notion of culture as one that would either encompass or replace that of biopolitical governance.

Butler's critical strike against the axis of normativity introduced fractal fissures into the feminist theorizing of the early 1990s. In spite of the stated difference concerning the question of culture, Butler built on and expanded Foucauldian concepts of power, resistance, and subjectivity to critique the subject of feminism as theory and political movement.

Anti-essentialism is not only a theory but also a political stance against the discursive hegemony of gendered essences, including that of woman. In *Gender Trouble* and in a number of her other works, Butler argues in favor of the subject as an effect of sliding

along the structure of signification, incessantly mobile and transformable. There are no traits of character and innate rules of behavior that determine gender. While the understanding of agency as a matter of individual volition tends to be taken as constitutive of identity in general and gender identity in particular, gender has no essence (Butler [1990] 2006, 22–46, 89–96, 270–82).

To perform or choose to subvert society's dominant rules about gender or sexuality, Butler argues, is to materialize gender, to bring it into being. This claim does not intimate some hidden truth about gender that has been obfuscated by performance but rather points to the fact that gender is the effect of an act or a series of acts, a performance. Butler's claim also underscores the contingent nature of gender and gender identity. It is contingent on culture and its norms. Considering that culture is subject to historical transformations, as Butler argues to be the case,[1] the "repertoire of performances" is subject to continuous change. We can, therefore, infer that one subverts the norm not only by defying it but also by reinventing the norm itself instead of merely reversing it (because, in the latter case, one remains within the same structure, albeit inverted).

Feminist poststructuralist critiques of essentialism rightly argue that there is no historical subjectivization that is permanent and more perfect than another. Consequently, they rightfully argue that particular and historically determined subject configurations (i.e., identities) are not fixed and stable. It is right to argue against the naïve philosophical (p. 106) implication that a transcendental category of essence can transpire in historically determined configurations of discourse and subjectivities. It is for these reasons precisely that the centrality of the theme of identity in contemporary feminist poststructuralist philosophy—and, hence, its application in the form of "identity politics"—represents a contradiction in terms. Any consequentiality to poststructuralism's premises concerning subjectivization requires a radical detachment from representational reductivism of genders. The reductivism at issue implies the fallacy of reification (Petrovic 1983) and the latter means: taking an abstraction, such as the subject, to be a material and visual form or a representation reduced to the real that not only acts as its substitute but also collapses with it (viz. with the real).

Critiques of Feminist Poststructuralism

Some feminists, such as the new materialists (Iris van Tuin), the Marxists (Nina Power), and those habitually associated with speculative realism (the Laboria Cubonics Collective), are concerned that the emphasis on anti-essentialism ignores the determining role of material and historical conditions. The new wave of Marxist feminists contends that a change in available gender positions is possible only via a profound change in the material political-economic conditions of our capitalist societies. Another concern is that, as a result of anti-essentialist militancy, the possibility of a universalist discourse has been dramatically limited. Consequently, international battles and goals cannot be—or are extremely difficult to be—fought and defended in the language of feminist or nonfeminist poststructuralism.

Poststructuralism

In a strange, subterfuge fashion, poststructuralism introduced culture as the lasting essence of gender, whereas gender expelled sexual difference from feminist theory of authority. Culture conditions gender in such ways that gender is merely its effect, but not the other way around. This is a fundamental difference in relation to the second-wave feminism in which patriarchy had the status of a universal category intersecting different cultures and historical configurations. Subversion is a powerful instrument of resistance if we look at power in its aspects of fluidity, dialectics, and mutation. As for the structures of political order, subversion may not be sufficient for overhaul. The double-bind of rejected grand narratives—and thus of the abandonment of any ambition for confrontation with the grand systemic structures—has produced a situation in which acts of subversion by means of identity roles have become the main, if not the only, avenue of resistance. The only mode available now is *resistance*, not struggle, revolution, or any other form of systemic change. For the advocates of resistance (through Foucauldian-Butlerian subversion), the political-economic system is seemingly immutable. Thus, culture is that which must be resisted. Surreptitiously, culture has usurped the position of the political, a territory where the individualistic concept of identity and its expression can fill the entire political space, subsuming the economic and the environmental under the notion of subjectivization.

(p. 107) In conclusion, poststructuralism has brought forth an effective and irreversible overhaul of the traditional philosophical metaphysics insidiously present in the treatment of femininity and masculinity as givens (i.e., in transcending the problem of essentialization). The premise that gender is a socio-linguistic (or discursive) construct is something that the emerging strands of feminist philosophy should retain as an epistemic step forward and away from philosophical atavisms. However, poststructuralism has been challenged by the new forms of feminist realism in ways that require adequate responses, such as: how are we to conceive materialism and universalism without regressing to modern and premodern philosophy and its self-sufficient detachment from political reality? To address the stated questions and reinvigorate its discussions, poststructuralism ought to resort to a constructive dialogue with the aforementioned emerging forms of feminist realism and materialism.

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(p. 108) Haraway, Donna. 1992. "Ecce Homo, Ain't *(Ar'n't)* I a Woman, and Inappropriate/d Others: The Human in a Post-Humanist Landscape." In *Feminists Theorize the Political*, edited by Judith Butler and Joan Wallach Scott, 86–100. New York: Routledge.

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Notes:

(^{1}) Elaborated in the Preface to the 1999 edition of *Gender Trouble* (Butler 1999, 4–5).

Katerina Kolozova

Katerina Kolozova is Senior Researcher and Full Professor at the Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities, Skopje. She is also a Professor of Philosophy of Law at the doctoral school of the University American College, Skopje. At the Faculty of Media and Communications-Belgrade, she teaches contemporary political philosophy. Kolozova was a Visiting Scholar at the Department of Rhetoric at the University of California-Berkeley in 2009 (program of Critical Theory), and a Columbia University NY-SIPA Visiting Scholar at its Paris Global Centre in 2019. She is a member of the board of directors of the New Centre for Research and Practice, Seattle, Washington. Kolozova is the first codirector and founder of the Regional Network for Gender and Women's Studies in Southeast Europe (2004–). She is the author of Cut of the Real: Subjectivity in Poststructuralist Philosophy (Columbia University Press, 2014) and Capitalism's Holocaust of Animals: A Non-Marxist Critique of Capital, Philosophy and Patriarchy (Bloomsbury Academic, 2019) and a number of articles including "Subjectivity without Physicality: Machine, Body and the Signifying Automaton" in the journal Subjectivity (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).