

Lyotard and the Politics of Antifoundationalism

Stuart Sim

I

An increasingly important trend in recent philosophy has been antifoundationalism: the rejection of the search for logically-consistent, self-evidently true "grounds" for philosophical discourse, and the substitution of ad hoc tactical manoeuvres as justification for what are quite often eccentric lines of argument. Antifoundationalism is a category broad enough to encompass figures as diverse as Derrida, Rorty, Kuhn, Feyerabend, Baudrillard, and Lyotard - all of whom might be described, as one commentator insists antifoundationalists must, as "anti-idealist" [1]. It is an essentially strategic practice concerned with undermining the philosophical establishment and its commitment to foundationalist principles. What might be called the "foundationalist dilemma" has been summed up neatly in a recent study of post-philosophy as follows: "There is proof, confirmation, evidence - and then there is what grounds proof, and is in itself incapable of being proved." [2]

This is a problem as old as Western philosophy itself, and in this sense antifoundationalism is merely the latest instalment in a long-running saga which has taxed the mind of nearly every major Western philosopher from Plato onwards. It is not too difficult to place Rorty and Kuhn in this debate. For all their appearance of philosophical radicalism they operate in a fairly traditional manner and pose no major methodological problems for mainstream Anglo-Saxon philosophy. There is general agreement amongst the participants in the Kuhn-Popper debate as to the parameters of that debate, and Rorty is at heart a reconciliationist ("I simply want to suggest that we keep pragmatic tolerance going as long as we can - that both sides see the other as honest, if misguided, colleagues doing their best to bring light to a dark time" [3]). Even Feyerabend, who has ruffled many feathers in philosophy of science in recent years, slots easily enough into the Kuhn-Popper debate as an extreme Kuhnian. The others mentioned above are more problematical, however, and certainly do seem to pose methodological problems. They would appear to be arguing for a far more radical change in our perception of the world than the change in emphasis called for by their Anglo-Saxon counterparts. Lyotard's recent book The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge brings many of these methodological problems to the fore, and I intend to examine the text in terms of the antifoundationalist debate in general with the intention of establishing the politics of antifoundationalism. Lyotard is one of the more accessible of the radical antifoundationalists and perhaps postmodernism is the acceptable face of the movement, but that makes it all the more imperative to lay bare the politics involved if, as I am going to argue, antifoundationalism is an ideologically questionable position in which a surface radicalism flatters to deceive.

II

Postmodernism is not the easiest of terms to define, and definition is most certainly not the strong suit of modern French philosophy anyway ("incredulity towards metanarratives" is Lyotard's rather cryptic formulation of postmodern sensibility [4]), so Frederic Jameson's introductory remarks are worth noting:

he [Lyotard] has characterised postmodernism, not as that which follows modernism and its particular legitimation crisis, but rather as a cyclical moment that returns before the emergence of ever new modernisms in the stricter sense [5].

The clear overtones of "eternal recurrence" here help to situate Lyotard within the nihilistic-Nietzschean strain in recent French thought (Cf. Derrida, Foucault, and Baudrillard in particular), although he is also capable of introducing an optimistically libertarian note into what is otherwise a fairly dark discourse: "give the public free access to the memory and data banks" [6] (the inadequacy of such a solution to the so-called "knowledge crisis" will be dealt with later). Postmodernism is to be seen, therefore, as being essentially an attitude towards modernism (however this latter is conceived within a given era).

Lyotard's antifoundationalist credentials reveal themselves in the way he pursues the problem of legitimation of authority:

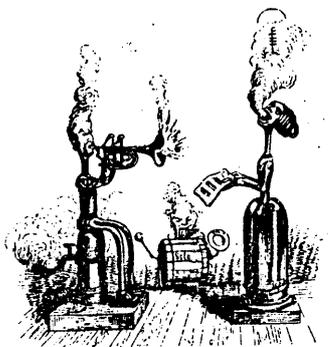
if a metanarrative implying a philosophy of history is used to legitimate knowledge, questions are raised concerning the validity of the institutions governing the social bond: these must be legitimated as well. [7]

Legitimation and proof are conspicuously different entities, although Lyotard is ultimately sceptical about claims to proof or truth: "Scientists, technicians, and instruments are purchased not to find truth, but to augment power" [8]. Truth is a fiction not just for Lyotard, therefore, but also for those institutions which claim to be bound by it. Beneath the apparent objectivity lies a buried, and dominant, discourse of realpolitik: "the exercise of terror" [9] as Lyotard calls it. Legitimation is accordingly a question of power, and Lyotard makes the salient point that, when it comes to socio-political (as opposed to philosophical) practice, "utterances [are] expected to be just rather than true" [10]. This ethical shift to the argument takes us into the area where rhetorics operate (justice being a far less logical concept than truth and more exposed to techniques of persuasion and emotional manipulation), where it is a question of language and its indeterminacies - infinite and inescapable in the poststructuralist view - rather than proof and its truth-value certainties.

This is a characteristic move for the antifoundationalist to make but it leaves him with the problem of establishing some criterion against which his method and concepts can

be judged (in the absence of truth-value certainties all strategies are equal, which makes the need for a legitimating principle imperative if a philosopher is to maintain credibility with his audience). Derrida gives us "blind tactics" [11] (whatever that may mean); Baudrillard "simulacra" [12]; Lyotard, less mysteriously, opts for "narrativity": less mysterious, but ultimately no less unsatisfactory as a justification for a set of theories than the foregoing. Narrativity simply involves the application of sequential process (in the fictive sense) to areas other than fiction.

Narrativity has its problems, as Lyotard willingly admits, and he is biased towards a certain restricted version of it, although essentially in favour of its role in the construction of knowledge. The virtue of narrative is that it just is, being in effect its own justification: "it certifies itself in the pragmatics of its own transmission without having recourse to argumentation and proof" [13]. Self-justification has a self-evidential ring to it, yet it is by no means clear why we should accept this as some kind of honorary (or disguised) ground for knowledge - because that is how it is really functioning. Like Derridean erasure it cancels out metaphysical commitments, but it could be argued that it is in reality more a case of bracketing, which temporarily suspends but never totally eliminates the commitments in question.



Allow Lyotard to call life (or any other sequence you care to name) a narrative, and he will draw you along with him from then onwards because you have tacitly accepted the bracketing of alternative explanations (the manoeuvre is very reminiscent of Barthes' somewhat facile, and quasi-imperialist, extension of the domain of narrative: "The narratives of the world are numberless ... narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting (think of Carpaccio's St Ursula), stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news item, conversation" [14]). As deconstructive practice amply demonstrates, all the tricks of rhetoric and literary criticism can be summoned into action at this point, and the structure of argument can begin to take on a certain appearance of authority. If life is a narrative then it must have a language, and if it has a language then it can be deconstructed. In Lyotard's view narrative is acceptable, whereas metanarrative is not. Metanarrative is foundational and thus to be avoided, so we are to try and ensure that life's narrative (the individual) is set free from life's metanarrative (the systems that control the individual). Once defined and applied the terms play off each other with ease forcing reality to conform to their requirements.

But life-as-a-narrative (hardly the most original of ideas [15]) is a mere analogy with all the limitations any rhetorical figure inevitably brings in its wake (it is also "a bowl of cherries", but how does this help our understanding of socio-political or epistemological processes?). The question at issue is not really whether narrative or metanarrative is preferable, but whether these terms have any relevance - or reference - within the socio-political sphere. Cancelling out (or claiming to cancel out) the metaphysics does not in fact give you that

relevance. It is revealing in this context that Lyotard is essentially tolerant towards the idea of short-term contracts ("the temporary contract is in practice supplanting permanent institutions in the professional, emotional, sexual, cultural, family and international domains" [16]). This is precisely the kind of tactical approach to process we would expect the phenomenologically-radical, bracket-wielding antifoundationalist to adopt. It conjures up the spectre of, at best, aimlessness, and at worst opportunism.

Narrative nonetheless provides Lyotard with a basic anti-foundationalist requirement: a starting-point which is not in the stricter philosophical sense a ground and accordingly does not commit one to a metaphysics of presence; as Vincent Descombes has pointed out,

It [narrative] has always already begun, and is always the story of a previous story ... [and] ... It is never finished, for in principle the narrator addresses a listener, or "narratee", who may in his turn become the narrator, making the narration of which he has been the narratee into the narrated of a fresh narration [17].

Taking temporal succession as an unproblematic given (no origin, no end, process only) and adding some measure of order (how much, and under whose aegis, being a matter of some concern for Lyotard) we arrive at narrative: a historically undetermined form with all the attractions that underdetermination has for an antifoundationalist, who does not want to be trapped in the "infinite regress" game: "what is the ground of the ground of the ground?" - and so on. Metanarrative becomes the enemy, the foundation which is perceived to limit individual creativity. Being underdetermined means that the narrative vests most of its power in the narrator. The audience is positioned by the narrative, but it is the narrator who determines the form this positioning will take, as well as the intensity of the experience. A narrator takes advantage of a narrative's legitimating power and this is a risk to which the audience must always be exposed, since it is exposed to the rhetorical talents of the narrator in the act of narration. Discriminating between narrator-power and narrative-power is not always so simple, and it is not clear how the dangers inherent in the former can be avoided in Lyotard's system.

It is precisely at this point that antifoundationalism is most liberating and most ideologically suspect. It is liberating in the way it sidesteps authority (the ground and those who espouse it) and suspect in the way it encourages the development of rhetorics as a method of fixing an audience's response (rhetoric in this case meaning the ability to put together an emotionally appealing narrative sequence through the adroit use of figures of speech, as in classical rhetoric). Not everyone who can string together a plausible narrative is politically desirable after all. There is no necessary connexion between narrative credibility and political virtue. What becomes crucial in such cases is the control of narrative, and Lyotard, to his credit, is very much exercised by this. His plea to open up the data banks is an index of his concern, although it can be considered somewhat naive. Extension of the franchise has not led to the collapse of elitist political structures and most likely neither would open access to the data banks: that would depend on who controlled certain other "narratives", most notably the socio-economic one. Lyotard's belief that individual opposition to the system (what he calls "agonistics") will help to keep the controllers of narrative honest is touching, but sounds as if it will have more effect on the individual than the system. On occasion something much more radical than agonistics is required - such as an alternative metanarrative. Feminism is one such recent example of the virtues of the latter in changing perceptions.

Lyotard is, however, much more interested in the individual than the collectivity. He speaks approvingly of a "delegitimation" of "grand narratives" in modern times (Marxism being one such outmoded grand narrative) and

argues that

We no longer have recourse to the grand narratives - we can resort neither to the dialectic of Spirit nor even to the emancipation of humanity as a validation for post-modern scientific discourse. But as we have just seen, the little narrative remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention, most particularly in science [18].

Delegitimation presumably pushes us in the direction of the open-ended narrative, where the individual can fill in the details as he goes along without being committed to any predetermined pattern or conclusion such as grand narrative enforces. We remove the teleological constraints of grand narrative, in other words, in order to leave room for individual initiative. This looks nicely democratic - in the free-market sense of the term anyway - and a plea for decontrol can always be relied upon to find a sympathetic audience in a laissez faire society ("abolish wage controls!" etc.). If we are to decontrol narrative, however, we shall need to be a bit more specific about the nature, and particularly the affective nature, of what we are decontrolling. To do so we have to return to the basis of Lyotard's analogy: literary narrative.

That narrative works on the level of pleasure has been a commonplace amongst literary theorists from Plato's day. Whether this is a good or bad thing and whether it should be encouraged or discouraged, have been more contentious matters. Moralists (Plato, neoclassical aestheticians, Marxists such as Brecht and Lukacs) have stressed the didactic role of literature, in terms of a given ideological programme. This moral dimension would no doubt be classed as metanarrative by Lyotard and accordingly dispensed with. We might just ask, however, what we are left with if the moral of the tale, which often needs untangling by yet another metanarrative practitioner, the critic, disappears. The narrative with no point, no moral? Open-endedness from which no value-judgements can be extracted to help guide future action, future response? This is no less ideologically-bound a programme in its privileging of pleasure over moral responsibility. Its objective is to maximise the "freedom" (that is, absence of external constraint) of the individual, whose pleasure-oriented personal narrative is held to transcend in importance the collective narrative (for Lyotard, metanarrative) of his fellows. Decontrol of metanarrative is an attempt to negate the didactic dimension of literature, and to reduce drastically the possibility of its constituting a source of politically-applicable value-judgements. Pleasure instead will out for the postmodernist and poststructuralist. Laissez faire aesthetics releases the individual but at an ideological cost.

For all the pretension of their rhetoric ("Let us wage a war on totality" [19]) antifoundationalists invariably seem to end up arguing on this small-scale, individualistic basis. Reducing human history - no doubt one of the grand narratives we should be expelling from our consciousness - to the individual experience in this manner is seductively subversive; but is it as anti-authoritarian as it is made out to be? Or is it instead a new and more insidious form of social control which works to destabilize collective political action at source? Tending your own little narrative, agonistically or otherwise, looks very much like a conservative tactic to keep change to a manageable minimum within the confines of a comfortable status quo.

Nevertheless, Lyotard would seem to feel that conscious use of agonistics will serve to limit contemporary power structures, and he fits into a recognisable, antifoundationalist tradition in this respect. Baudrillard's "speculation to the death" [20] and Derrida's guerilla-like conception of deconstruction (Western metaphysics as "an old cloth that must continually, interminably be undone" [21]) are other examples of this subversive attitude to dominant power structures, most notably the authoritarianism felt to be embedded in language. Lyotard's guerilla campaign is less nihilistic in

tone than either of the above, but it is still adversarial and language is its main target:

to speak is to fight, in the sense of playing, and speech acts fall within the domain of a general agonistics. This does not necessarily mean that one plays in order to win. A move can be made for the sheer pleasure of its invention: what else is involved in that labor of language harassment undertaken by popular speech and by literature? Great joy is had in the endless invention of turns of phrase, or words and meanings, the process behind the evolution of language on the level of parole. But undoubtedly even this pleasure depends on a feeling of success won at the expense of an adversary - at least one adversary, and a formidable one: the accepted language, or connotation [22].

The introduction of aesthetics seems a trifle invidious, and suggests a desire to separate the individual from the world of action and ideological commitments which compromises his innocent, game-playing self.



Were Lyotard so easily caught out playing the apolitical card his work would not merit much sustained attention; but he does keep the political dimension in mind, and indeed there is a persistent sense of tension in his work between political and apolitical imperatives which illustrates the sense of insecurity within the antifoundationalist position in general. The point of the fight, for Lyotard, is not just aesthetic, it is also consciously disruptive:

it is important to increase displacement in the games, and even to disorient it, in such a way as to make an unexpected "move" (a new statement). What is needed if we are to understand social relations in this manner, on whatever scale we choose, is not only a theory of communication, but a theory of games which accepts agonistics as a founding principle [23].

Lyotard consistently stresses this relationship between agonistic tactics and "new" states of affairs. Postmodern science is "producing not the known, but the unknown" [24], we have "a desire for the unknown" [25], and he quotes approvingly Anatol Rapoport's view that game theory "is useful in the same sense that any sophisticated theory is useful, namely as a generator of ideas" [26]. Presumably the powers-that-be are an obstacle to our breakthrough to the territory of unknown ideas (Derrida's brave new world "beyond the field of the episteme") [27].

Put like this the enterprise sounds all very exciting and it would seem reactionary to raise objections to it (who would want to be against ideas, new statements, or the unknown?). But we might justifiably ask what we are supposed to do when we reach the promised land: go forth again presumably - singly, and single-mindedly. The progression would appear to be from modernism to postmodernism to modernism to ... infinity? Yet again the ahistoricist (and I would argue anti-social) nature of the exercise comes strongly to the fore. Those going forward have no past and are continually in the business of

rejecting the present in an interminable process of cancelling and erasure. It is an uncoordinated guerilla campaign conducted by alienated solipsists - and one wonders how successful that would be. Lyotard begins to edge towards Derrida's "blind tactics" position here and that can make his rhetoric - "let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences" [28] - sound rather hollow. When all is said and done he has given us little more than a network of analogies and backed it up by nothing stronger than a rhetorical call to action, which translates into something fairly trite like "accentuate the negative". We must take it on trust that this will have any significant effect on entrenched authority.

The question of rhetoric is crucial in this context. In an antifoundationalist world rhetoric must become an ever more important aspect of philosophical discourse. Indeed some recent commentators have gone so far as to assert that philosophy is little else than a series of more-or-less inspired fictions and thus wide open to techniques of literary analysis; philosophy, argues Christopher Norris, "is always bound up with linguistic structures which crucially influence and complicate its logical workings" [29]. Lyotard himself insists that narrativity encroaches on philosophy as a legitimization device more than is usually acknowledged; in the case of Platonic dialogue, for example, "does it not fall into the same trap [as poetry] by using narrative as its authority?" [30] This is the radical side of antifoundationalism and once again it has a certain surface attractiveness. We are all post-philosophers now it would appear to be saying. Philosophy's pretensions to truth have been unmasked, another blow has been struck against authority (if Plato, that arch-opponent of narrative aesthetics, can be betrayed by his own practice, who can argue the case for anti-rhetorical rationality?). Ignore the grand narratives (societies), the injunction goes, and concentrate on the little narratives (selves). In the absence of foundations try tactics, try strategy. However tactics and strategy assume the necessity of persuasion, and that means rhetoric. Which must lead us to ask the question: what are the conditions under which a given rhetoric gains plausibility? The answer, I would suggest, points to the poverty of antifoundationalism, and must seriously call into question the too-easy collapse of philosophy into fiction, proof into rhetoric.

Rhetoric can hardly be neutral: it is always in the service of an ideological position. To be a rhetorician, to engage in the task of analysing others' rhetorical practices (declared by them or otherwise) is to position your audience. Success in this game depends on an ability to manipulate the emotions, and its measure will be the size of the nuisance-value you can create in your field of activity - which is to say that market forces apply. Derrida must be considered a notable success in these terms of reference. His influence can be seen at work throughout a range of contemporary French cultural debates (as Lucien Goldmann has put it, "Derrida has a catalytic function" [31] in this sphere), and when it comes to American academic life there have been some spectacular victories: "the fact is that deconstruction effectively displaced other intellectual programs in the minds and much of the work of the literary avant-garde" [32]. Derrida's antifoundationalist crusade grows in credibility as it grows in numbers of supporters willing and able to inflict nuisance-value. Antifoundationalism works hard at overturning traditional authority, but it substitutes another kind of authority in its stead: the authority which emanates from charisma. To answer the question posed above, it is under the conditions of charisma (exercised in this instance through the ultra-elitist technique of linguistic ingenuity) that rhetoric comes to attain plausibility. Not everyone will misuse rhetoric, but some will - some always do. It was to avoid this outcome that foundationalism was devised. The spectre it set out to exorcise was the spectre of clever, and possibly

unscrupulous, language-game theorists (the sophists are always with us) exploiting the innocent.

Foundationalism works, therefore, to limit the abuse of language power. The risk we run when we ditch it unceremoniously is that we expose all the world's vulnerable little narratives, not so much to a tyrannical grand narrative, as to the verbally-fluent, charisma-based narrative which will seek to deflect it from connecting with any narrative rooted in collective action and a desire for socio-economic change. Power-games are all too often dominated by those who shout the loudest or talk the fastest, and the spontaneous response they demand from their supporters is essentially ahistoricist and emotional rather than historically-conscious and rational. Reducing philosophy to fiction effectively removes some of the most important safeguards against abuses of power. Foundations (taking the notion in a fairly broad sense) can be justified on pragmatic grounds too.

Lyotard is certainly no advocate of rhetorical excess and he is acutely aware that epistemological problems are very often solved by a fairly brutal application of realpolitik. He identifies with what he calls "an equation between wealth, efficiency, and truth", and argues, with considerable justification, that it is generally a case of No money, no proof - and that means no verification of statements and no truth. The games of scientific language become the games of the rich, in which whoever is wealthiest has the best chance of being right [33].

Lyotard is at his most perceptive at points like this, and he pursues, in exemplary antifoundationalist fashion, the misuse of power when institutions monopolise the legitimization privilege. He is also perceptive about the utilitarianism prevalent in so many of our institutions (a trend he links to the pervasive influence of cybernetic theory in modern Western culture) where function has come to be considered all-important:

The question (overt or implied) now asked by the professionalist student, the State, or institutions of higher education is no longer "Is it true?" but "What use is it?" In the context of the mercantilization of knowledge, more often than not this question is equivalent to: "Is it saleable?" And in the context of power-growth: "Is it efficient?" ... What no longer makes the grade is competence as defined by other criteria true/false, just/unjust, etc. [34]

Few left-wing theorists would disagree with such a reading of recent cultural history in which the autonomy of higher education has been seriously eroded. Where the problems start is where the state or the utilitarian imperative gets lumped together with a range of other "authorities" such as logic and foundationalism. The analogy just does not always hold. The state may be like a formal system, or a language, but that does not mean it is a formal system or a language. The analogy goes so far and no further - the trick is not to give in to the rhetorical manoeuvre in the first place.



Lyotard has the virtue - which most antifoundationalists do not - that he is open to the political dimension of his theories. Having said that, the solutions he offers are pretty weak. Indulge in an agonistics in your philosophical discourse and you will be striking a blow against the imperialist state and the multinationals, because you will be denying authoritarian principles of legitimation. Avoid grounds (they are probably an illusion anyway) and put your faith in narrativity. Treat all sequences as narratives and their legitimation procedures will be revealed to you. Stick with little narratives because the big ones deceive you (and are no more than consensually-accepted fictions anyway), and wrest control of legitimation from the powers-that-be since "the language game of legitimation is not state-political, but philosophical"[35]. It is a basically libertarian programme, with all the lacunae libertarianism almost inevitably involves (just how do you get the state to pay attention to the efforts of isolated individuals?), and it is worth stressing that libertarianism - of a greater or lesser kind - seems to be an active ingredient in the work of the leading antifoundationalists. Derrida declares himself against philosophical totalitarianism and seeks the opening in the totality which "liberates time and genesis" [36]; Baudrillard argues for a free market of signs and meanings "in which all classes eventually acquire the power to participate" [37]. Individual freedom seems to be the major motivating factor on display.

III

All of this is to take place in the aftermath of foundationalism's collapse. Perhaps the collapse is more assumed than real, however, and perhaps all that antifoundationalism has achieved is to make us aware, if regrettably so given the authoritarian overtones, of foundationalism's virtues. In the process antifoundationalism slots into one of Western philosophy's longest-running debates. In modern times the immediate point of reference is the sceptical tradition from Hume onwards, in which commonsense beliefs (the uniformity of nature, personal identity, etc.) are called into question because of their ungroundability in deductive logic (Derrida is similarly sceptical about identity [38]). Hume's radical scepticism is calling into doubt the regularity of sequences in the physical world, or at the very least our ability to prove the necessary presence of such regularity through the medium of sense-experience. There is nothing to legitimate future action, in other words, since there is no guarantee of continuity, and Hume introduces "custom" as the enabling mechanism which will allow us to continue discourse in the face of the essential contingency of things. Having reached the kind of dead end radical sceptics can hardly avoid, he backtracks, in pragmatic fashion, into the world of action:

Without the influence of custom, we should be entirely ignorant of every matter of fact beyond what is immediately present to the memory and the senses. We should never know how to adjust means to ends, or to employ our natural powers in the production of any effect. There would be an end at once of all action, as well as of the chief part of speculation [39].

(Berkeley undertakes a similar backtrack from the dead end of his sceptical speculation, but it brings him to God rather than society which gives it less relevance and accessibility to the current debate than Hume's move.)

Hume's solution points the way the socially-conscious (taking the term in its broadest sense) sceptic has to move. The sceptic who is not socially-conscious may proceed to embrace contingency with enthusiasm (that world of uncontaminated, non-originary signs Derrida is so fond of evoking, for example); but he must still provide some credible substitute for grounds if he wishes public discourse and dialogue to continue, as opposed to

automatic writing or private and hence inaccessible language-games. Antifoundationalism often flirts with the world that lies beyond scepticism's apparent dead end, and instead of "Hume's backtrack" performs what might be called "Derrida's leap". In the face of closure, resort to the pun and free-associate your way over the obstacle of logocentrist limits and into the much-desired condition of permanent contingency, where "unheard of thoughts are required" [40]. No doubt this will have a very salutary effect on the complacent philosophical mainstream, even if an unqualified commitment to the "unheard" has more of the character of faith than philosophy.

The attitude adopted towards contingency is crucial here and will constitute an index of the nuisance-value the antifoundationalist in question will have for the philosophical establishment. The current revival of interest in rhetoric indicates the direction in which the search is moving. It is rhetoric, I would argue, that lies behind Lyotard's narrativity, Baudrillard's "speculation", and Derrida's anti-logocentrist word-play. Rhetoric is a mode at once more flexible and more insidious (ideologically speaking) than "custom". It leads ultimately to a very self-regarding individualism which at its worst is as elitist as anything twentieth-century critique has to offer. Derrida at his densest, the Yale critics at their most punningly ingenious, Baudrillard at his most cryptic, are less likely to start a revolution than to draw attention to their sheer marginality in the cultural debate. The practice of erasure begins to look like a form of self-imposed exile from the business of adjusting means to ends. We might all agree that the hermeneutical turn is a valuable, and maybe even necessary one for philosophy to take, without thereby agreeing that all discourse is merely a game in which linguistic dexterity is the individual's greatest - perhaps only - ambition. The latent nihilism of the proceedings reveals itself particularly clearly at such points. It presents as action in the void - a self-created void, which is a poor response to power.

Lyotard perhaps escapes the worst of this censure, but even this acceptable face of antifoundationalism can take refuge in cloudy rhetoric when his argument has been brought to a conclusion.

The answer is: Let us wage war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name [41].

This can mean anything or nothing. Whose totality? (anything can be a totality if you want it to be, just as anything can be a narrative). Which differences? Whose honor? Whose name? Isn't witnessing a rather passive activity for a radical to be undertaking? (close reading here gives us "let us" (call to action) followed by "witness" (passive state), the latter effectively cancelling out the former in an agonistic stalemate). What are those in charge of the totality doing while "we" are witnessing the unrepresentable? There is a distinct tendency for antifoundationalism to marginalise or exclude itself from the power discourse in this way.

When rhetoric takes over from proof it tends to look much like this; and the force of such proclamations evaporates the minute you start to ask yourself "What does it mean?" Unpacking the rhetoric leaves us with only unfulfilled - and for all practical purposes probably unfulfillable - desires. Philosophy has been collapsed into fiction and the fiction has been found wanting. The answer to "What does it mean?" is: solipsism; that is the politics of antifoundationalism - and its poverty.

If we treat antifoundationalism as a form of radical scepticism we can see why rhetoric has been called on to plug the gap filled by custom in Hume. Without rhetorically-based strategies we would be left with silence, and silence in the world of action equals acquiescence. Rhetoric certainly appears to be directed against acquiescence with the philosophical status quo, but it merely serves to reinforce the ahistoricist cast to antifoundationalism, locking it into an eternal present

with no reference (except a negative one in the act of distancing oneself) to past states-of-affairs. It encourages you to keep pushing forward into the unknown as an article of faith: "new" equalling "good" from this point of view. Rhetoric functions, therefore, as a pragmatics to counter the negative, discourse-destroying aspects of antifoundationalism. This can be extended, as it is in Lyotard, into a confrontational agonistics which gives a seemingly dialectical character to the enterprise; yet the scale remains restricted, with the little narrative of the individual (how we get to the "us" in Lyotard's closing remarks is by no means obvious) taking precedence over the grand narrative of society.

The stance is libertarian and it can certainly be described as anti-authoritarian in intent; but not anti-authoritarian in any hegemony-threatening way. Antifoundationalism, if taken far enough, remains an essentially peripheral activity, much in the way that any thoroughgoing scepticism does, and its ahistoricism does not negate the problems of history. It simply leaves someone else in control of them. Good intentions and messianic pronouncements are just not enough to destabilise the authoritarians in the long term.

IV

Antifoundationalism is fundamentally suspicious of the use of meta-levels in any discourse, and while there is a certain justification for this suspicion it can be taken too far - and have unacceptable consequences for the left-wing theorist. If meta-levels are to be equated with authority then it seems inevitable that the radical will have to be opposed to them: especially if the radical is committed to the idea of a paradigm shift. History is littered with examples of theory-bound, foundation-bound, institutions which suppressed dissent (that is, anything that called dominant theory or foundation seriously into question) and the radical is certainly justified in referring to this history of intellectual suppression as a defence of his agonistic practice. What modern antifoundationalism appears to be demanding, however, is not so much a

paradigm shift as a permanent attitude of scepticism towards any and all paradigms. Paradigms and meta-levels are deemed to be bad things by definition under this reading, and their practical utility in specific socio-political circumstances is denied in favour of some kind of anarchistically-inclined permanent revolution. Lyotard will allow a "multiplicity of finite meta-arguments" just as long as they are "subject to eventual cancellation" [42].

Yet surely it is not so much a case of meta-levels being bad by definition, as by their ideological function. It depends, in other words, on your relative positioning in the ideological debate. We can only judge a given position by its likely effects, and as I have tried to show, the radical sceptical one with its disdain for means-ends policies is most likely to result in exile from the discourse on power. Lyotard's agonistics is more viable than most strategies in this area, being directed against specific cultural abuses (the knowledge crisis, the imposition of cybernetics-inspired functionalism on intellectual enquiry) but it remains self-defeating in the way it drives towards the abstract ("Let us wage war on totality") while simultaneously denying individuals access to those "metanarratives" (or modes of explanation) which enable them to maximise the effect of their anti-authoritarian actions. Lyotard wants action to remain on the individual level and he wants it to resist the interpretative reflex: "It is necessary to posit the existence of a power that destabilizes the capacity for explanation" [43]. The brief glimpse of dialectics we are afforded here is soon swallowed up in an eternal recurrence of socially-unaccountable anti-interpretation, as Lyotard edges ever closer towards the "blind tactics" school.

Individualism of action plus abstraction of goals is not a particularly good combination for social change, especially when accompanied by a radical scepticism which makes a virtue out of contradiction for its own sake with scant regard for local conditions or overall aims. Despite Lyotard's political perspective his work is still shot through with the ideologically suspect motives which mark modern, and most particularly French, antifoundationalism.

Notes

- [1] John Fekete, "Modernity in the Literary Institution: Strategic Anti-Foundational Moves", in Fekete (ed.), *The Structural Allegory*, Manchester, 1984, p. 228.
 [2] Henry Staten, *Wittgenstein and Derrida*, Oxford, 1985, p. 159.
 [3] Richard Rorty, *The Consequences of Pragmatism*, Brighton, 1982, p. 108.
 [4] Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester, 1984, p. xxiv.
 [5] *Ibid.*, p. xvi.
 [6] *Ibid.*, p. 67.
 [7] *Ibid.*, p. xxiv.
 [8] *Ibid.*, p. 46.
 [9] *Ibid.*, p. 64.
 [10] *Ibid.*, p. 33.
 [11] Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, Evanston, Illinois, 1973, p. 135.
 [12] Jean Baudrillard, "The Structural Law of Value and the Order of Simulacra", in Fekete, *op. cit.*, pp. 54-73.
 [13] Lyotard, p. 27.
 [14] Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, Glasgow, 1977, p. 79.
 [15] Literary history is full of examples of this theme. To cite but one obvious instance, that seminal text of the English novel tradition, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, is conceived in this form and stands in a long line of religious allegories which make use of the idea.
 [16] Lyotard, p. 66.
 [17] *Modern French Philosophy*, Cambridge, 1980, p. 186.
 [18] Lyotard, p. 60. While it would be possible to argue for Marxism or Hegelianism as antifoundational (in the sense that dialectics implies a continual process of change and involves a rejection of classical logic), Lyotard's reading would seem to preclude them being so in the postmodernist sense.
 [19] *Ibid.*, p. 82.
 [20] Fekete, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

- [21] Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, London, 1981, p. 24.
 [22] Lyotard, p. 10.
 [23] *Ibid.*, p. 16.
 [24] *Ibid.*, p. 60.
 [25] *Ibid.*, p. 67.
 [26] *Ibid.*, p. 60.
 [27] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore and London, 1976, p. 93.
 [28] Lyotard, p. 82.
 [29] *The Deconstructive Turn*, London, 1983, p. 3.
 [30] Lyotard, p. 29.
 [31] Quoted by Wallace Martin in Introduction to J. Arac, W. Godzich, and W. Martin (eds.), *The Yale Critics: Deconstruction in America*, Minneapolis, 1983, p. xix.
 [32] Paul Bove, "Variations on Authority: Some Deconstructive Transformations of the New Criticism", *ibid.*, p. 6.
 [33] Lyotard, p. 45.
 [34] *Ibid.*, p. 51.
 [35] *Ibid.*, p. 33.
 [36] *Writing and Difference*, Chicago, London and Henley, 1978, p. 26.
 [37] Fekete, *op. cit.*, p. 62.
 [38] "Derrida, echoing David Hume, reminds us that because of *retardement* (delay) the originating factor operative in classical self-identity can never really be reflected by the expression (nomen) which is its "mirror", for during the "time it takes" for the reflexive act to catch the originating factor, the latter has changed". Robert Magliola, *Derrida on the Mend*, West Lafayette, Indiana, 1984, p. 23.
 [39] *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, rev. P. H. Niddich, Oxford, 1973, p. 45.
 [40] *Speech and Phenomena*, p. 115.
 [41] Lyotard, p. 82.
 [42] *Ibid.*, p. 66.
 [43] *Ibid.*, p. 61.