The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge

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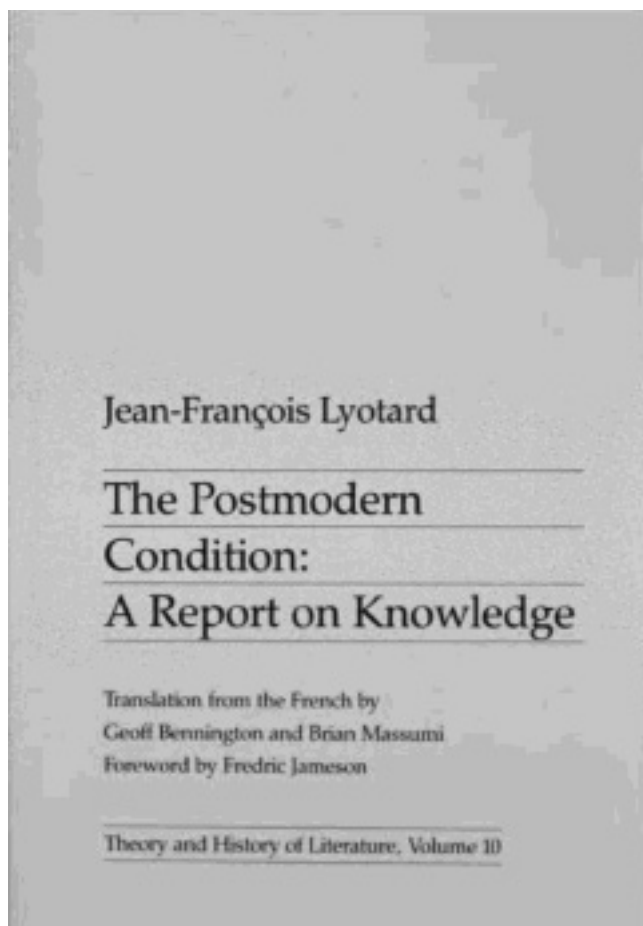
Jean-François Lyotard

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A Report on Knowledge

Translation from the French by
Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi
Foreword by Fredric Jameson

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The Postmodern Condition is the most known and renown work of French philosopher and sociologist Jean-François Lyotard (1924 – 1998). The book, originally published in 1979 with the title *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir*, relatively quickly gained traction all over the world thanks to its original views on contemporaneity, science and technology. The resonance of this work lingers even today and it has reshaped the philosophical, sociological, cultural theory discourse. This book is a commission from the president of the *Conseil des Universities* of the government of Quebec as a report on knowledge in the most highly developed societies. As Lyotard himself states it is an occasional one. Nevertheless, despite it not getting much consideration by Lyotard himself, the book ended up being not only his most renown, but one of the milestones of last second half century philosophy. The 1983 English edition translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi contains an extensive foreword by Frederic Jameson (who would become himself an important postmodern theorist), and an appendix written by Lyotard by the title: Answering the Question: *What Is Postmodernism?*. At the center of this work is the topic of knowledge. Specifically the acquiring and transmission of knowledge in the changing conditions of society starting from the 1950s. Here Lyotard individuates the major trait of the paradigmatic change of what he calls postmodern society, which is the *decline of metanarratives*. The main preoccupation is scientific knowledge and its legitimation. In a time when metanarratives, as the scientific system itself, become dissociated from society, the need for alternative thinking and methods raises. The challenge here is not to dismiss the scientific method, but to find ways to open it to new horizons according to the new condition of postmodenity. Lyotard tackles the problem in a systematic way. He starts by analyzing knowledge in relation to computerized society, individuating the relationship between knowledge and power, and pointing out how science, especially computer science, is driven by a principle of *performativity*. Successively, a new analytic method of *linguistic games*, is introduced. Here

Lyotard extracts from Ludwig Wittgenstein's studies on language the method of analysis of knowledge. Particularly the differentiation between types of knowledge and their rules. After a social analysis of modern and postmodern society we are introduced at the heart of this book, where Lyotard makes a comparison between Narrative Knowledge and Scientific Knowledge, arguing substantially that the latter is a particular function of the former, or more exactly that Scientific Knowledge uses Narrative Knowledge to legitimize itself.

This is a very technical and dense book but the writing feels very fluent, and in the panorama of comparable theoretical books on postmodernity is one of the most accessible and surely a milestone for whoever is interested in avant-garde research or postmodern theory. The methodical deconstruction of society and scientific knowledge de facto opened a plethora of new ideas changing irreversibly the perception of contemporaneity. In theorizing the evolution of science, and western thought in general, Lyotard proposes a new mean of legitimation that he calls *Paralogy*. This implicates the return of *small narratives* instead of the various metaphysical systems of knowledge. The return of narrative knowledge in the legitimation of scientific knowledge through open *systems, localism, anti-method*. As opposed to the Hegelian dialectic in which the *thesis* an *antithesis* are pacified in a *synthesis*, Lyotard argues that this consensus *is only a particular state of discussion, not its end*. Furthermore, he makes an ethical point (as opposed to the scientific performative one) considering consensus unjust and totalitarian, and finding in dissent true freedom. Arguably, the greatest legacy of this Lyotard's work is the introduction of the term postmodern in philosophy. There is much debate even today about the term and there is no consensus about the truthfulness or usefulness of said. To start, postmodernism is a posthumous term used to categorize a heterogeneous group of French thinkers of the second half of last century. Very few of postmodern theorists identified as such, the others were indifferent or actively contrary. Even in the cultural sense postmodernity is not always accepted. Most notably Zygmunt Bauman denies the existing of such thing as postmodernism arguing that there are no sufficient changes that differentiates it from modernism, while proposing the liquefaction of modernism. Semantics. I, personally tend to agree with Jameson when he points out the much-needed usefulness of the term when describing contemporaneity. There are two aspects in which we can look at postmodern: as a theoretical framework (that we will call postmodernism); as a cultural condition (that we will call postmodernity). Lyotard tackles them both in his book. Postmodernism extended to pretty much to all the field of social sciences but not only, literary theory, architecture, anthropology, sociology, psychoanalysis, cultural theory and philosophy. The main exponents of the movement in philosophy include Lyotard and other thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze. Postmodernism starts as a reactionary movement against the structures of power of the totalitarian states be it capitalist or communist. Many of the above (except for Derrida) were part of the structuralist movement and sometimes are referred to as post-structuralists. Theoreti-

cally, the connection between these philosophers is to be found in the decline of the metanarratives, which is the starting point of Lyotard's reasoning. This, in practical terms implies the rejection of Marxism as ideology and historical materialism as a critical apparatus of contemporaneity. New methodological approaches rise. From the multiplicities (instead of monadic) of the *rhizome* and the interpretative relativisation (instead of Truth) of the *lines of flight* proposed by Deleuze, to the *deconstruction* of Derrida, to the *genealogic* (instead of classical historic) analysis of power structures put forward by Foucault.

As a cultural condition, postmodernity might be characterized by: the fall of metanarratives; the economical shift from industrial economy to service economy; the emergence of new media and technology. The decline of metanarratives can be safely traced as a phenomenon to the Enlightenment and the decline of the Christian metanarrative and the concept of God. Lyotard just happened to reveal it as a phenomenon. In this sense, Lyotard views postmodernity as a generally good thing, as liberating. The fall of a single interpretative system or worldview should lead to a prosperous multiplicity of discourses that undermine the monolithic structures of power, conducing therefore to a more just and free society. To emphasize the difference between postmodern as a cultural condition and a theoretical framework we can make a comparison between Lyotard and Jameson. While both agree that we live in a postmodern condition and that metanarratives are in decline, Jameson views postmodernism as a temporary and somewhat negative condition to overcome, and advocates for a return of the Marxist metanarrative. The last aspect pertinent to the contemporary condition and scientific research that I would like to address is the recognition of the ascent of what Lyotard calls *computerized society*. In unsuspected times Lyotard predicts accurately the world changes due to informatisation and their repercussions on power and knowledge. There are two main points that he makes. The first is a political one. "*Suppose, for example, that a firm such as IBM is authorized to occupy a belt in the earth's orbital field and launch communications satellites or satellites housing data banks. Who will have access to them? Who will determine which channels or data are forbidden? The State? Or will the State simply be one user among others? New legal issues will be raised, and with them the question: "who will know?"* (p. 6). The rise of multiple mega companies like Google, Amazon, or others that in several aspects are actually competing with nation-states is evident. Furthermore, the fact that our personal data is stored by multiple sources on clouds, and often used in various ways without our knowledge, poses some questions. The second point that Lyotard makes is the connection of *knowledge* and the *knowledgeable*, or better, their disconnection. In our time, we have easy access to more knowledge that we could ever consume. Knowledge therefore becomes more abstract and dissociated from the *Bildung* (training of the mind). To push the point even further, with the advent of AI (artificial intelligence), not only we as a society are capable of easily and without particular competence accessing knowledge, but also producing it.