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To speak is to fight: war as structure of thought in Lyotard's postmodern condition

ABSTRACT

This article, as part of a larger study on the role of war as the primary and primordial formative mechanism of human thought and communication, investigates the functions of war in the thinking of postmodern philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard. It is argued that the central idea that provides the structuring framework for Lyotard's theory of communication is the concept of agonistics that is derived from Heraclitus' assertion that war is the father of all things. Against the prevailing hegemony of the pacifist bias in poststructuralist social theories, Lyotard returns language to its pragmatic origin in the war-like agonistic and combative social reality. Lyotard's insight that acts of speaking in society resemble fighting facilitates a better understanding of the contemporary postmodern global world that resembles a return of the neomedieval condition, which was characterised by perfect communication and warfare.

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INTRODUCTION: WAR AND COMMUNICATION IN THE POSTMODERN CONDITION

> *To speak is to fight, in the sense of playing, and speech acts* – Lyotard (1984:10)
> *Making thought a war machine* – Deleuze & Guattari (1986:44)

Social theorists have been searching for an appropriate way to understand contemporary society and culture, which have been aptly described as *the postmodern condition* and assumed to be a new kind of social formation whereby the developed Western societies enter the 'post-industrial age', and cultures enter the 'postmodern age'. The entire configuration of the postmodern condition is marked by its communicational or discursive character, which implies the central importance of, and concern with language, information and electronic communication (Lyotard, 1984:3).

The postmodern theorist J-F Lyotard (1984) proposes that an understanding of the communicational *postmodern condition* requires a communication approach that acknowledges the peculiar discursive nature of postmodernity. While Lyotard (1984) identifies communication as the central characteristic of the postmodern condition, he also discerns the coexistence of another element: *conflictual* diversity. According to Lyotard (1984:5), while communication and information are becoming commodities and gaining central importance in the capitalist global economy, 'it is conceivable that the nation-states will one day fight for control of information, just as they battled in the past for control over territory, and afterwards for control of access to exploitation of raw materials and cheap labour'. Lyotard thus considers the postmodern condition to open up a new field of action that combines 'industrial and commercial strategies' on the one hand, and 'political and military strategies' on the other (Lyotard, 1984:5).

Lyotard is of course not the first to liken information and media to warfare. McLuhan (1969) outlined the relationship between the development of media and warfare, and Mattelart's (1994) study of the history of international communication contends that 'communication serves first of all to make war'. War is therefore the frame of reference for the development of communication technology and communication theories (Mattelart, 1994:xiv): 'War and its logics are essential components of the history of international communication and of its doctrine and theories, as well as its uses' (Mattelart, 1994:xiii). Indeed, the global information network (Internet) has its origins in the ARPAnet computer network that was funded by the United States military with the aim of securing military communication that would be able to withstand nuclear attack.

1.   COMMUNICATION AGONISTICS: TO SPEAK IS TO FIGHT

The centrality of communication in the postmodern world implies that the latter should be understood from a communication perspective. According to Lyotard, communication must be understood as reflecting the social nature of the postmodern world, that is, the agonistic character exhibited by all human societies throughout history (Sonderling, 2012a; 2012b). However, Lyotard notes that it is unfortunate that the traditional communication and information theories miss this agonistic aspect of society because of their naïve emphasis on consensus – as if it were the natural and unquestioned norm. Lyotard (1984) suggests that the postmodern condition can be best

understood from within the conceptual framework of linguistics and *communicational agonistics*, whereby the emphasis falls on the *pragmatic* aspects of language and communication (Lyotard, 1984:9). This implies that communication should be understood as a form of activity, as a *speech act or a language game*. The underlying principle of such an understanding of communication is that 'to speak is to fight, in the sense of playing, and [a] speech act [that] falls within the domain of a general agonistics' (Lyotard, 1984:10). Here Lyotard extends and modifies Wittgenstein's conception of the social usage of language as if it were a game of chess whereby each act of speaking is akin to a move in the game and the game itself is defined by its rules (Lyotard, 1984:37). Implicit in Wittgenstein's reference to a game of chess is an allusion to contestation at the heart of the language game. This agonistic character is extended by Lyotard, as if to suggest that conflict – *agon* – is the fundamental principle of all games (Sonderling, 2012a). Lyotard suggests that language and language games can provide a way to understand society because it is possible to consider 'the *entirety* of social relations' as consisting of linguistic relations. Although not all social relations are linguistic relations, 'language games are the minimum relation required for society to exist' (Lyotard, 1984:15). Thus Lyotard concludes: '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' (Lyotard, 1984:16).

Moreover, because of the increasing prominence of, and concern with language and communication in postmodern society, 'both as a reality and as an issue' of contentions, it would, contends Habermas (Lyotard, 1984:16), 'be superficial to reduce' the significance of communication 'to the traditional alternative between manipulatory speech and unilateral transmission of messages on the one hand, and free expression and dialogue on the other'.

Similarly, the dominant communication and information theories evaluate communication from a simple cybernetic information perspective and neglect 'the agonistic aspect of society' whose characteristic is transferred to language games (Lyotard, 1984:16). Because language reflects the dynamic nature of the social world, both can be considered complex systems that are perpetually in a process of conflict. As conflict is a permanent condition, language and society can be theorised in terms of Heraclitus' contention that 'conflict, [is] the father of all things' and is the single and prime 'causative process' or first principle (Lyotard, 1984:59). From this it follows that speaking can be considered as being akin to fighting (Lyotard, 1984:10).

Lyotard's insistence that conflict and dissensus are the points of departure for understanding society represents a return to an old Western tradition dating back to the ancient Greeks. Lyotard thus corrects the dominant contemporary theories that condemn conflict and assume that consensus is the only valid principle. Lyotard argues that to represent social reality as if it were a stable consensus and amenable to total control is to misrepresent it. To Lyotard, there can never be a stage of complete knowledge about society that allows for total control and the eradication of conflict and indeterminacy. Because of the agonistic character of human nature, unpredictability, as Lyotard argues, is always a central part of society:

> Take the aggressiveness as a state variable of a dog: it increases in direct proportion to the dog's anger, a control variable. Supposing the dog's anger is measurable, when it reaches a certain threshold it is expressed in the form of an attack. Fear, the second control variable, has the opposite effect; when it reaches its threshold it is expressed as flight. In the absence of anger or fear, the dog's behaviour is stable ... But if the two control variables increase together, the two thresholds will be approached simultaneously: the dog's behaviour becomes unpredictable and can switch abruptly from flight to attack, and vice versa. The system is said to be unstable: the control variables are continuous, but the state variables are discontinuous (Lyotard, 1984:59).

Lyotard notes that society is unstable and contains tension and conflict, a condition he terms *paralogy* (1984:60). Thus Lyotard (1984:66) celebrates the 'heteromorphous nature of language games'. Lyotard's perspective on conflict and dissensus can acknowledge the complexity, social diversity and varieties of language games. This stands opposed to Habermas's theory of rational consensus that tends to limit dissent and forces it to conform and seek consensus (Lyotard, 1984:60–61, 65–66). Contrary to Habermas, Lyotard (1984:61) contends that consensus is an ideal situation that is never reached. Thus, if 'the goal of dialogue is consensus', this 'consensus is only a particular state of discussion, not its end' (Lyotard, 1984:65). The end or aim is dissent because dialogue is an open system of play and someone will always come with something new to say and so disturb the consensus (Lyotard, 1984:61).

Lyotard's idea is confirmed by Derrida's (2001:145) assertion that 'there is war only after the opening of discourse', by which he implies that a dispute can only arise once communication has taken place. Moreover, in the universe of discourse there is always diversity and there is no universally valid metaprescription that can apply to all language games (Lyotard, 1984:65). Attaining complete consensus is only possible by an act of terror that eliminates all oppositional players from the language game (Lyotard, 1984:63–64).

Nevertheless, playing a language game may have a variety of motives, and winning the game is the primary and perhaps the only motivation – even if doing so goes unacknowledged or is misrecognised. In this sense, if speaking is considered to be a move in a language game – in a manner similar to a move in a game of chess – then a 'move can be made for the sheer pleasure of its invention: what else is involved in that labour of language harassment undertaken by popular speech and by literature?' (Lyotard, 1984:10). However, behind the pretence that the players are merely playing for the sake of the game, winning still remains the primary motive. Lyotard acknowledges that the motive for playing a language game may well be the joy and pleasure gained at the level of linguistic *parole*, but even here the competitive and agonistic nature of games soon discloses itself. Thus Lyotard concludes that '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' (Lyotard, 1984:10). The agonistic, competitive and fighting spirit of linguistic communication is evident at all levels of communication:

> In the ordinary use of discourse – for example, in a discussion between two friends – the interlocutors use any available ammunition, changing games from one utterance to the

next: questions, requests, assertions, and narratives are launched pell-mell into battle. The war is not without rules, but the rules allow and encourage the greatest possible flexibility of utterance (Lyotard, 1984:17).

The contests and battles are not limited to the interpersonal level of communicative interaction but are also evident at the level of institutionalised discourse, because 'an institution differs from a conversation in that it always requires supplementary constraints for statements to be declared admissible within its bounds' (Lyotard, 1984:17). However, the limitations that an institution imposes on 'moves' within a language game are not fixed for all times: 'the limits are themselves the stakes and provisional result of language strategies, within the institution and without' and new rules are negotiated and made as the game progresses (Lyotard, 1984:17). Thus, communication is a social activity and assumes the form of an agonistic language game whether it be an interpersonal dialogic performance or a large-scale social interaction (Lyotard, 1984:16).

2. WAR OF ALL AGAINST ALL: POSITIONS FOR INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS ON LYOTARD'S AGONISTIC COMMUNICATION BATTLEFIELD

Lyotard imagines communication as an agonistic act in which the individual speakers conduct a fight in the form of dialogue. Lyotard's view is anchored in his assumption that the basic unit of communication is an act involving individual human beings. The human being is envisaged as an *atomistic* individual existing within a social network (Lyotard, 1984:15–16) or within a social bond that is constructed by language. All social relations depend on language and are conducted within language games. This implies that

> … there is no need to resort to some fiction of social origin to establish that language games are the minimum relation required for society to exist: even before he is born, if only by virtue of the name he is given, the human child is already positioned as the referent in the story recounted by those around him, his relation to which he will inevitably chart his course (Lyotard, 1984:15).

Yet, while the social bond is linguistic it is not composed of a single language game because there is no language in a general sense (Lyotard, 1988:xii). Here Lyotard distances himself from Saussure's structuralist view of language as an abstract single structure while neglecting its actualisation in speech. To Lyotard there is no one single language used in a society: the social use of language consists of indeterminate numbers of language games, each with its own rules. Lyotard's view of language follows on Wittgenstein's conception of the multiplicity of language games that can be compared to an ancient city with its maze of streets, old and new houses, and old and new suburbs (Lyotard, 1984:40). The multiplicity of language games, their different rules and pragmatic efficacy provide the positions and roles for people to assume and play their allocated social parts. Ultimately, the outer limit of the social bond is death: the social bond is always traversed by fear of death, and the various forms of death – imprisonment, repression, hunger – all threaten to interrupt the social bond and end the language game (Lyotard & Thébaud, 1989:99).

Lyotard considers the speech acts to be a Hobbesian war of all against all. In the postmodern condition, the breaking up of the unifying 'grand narratives' of modernity lead to the dissolution of the social bond and to the 'disintegration of social aggregate into a mass of individual atoms' (Lyotard, 1984:15). But rather than see this as a radical destruction of society, Lyotard attributes a positive function to the 'atomisation of the social into flexible networks of language games' (Lyotard, 1984:17). The agonistic nature of society means that the individual 'atoms are placed at the crossroads of pragmatic relationships', and while humans are 'displaced by the messages that traverse them' and exist 'in perpetual motion', the human 'atoms' are nevertheless competent to handle statements (Lyotard, 1984:16). The postmodern individual thus exists as an active agent or an atom linked to a network. Each individual is not powerless but is an active player with limited autonomy:

> A *self* does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before. Young or old, man or woman, rich or poor, a person is always located at 'nodal points' of specific communication circuits, however tiny they may be. Or better: one is always located at a post through which various kinds of messages pass. No one, not even the least privileged among us, is ever entirely powerless over messages that traverse and position him at the post of sender, addressee, or referent (Lyotard, 1984:15).

Lyotard's view of the atomised postmodern individual is paradoxical: while he sees the individual as atomised and dispersed, he does not consider the individual as powerless, passive and entirely at the mercy of the abstract structure of language. Lyotard's claim that the individual has some limited autonomy is derived from his acceptance of the modern anthropological assumption implicit in Wittgenstein's linguistics. Moreover, the possible role of the individual increases in the postmodern world because of the expansion of new electronic and telecommunication technologies that enable individuals to enter and play a variety of language games. As Lyotard (1991) notes, 'any piece of data becomes useful (exploitable, operational) once it can be translated into information', and the use of such data is limited neither by the place nor the time of its reception and use (Lyotard, 1991:50). Implied here is the liberation of data and its availability to larger audiences in a variety of locations. Moreover, the new communication technologies also change the use and experience of space and time:

> The question raised by the new technologies ... is that of the here-and-now. What does "here" mean on the telephone, on television, at the receiver of an electronic telescope? And the "now"? Does not the "tele-" element necessarily destroy presence, the "here-and-now" of the forms and their "carnal" reception? What is a place, a moment, [if] not anchored in the immediate "passion" of what happens? Is a computer in any way here and now (Lyotard, 1991:118)?

The only certainty is that communication generally follows the model of war because language has its origin in fighting and war. Lyotard's (1984) idea that speaking is fighting is similar to George Herbert Mead's conception. Fighting is considered as a 'conversation of gestures' such

as in a boxing match that serves as a paradigmatic model for communication (Bushman, 1998). The underlying assumption is that the act of fighting precedes the construction of the symbol and deliberate communication (Mead, 1965:129). As Mead (in Meltzer, Petras & Reynolds, 1980:36) contends: 'The blow is the historical antecedent of the word.' Human consciousness develops first from actions and gestures or as Mead (1965:162) puts it: 'Mind arises through communication by conversation of gestures in a social process or context – not communication through mind.'

In similar manner, Lyotard invokes Levinas's comment on some theological text that places action as source for intentional comprehension: 'Do before you understand.' Levinas argues that it always was a popular practice for people to act first and only understand after the fact (Lyotard & Thébaud, 1989:41). Implied is this statement is the claim that human actions create ideas and beliefs and that war as the paradigmatic human action is a productive force. A clear exposition of Mead's view of communication as a boxing match is developed by Bourdieu. Bourdieu (1977:11) suggests that speaking and communication encounters are conducted as an exchange of blows:

> In dog-fights, as in the fighting of children or boxers, each move triggers off a counter-move, every stance of the body becomes a sign pregnant with meaning that the opponent has to grasp while it is still incipient, reading the beginning of a stroke or a sidestep, the imminent future, i.e. the blow or the dummy (Bourdieu, 1977:11).

Lyotard's, Mead's and Bourdieu's conceptions of the agonistic model of communication have empirical support from linguistic research. According to Farb (1974:12–14), language is always used in order to achieve some objective, and this is evident in the ordinary way people speak, which resembles a verbal duel or a war: 'Most speakers unconsciously duel even during seemingly casual conversation, as can often be observed at social gatherings where they show less concern for exchanging information with other guests than for asserting their own dominance' (Farb, 1974:93). In ordinary situations when 'two people who know each other approach, a duel immediately takes place over who will speak first' (Farb, 1974:93). The contest to determine the speaking positions is occasioned by the fact that in any conversation only one speaker can speak at any one time, and, by speaking, the speaker issues a challenge and establishes positions of domination and subordination: active speaker, passive listener (Farb, 1974:93–94). In a dialogue, the role of the one person asking questions includes the right to interrogate and the right to pose questions while the person 'being interrogated ... plays a passive role in which he is forced to respond verbally' (Farb, 1974:100–101). In many social situations the verbal duel can be an alternative to actual fighting. Such a substitution was evident, for example, in American society in the 1960s: African-Americans, while being relatively powerless, discovered that 'one of the few ways they could fight back was verbally. Verbal battles against whites became more important than physical battle[s], where blacks have been outnumbered and outgunned' (Farb, 1974:107).

Historically, the verbal combat or 'flyting' was a verbal expression of a general mode of aggressive, competitive, agonistic, human interaction rooted in biology, psychology and social and cultural existence. The verbal duel was a prelude to actual battle and, at times, it was in itself a real form of a battle and contest (Pagliai, 2009:61, 2010:87; Parks, 1986, 1990; Ong, 1982, 1989). As Pagliai (2009:63) notes, a verbal duel is a form of argumentative dialogue between two persons

or parties who challenge each other to perform a display of verbal skill in front of an audience. The outcome of such a duel is victory or defeat as though in a real battle and it thus allows for the social recognition of an individual's worth and for displays of status.

3. WAR ON TOTALITY: THE TERRORISM OF CONSENSUS

To Lyotard, speaking is fighting because language gains its character from its origins in fighting and warfare. He suggests that the postmodern condition returns language to its pragmatic tradition. Rather than consider society from the structuralists' perspective – whereby meaningful action can be considered as text (Ricoeur, 1977) – Lyotard suggests that speaking is a language game and is an appropriate form of social action: *production of text can be considered to be meaningful action*. Moreover, postmodern fragmentation has a liberating effect and provides conditions for creativity, as opposed to the totalising spirit of modernity with the iron cage of formal logic as the only valid discursive rule. Thus modernity's 'grand narratives' of progress and the emancipation of humanity are oppressive. Lyotard contends that the enforcement of universal uniformity and the disregard of local knowledge by the discourse of modernity is a form of terrorism. Universalisation enforces conformity and eliminates creative input from a rebellious opposing player because it threatens to eliminate him/her from the language game when it dictates: 'Say or do this, or else you'll never speak again' (Lyotard, 1984:46). A speaker is silenced or made to consent 'not because he has been refuted, but because his ability to participate has been threatened' (Lyotard, 1984:63–64). Lyotard considers terrorism to be manifested in the fashionable contemporary concept of *system efficiency*, one that is increasingly used by social engineers and politicians. In the name of efficiency, the latter two have destroyed both democratic politics and the adversarial practice of true scientific inquiry.

As against the totalising discourse of modernity, the postmodern is liberating because it fragments and affords diversity. There is neither a universal narrative nor a common language to impose on the incommensurable variety of competing discourses. According to Lyotard (1984:65), 'there is no reason to think that it would be possible to determine metaprescriptives common to all these language games'. This provides a new understanding of dialogue. The ultimate goal of dialogue is not consensus because 'consensus is only a particular state of discussion, not its end. Its end, on the contrary, is paralogy' and a search for dissent (Lyotard, 1984:65–66). The only valid criterion is heterogeneity and dissensus – whether on the global level of discourses or within locally played language games (Lyotard, 1984:66). Lyotard's theory aptly describes the isolated individual and small marginal groups in the postmodern global landscape of electronically mediated communication (Poster, 1990:129). Within the agonistic and playful culture of the postmodern, it is possible for individuals and groups to resist the totalising force of the system, to 'wage a war on totality' and to 'activate the differences' in and through speech (Lyotard, 1984:82).

Lyotard further develops his agonistic theory by introducing the idea of the *differend* (Lyotard, 1988). The *differend* is a case of conflict between at least two parties that cannot be resolved equitably for lack of rules of judgment that are applicable to both their arguments. Applying some single rule to both parties would distort their arguments and not do justice to either the one or the other (Lyotard, 1988:xi).

> By declaring such and such a phrase permitted, such and such a phrase prohibited, and such and such a phrase obligatory, authority subjects them, whatever their heterogeneity might be, to a single set of stakes, justice. Singing undoubtedly relates to the beautiful, but it may be unjust if it is a certain song, at a certain time, in a certain place (Lyotard, 1988:143).

The situation regarding the postmodern diversity of discourses and speech acts is experienced as freedom. Lyotard considers the discursive nature of the postmodern to mean that speech acts, 'phrases' or genres of discourse exist in permanent conflict. The conflicts and clashes of language games are 'events' (Lyotard, 1988:xii). Within any such event, phrases come into conflict with one another, and 'a phrase offends a phrase, or do[es] it wrong' (Lyotard, 1988:85). This is an acknowledgement that it is impossible to avoid conflicts and that there is no universal genre of discourse to dominate others and resolve conflicts.

To the philosopher, the only thing left to do in the postmodern world is 'to save the honour of thinking' (Lyotard, 1988:xii). To save the honour of thinking is particularly important in the postmodern condition because belief in a solid foundation of knowledge and in the existence of objective reality has been eroded. Moreover, the rise of the ideology of performativity has further debased thinking and it actively prevents critical thinking. The belief that transfer of data, information and clear communication is all that is needed for intellectual development, fails to acknowledge the complexity of language and thought. All such assumptions promote nihilism, something that needs to be combated.

> The "linguistic turn" of Western philosophy (Heidegger's later works, the penetration of Anglo-American philosophies into European thought, the development of language technologies); and correlatively, the decline of universalist discourses (the metaphysical doctrines of modern times: narratives of progress, of socialism, of abundance, of knowledge). The weariness with regard to "theory", and the miserable slackening that goes with it (new this, new that, post-this, post-that, etc.). The time has come to philosophise (Lyotard, 1988:xiii).

To philosophise is to stimulate thought through agonism and rekindle the spirit of fighting and contest. Lyotard invokes Heraclitus' notion of conflict as the principle justification for his own postmodern agonistic theory. According to Lyotard (1984:59, 88 note 35), Heraclitus rightly recognised 'conflict, [as] the father of all things' and thus conflict can be assumed to be the single cause of all phenomena (Lyotard, 1984:59). From the time of Heraclitus and throughout all of Western history, war and conflict have been recognised as positive phenomena and have provided the metaphor with which to describe human life. Transferring the metaphors of war and of fighting to language provides Lyotard with a credible means of 'speaking' and combining and linking different and incompatible phrases from various discursive regimes. Linking these different, contradictory and often incommensurable phrases that cannot be translated from one language into another gives rise to internal conflicts and indicates that language is not merely an instrument of communication, (Lyotard, 1988:xii).

> Language is not an 'instrument of communication'; it is a highly complex archipelago composed of domains of phrases belonging to regimes so different from one another that a phrase from one regime (a descriptive phrase, for example) cannot be translated into a phrase from another regime (an evaluative or prescriptive phrase) (Lyotard, 1986/1987:218).

When one assumes that to speak is to fight, it may be useful to turn to Clausewitz (1985:109) for military enlightenment. According to Clausewitz (1985:109), 'one and the same political object may produce totally different effects upon different people, or even upon the same people at different times' and thus leads to different types of warfare. In similar manner, the phrases or genres of discourse encounter one another and give rise to *differends* and conflictual interactions, and 'encounters between phrases of heterogeneous regimen' are unavoidable (Lyotard, 1988:28–29). The existence of incommensurable and conflicting phrases and discourses in the postmodern condition leads to the rejection of modern Enlightenment rationality and to acceptance of incongruity and illogic. Illogic and the existence of paradoxes are readily accepted by the postmodern reader of literary texts or by the consumer of mass media texts. According to Barthes (1986a:3), the postmodern individual disregards all logical contradictions and freely mixes all languages and accepts incongruity and illogic; she/he can even endure self-contradiction and live unashamedly with unresolved paradoxes (Barthes, 1986a:3; Sonderling, 2009:598).

4. IN AND OUT OF THE PRISON HOUSE OF LANGUAGE

Lyotard's claim that to speak is to fight was assumed to provide direction for political action. But Lyotard seems to be trapped in the prison house of language and cannot locate a reality beyond language. With the idea of the *differend*, Lyotard seems to have reified discourse and introduced anthropomorphism into language. This indicates a retreat from poststructuralist pragmatic and a materialist and *worldly* view of discourse as practice into the old *textualist* idealist position of structuralism (Sonderling, 1994:12). This retreat is accomplished in two steps: first, one assumes that language has a material existence and *thinghood*, for example, the structuralist assumption that language is a structure. The second step is to introduce anthropomorphism that attributes an independent and active agency to language. For example, it is assumed that it is not people who speak a language but that it is language that speaks and constructs people. Perhaps this reflects a remnant of the ancient belief in the magical power of words and is evident when Lyotard assumes that language acts by itself (Lyotard, 1988:85). Best and Kellner (1991) note that Lyotard's postmodern idea of politics replaces real politics with the politics of discourse and real struggles within language games:

> Political struggle for Lyotard is a matter of discursive intervention within language, contesting rules, forms, principles and positions, while offering new rules, criteria, forms of life, and perspectives. The struggle takes place within a given language game (such as politics, philosophy, and art), and perhaps between these language games. Yet Lyotard insists that there is no overarching language game, no privileged discourse, no general theory of justice within which struggles between different languages could be adjudicated (Best & Kellner, 1991:163).

Lyotard's conception of postmodern politics is influenced by a pre-modern model of politics derived from Greek Sophists (Best & Kellner, 1991:162). Having decided that politics is not so much a matter of real action but of how one speaks, Lyotard further assumes that the various social groups are 'minorities' and can be reduced to language games: 'Minorities are not social ensembles; they are territories of language' and each individual belongs to several minorities; and all such minorities have equal power, and no one dominates over another (Lyotard & Thébaud, 1989:95).

Lyotard considers the physical existence in the postmodern to be less important than discursive existence: 'The ideal is no longer physical strength as it was for the man of antiquity; it is suppleness, speed, the ability to metamorphose (go to a ball in the evening and fight a war at dawn)' (Lyotard, 1986/1987:219). Lyotard has limited knowledge of military history, because such flexibility and ability to play on the erotic, social, and cultural fields at night and play on the real battlefield in the morning was an accepted way of life for the European warrior-nobility throughout the centuries (Bell, 2008).

Lyotard ultimately seems to ask how one is able to communicate without a common language and yet not succumb to the terror of the totalising discourses of modernity, and to the terrorism of the multicultural demand for political correctness and docility, and, moreover, to the new terror of religious fundamentalists' encroachment on freedom of speech (Gasché, 2000:128; Sonderling, 2008). Under the postmodern condition the question is: How is one to restore honour to philosophical thinking because it is being dishonoured by people demanding conciliation of differences and a disavowal of radical differences (Gasché, 2000:141)? The languages of art, science and philosophy are dishonoured by capitalism and the postmodern demand for efficiency that requires them to conform to rules of clear communication: phrases must 'become communicable' so they can be encoded into computer language and marketed and exploited for their commodity value (Lyotard, 1986/1987:210–212).

Because there is 'no language in general' (Lyotard, 1988:xii), Lyotard does right to suggest that there is no universal language to communicate and translate between incommensurable discourses. There are only particular discourses, genres, and language games that are instances of language-in-use or 'paradigms' in Thomas Kuhn's (1970) conception of discursive communities. Such communities are similar to Wittgenstein's idea of language games. According to Wittgenstein (1988:88), language games are distinct 'forms of life' because people playing such games must agree and synchronise both their linguistic definitions and social judgments. But here Lyotard seems to have remained in the sphere of language and not social reality. The linguistic and social synchronisation can be seen in the ways scientific and scholarly communities socially construct, what Kuhn calls, the dominant scientific paradigms. Both Kuhn's (1970) and Bruno Latour's (1987) studies of the working life of scientists indicate that central to the construction of theories and the organisation of scientific work is a war between various antagonists, and winning the war is the only thing that matters. In order to win, you must 'weaken your enemies, paralyse those you cannot weaken ... help your allies if they are attacked, ensure safe communication with those who supply you with disputable instruments ... oblige your enemies to fight one another' (Latour,

1987:37). The construction of a theoretical paradigm is an 'enrolment drive' to gain adherents (Latour, 1987:111). Winning against opposing paradigms and adversaries in the scientific contest is winning the 'proof race' and the victory allows one to establish a large network of committed enlisted members and allies and 'make dissent impossible' (Latour, 1987:103). Latour (1987:172) concludes that the 'similarity between the proof race and arms race is not a metaphor'.

While Lyotard is correct in asserting that there are no objective discursive criteria with which to judge diverse language games, he may be mistaken in assuming that there is no universal procedure for resolving linguistic conflicts and *differends*. The source of Lyotard's problem is his insistence on remaining trapped in language without reality. From such a perspective, it is easy to forget the role of social power while erroneously assuming it to be the power of language in itself. Indeed, while Lyotard credits power with being a good means of legitimating a particular language game, he considers the language game as an abstract linguistic action distinct from non-linguistic action carried out by a human subject (Lyotard, 1984:47). According to Lyotard (1984:40), '[T]he social subject itself seems to dissolve in this dissemination of language games'.

Contrary to Lyotard, it is possible to suggest that the productive use of power does not resolve conflict but (*di*)*solves* it by cutting the Gordian knot: one needs to cut off the real human opponent's head and proclaim victory. Power is always a social reality that only extends symbolically into language where phrases confront one another. Of course, one can accept linguistic battles as substitutes for real battles, but this is dependent on the existing social play of power. As Bourdieu (1977:21) reminds us, language has no power, power comes to language from outside: it is the power of the group that uses language. Yet this social power is misrecognised and is erroneously assumed to be the power of language itself. Moreover, from the fact that phrases belonging to different regimens or genres of discourse encounter one another and come into conflict, it is possible to conclude that they have some common properties and that the 'encounter' takes 'place within a single universe, otherwise there would be no encounter at all!' (Lyotard, 1988:29). This would justify the claim that to speak in the postmodern world is to fight and that the fighting is inevitable because of the proliferation of language games and their dissemination by electronic communication technologies. According to Lyotard (1986/1987:213–214), 'in the absence of narratives of legitimation – there is only one possibility left for us: to fight for that work of incommunicability' and for a language game's right to exist; it is also to fight for the 'urge in thought to go beyond experience', and 'to fight and create differences of opinion' (Lyotard, 1986/1987:216–217).

Lyotard's vision of how counter-discourse challenges dominant establishment discourse is inspired by the discourses of marginalised revolutionaries, militant minorities, and the German and Italian terrorist cells that dominated the European political world after the 1968 youth rebellion. Lyotard and Thébaud (1989) see terrorism as consisting of two types of operation: one type practises fair play, and violence belongs to the 'game of war' into which the terrorists make incursion and destroy part of the adversary's forces: for example, 'the group Red Army Fraction makes incursion and destroys the American computer in Heidelberg, that is war ... That is part of the rather exact game that is a two-sided war' (Lyotard & Thébaud, 1989:67). The other form of terrorism applies

when the same group kidnaps a banker. This form is not a just and fair game in that the person kidnapped and threatened with death is not the player, and the threat is addressed to a third party, and not to the kidnapped person. This 'threat of death that is used as an argument', is part of 'pedagogical politics' (Lyotard & Thébaud, 1989:67).

Ultimately, the relativism and a lack of the criteria for evaluation expose an existential weakness in Lyotard's discourse. By celebrating terrorism, the postmodern thinker cannot mount a defence against mortal enemies. What is needed is the ability to distinguish between enemies and friends, as propounded by Carl Schmitt (1976) and Derrida (2005). As Derrida notes, a world without enemies is also a world without friends and such non-distinction and lack of differences imply that the world has lost all meaning and it is no longer a human world (Derrida 2005:76–77, 83–84).

Lyotard's concept of *heterodox dissensus* that portrays both thinking and speaking as battle is similar to Deleuze and Guattari's (1986) conception of thought as being constructed by military institutions: the dominant sedentary thought is modelled on the military institution of the state apparatus and opposing the state thought is the nomadic 'war machine'. The model of the state sets the goals for thought, provides it with 'paths, conduits, channels, organs, an entire *organon*' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986:40). The state's claim to universality is reflected in logical thought's claim to universality, where the 'cogito, is the State's consensus raised to the absolute' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986:42–43). The counter-thought is a nomad thought, which comes from beyond the borders of the state borders and is always violent, iconoclastic, and has its origin in the attack against the sedentary state and its military institution by the mobile people functioning as a nomadic 'war machine' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986:44). The war machine is mobile and is the invention of the nomads and exists outside the state and is distinct from the state's military institution that it confronts (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986:49). Thus *dissensus* that emerges within the state has its origin in thought that comes from outside the totality and 'places thought in immediate relation with the outside, with the forces of the outside' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986:44). The counter-thought is comparable to 'a tribe, the opposite of a State' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986:45), and as such 'it does not ally itself with a universal thinking subject, but ... with a singular race' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986:48). This counter-thought or counter-discourse is a disruptive 'anti-dialogue', it 'speaks before knowing ... relays before having understood' and 'proceeds like a general in the war machine' and ultimately 'bring[s] something incomprehensible into the world' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986:46–47). In other words, war is a productive force and any ideological, scientific or artistic movement can produce counter-thought and become a potential war machine (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986:121).

The analogy of speaking and war also highlights the limits of the postmodern view of language. For example, the problem of incommensurability is not the result of people not understanding one another because they participate in different language games. The problem is not derived from either linguistic misunderstanding or the assumed impossibility of translation between discourses. The problem is that

> [C]ommunication sometimes masquerades as the great solution to human ills, and yet most of the problems that arise in human relations do not come from a failure to match signs with

> meanings. In most cases, situations and syntax make the sense of words perfectly clear; the basis of conflict is not a failure of communication but a difference of commitment. We generally understand each other's words quite well: we just don't agree (Peters, 1989:397).

In other words, people understand one another but do not agree about what the linguistic propositions mean and what they propose to enact in reality. No amount of translation and linguistic clarification will resolve such differences. Words and concepts are always *essentially contested concepts* in any social and political discourse. There is no objective understanding of political words because there is no common-sense understanding in politics (Pêcheux, 1978:265–266). Politics is a battle between enemies or adversaries with alternative visions of the ideal society. Pêcheux (1978:265) contends that 'words, expressions, and utterances change their meanings according to the position from which they are uttered' and 'no universal semantics will ever be able to fix what should be understood'. The contests are unending because

> the ideological struggle has nothing whatsoever to do with so-called semantic misunderstandings giving rise to vacuous problems which will disappear in the light of the formation of a universal semantics. On the terrain of language, the ideological class struggle is a struggle for the sense of words, expressions and utterances, a vital struggle for each of the two opposite classes which have confronted each other throughout history, right up to the present (Pêcheux, 1978:266).

Lyotard's idea of agonistics is shared by Chantal Mouffe's (1993, 2000, 2005) vision of politics as essentially consisting of a multiplicity of discourses, their conflicts and antagonism and agonism. Acknowledging that political agonism – rather than consensus – is the engine of democracy, agonism can provide a foundation for a new radical democratic politics. A positive understanding of conflict provides insights into the relationship between war and thought and it challenges the common view that ideas in people's heads are the cause of war. If differences between particular language games are factors in conflict, this is so because 'people with different basic collective interests come into contention over those interests while expressing differences of organisation as differences of belief' (Richards, 2006:651). In other words, it is not the ideas in people's heads that cause wars but rather the actions and practices of war that produce ideas.

5. *LYOTARD'S PAGANISM: BACK TO THE FUTURE IN A NEOMEDIEVAL POST-MODERN WORLD*

Lyotard's agonistic model is useful for understanding communication in the postmodern global society. Any attempt to understand the postmodern world, globalisation and the spread of communication technology is confronted with a perplexing paradox of *integration* and *fragmentation*. Friedrich (2001:478) aptly describes the paradox of globalisation thus: 'When talking about globalisation, one is in danger of being blind to the opposite trend of fragmentation; when shifting to the discourse of fragmentation, one can hardly grasp the evidence of globalisation.' According to Urry (2002:57), globalisation is a complex system that is neither well ordered nor in a state of perpetual anarchy.

The fact that war and conflict persist while communication technology spreads globally uncovers another paradox and contradicts the popular belief that new communication channels contribute towards constructing a peaceful and unified humanity. The notion of *free flow of communication* conjures up the idea of homogenisation and unification on a large scale. However, such notions are contradicted by conflicts, schism and fragmentation.

For a better understanding of postmodernity and globalisation, Mattelart (1994:ix) proposes the idea of a *baroque system* as being aptly descriptive of the contemporary world. Other scholars consider the postmodern world in terms of disorder and suggest that it has come to resemble the social (dis)order of the Middle Ages. According to Bull (1995) and Eco (1987), one could describe the postmodern world as a return of the Middle Ages or as a *neomedieval* age. The idea of a 'return of the Middle Ages' was already used at the end of the nineteenth century: contemplating the coming of the new century Nietzsche notes that 'I am greatly worried about the future in which I fancy I see the Middle Ages in disguise' (Nietzsche in Coker, 1994:172). To Eco (1987) *neomedieval postmodernity* indicates the similarity between social and cultural processes of the present and those of the past (Eco, 1987:73). According to Eco (1987:65), seeing the world as if it were *neomedieval* makes sense because 'we go back to that period anytime we ask ourselves about our origin … looking at the Middle Ages means looking at European infancy'. Kobrin (1998:364) contends that understanding medieval Europe as our immediate past 'can help us imagine our postmodern future'. Such a creative step 'back to the future' provides a heuristic framework for understanding the present (Cerny, 2005; Deibert, 1997:183–184; Friedrich, 2001:476–477; Kobrin, 1998:364).

Determining the similarities between postmodernity and pre-modernity is facilitated by Kaplan's (2003:15) argument that 'the world is not "modern" or "postmodern", but only a continuation of the "ancient"' and Latour's (1993) contention that *we have never been modern*. According to Meyrowitz (1986), the postmodern implies that we may be returning to a world even older than that of the late Middle Ages in that many of the features of our 'information age' make us resemble the most primitive of social and political forms: the hunter-gatherer society (Meyrowitz, 1986:315). Expanding McLuhan's idea that the electronic media create a new form of the global *tribal* sphere of interaction, Meyrowitz (1986:316) finds that the lifestyle of the 'hunters and gatherers of an information age' resembles the nomadic lifestyle of primitive hunters and gatherers, as both have no loyalty to a territory: they have 'no sense of place' (Meyrowitz, 1986:315). Moreover, the availability of information about any individual in the postmodern world makes for a loss of privacy that comes to resemble life in a primitive village society: there are no secrets and the community controls the individual (Meyrowitz, 1986:315). The global spread of information technology and the elimination of national borders mean that people come into direct contact with people they did not previously know, and, through communication, they learn about the existence of previously unknown others. However, contrary to the utopian assumption of harmony and peace, the increasing real and mediated contacts lead to more conflicts and wars because when 'people share the same environment, they often see more differences among themselves than when they are further apart' (Meyrowitz, 1986:317).

The most important insight for understanding our neomedieval age is provided by a more positive understanding of conflict and war (Sonderling, 2012a). Since the times of the ancient Greeks and throughout the Middle Ages, modernity and postmodernity, war was an ever-present reality and the central governing ideal of humanity. As in the past, so, increasingly, war is becoming the central structuring principle in the contemporary age of globalisation (Foucault, 2003; Hardt & Negri, 2006). This realisation leads to a *postmodern enlightenment*. Gray (2004:103) points out, that the 9/11 terror attack shattered the Western myth of global peace that chained 'us to a hope of unity' and points to the fact that 'we should be learning to live with conflict'. Therefore, to understand the contemporary world properly demands 'developing [an] hypothesis for [the] exploration of disorder, [and] entering into the logic of conflictuality' (Eco, 1987:84). The logic of neomedieval *conflictuality* is captured by Lyotard's vision of the postmodern condition as being a form of 'paganism' (Lyotard & Thébaud, 1989:16, 19). The pagan postmodernity is characterised by its agonism and an absence of rules and criteria for judgement. This opens new possibilities for experimentation, production of new discourses and of new criteria (Best & Kellner, 1991:164; Lyotard & Thébaud, 1989:14, 17).

Behind the playful diversity of agonistic and competing discourses in the postmodern condition, Lyotard (1997) discerns an element of terrorism to be at work in the non-judgmental liberal discourse that is gradually becoming a new postmodern *grand narrative* of the global age. Behind the presumed diversity, the global liberal (capitalist) system exerts unifying and pacifying terror because it only permits agreed-upon deviations from the general consensus: 'It solicits divergences, multiculturalism is agreeable to it but under the condition of an agreement concerning the rules of disagreement. This is what is called consensus' (Lyotard, 1997:199). The result is that original, radical and critical thinking is becoming rare, while the noise of dissent is silenced, and only subdued diversity is permitted to be publicly expressed (Lyotard, 1997:199–200). Lyotard discovers a contradiction at the hearth of liberal discourse: while dissent and diversity are increasingly praised there are calls 'to put an end to the disorder and the terror' of the multiple discourses of criticism and philosophy, and ultimately liberal discourse ends up 'prohibiting all debate' (Lyotard, 1997:204). Lyotard is not the first to have noticed the terrorism at the hearth of liberal discourse and he shares this awareness with Carl Schmitt (1976) and Barthes (1986b). Barthes (1986b) considers liberal discourse to be the 'repressive discourse' of good conscience because behind the liberal pretence of neutrality and declarations for being 'neither' for this 'nor' for that, the liberal speaker is clearly taking a position and 'is *for* this, *against* that' (Barthes, 1986b:325–326).

Since 2001 and the war on terror, life in the global society is set on a course between the terrorism of the liberal system of political correctness that denies the existence of a real enemy, and the threat from the real enemy in the form of a network of individual Jihadist terrorists: the nomad war machine. In response to these complexities, postmodern politics have become 'managerial strategies' and the postmodern wars are merely 'police actions' that refrain from killing the adversary because of self-imposed rules (Lyotard, 1997:199). Ultimately, it is only a short step from being forbidden to kill the enemy to the self-deluded claim that there is no need to fight because there are no enemies.

CONCLUSION

Lyotard's insistence on the agonistic character of society and the realisation that speaking reflects its social origin and is a form of fighting provides a heuristic model with which to understand the contemporary postmodern world. However, despite Lyotard's emphasis on the agonistic aspect of society and the need to fight, he seems to imagine war as a disembodied contest between linguistic phrases. Lyotard is not alone in espousing this postmodern tendency to escape from reality into the *hyperreality* of media spectacle and to imagine war as an unreal construction generated by mass-media images (Baudrillard, 1995; Norris, 1992:12, 16). This view can offer limited insights into the nature of the virtual war of media spectacle and of computer-generated graphic reconstructions. However, if communication is always agonistic and if the war over information is inevitable, then there is a need to identify the real enemies and defeat them.

NOTES

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