

Revisiting the Rorty–Lyotard debate: The microchip and liberal cosmopolitanism

Philosophy and Social Criticism

2024, Vol. 0(0) 1–17

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DOI: 10.1177/01914537241284525

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Abstract

In the mid-1980s, Richard Rorty debated aspects of Jean-François Lyotard's evolving theories of language and politics, embracing the latter's critique of metanarratives as forms of metaphysics we should discard but rejecting Lyotard's claims about the incommensurability of language games. Largely overlooked was the force of Lyotard's critique of the transvaluation of knowledge in the emerging digital age, canvassed in *The Postmodern Condition*. This article revisits the encounter between these thinkers to reconstruct the more central challenge that Lyotard's theory posed to Rorty's pragmatic politics and to liberal cosmopolitanism more broadly. Lyotard's work was prescient in detailing an emerging technological order in which ideals of tolerance and solidarity in the form of Rortian translation and redescription come into conflict with imperatives of performativity, profit-seeking, and power – fostering dominance rather than universal progress. The article concludes by drawing implications of the encounter for current scholarship on Rorty and political theory.

Keywords

cosmopolitanism, consensus, digital, knowledge, Lyotard, liberalism, networks, power, Rorty, translation

1. Introduction

A central preoccupation for theory in the 1980s was to think through the social and political consequences of new pictures of truth and knowledge formulated in the two prior decades in work by Kuhn (1962), Blumenberg (1966), Foucault (1966), and others.

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Richard Rorty was prominent as both a theorist of knowledge, in his neo-pragmatism of the 1970s, and a figure at the forefront of debates about the political import of post-foundationalist thought in the 80s. Over the course of the decade, he developed a form of ‘postmodern bourgeois liberalism’ through a dialogue with European contemporaries in which he distinguished features of their work that marked an important break with the metaphysical tradition and features still tethered to it (Rorty 1989). Among his interlocutors was Jean-François Lyotard, whose work contained elements Rorty found laudable, chiefly his critique of metanarratives as forms of metaphysics, but also other elements – the ‘differend’, the incommensurability of ‘genres of discourse’ – which Rorty found less compelling or implausible as a guide to politics (Lyotard 1983, discussed in Rorty 1985). At stake in the difference of perspectives was nothing short of whether a ‘universal history of humanity’, a cosmopolitan liberalism, was still viable (Lyotard 1985; Rorty 1985).

Rorty (1985) defended the possibility of an ‘ethnocentric’ cosmopolitanism, premised on a shift he advocated from relying on what Lyotard had termed the ‘metanarrative of emancipation’ to what Rorty called a ‘reformist rhetoric about increased tolerance and decreased suffering’ (Rorty 1985, 213). People in western democracies should continuously seek to extend their sense of community by attempting to overcome cultural differences through translation of ideas and beliefs held in other people’s language games, cultivating empathy for their suffering by learning more about their experiences through novels and other artistic works, and by embracing an ethic of solidarity in economic and political struggles. The case could be made for this form of progressive, liberal cosmopolitanism without reliance on metaphysical principles to underwrite the possibility of undistorted communication or truth across the boundaries of language and culture.

Yet, by the time Rorty and Lyotard came together in 1984, to debate their ideas in person at Johns Hopkins, Lyotard’s ideas about language and knowledge had evolved considerably from his earlier statement of them in his best-known work, *The Postmodern Condition* (1979).¹ Lyotard had by then formulated his theory of the differend (in Lyotard 1983), which involves forms of discourse that cannot be made commensurable in certain contexts, such as where claims in two incompatible ‘genres of discourse’ compete for recognition in an adjudicative context in which only one genre can be recognized. The differend and its implications for a ‘universal history of humanity’ became the focal point of the meeting at Hopkins (Lyotard 1985). Lyotard’s concept of the differend posed no hindrance for Rorty since, in his view (Rorty 1985, 215), it was premised on a misconstrual of some of Wittgenstein’s insights about language and an undue pessimism about the possibilities of translation and commensurability. Inter-cultural consensus could be forged, in Rorty’s view, by persuasion rather than force, as Lyotard had argued. Western social democrats could thus strive for an ever-larger community with cultural others, adopting ideas for reform from some of their different practices and beliefs. Largely overlooked in this encounter was the challenge posed to Rorty’s cosmopolitanism by Lyotard’s more forceful critique of the emerging regime of digitized knowledge and politics in *The Postmodern Condition* (hereafter, *PMC*).²

In the *PMC*, Lyotard offered a consolidation of early sociological studies of the broader implications of the advent of computers and cybernetics, including Daniel Bell’s *The*

Coming of Post-Industrial Society (1973). But Lyotard's unique contribution was to situate the transformations currently underway within a larger story – a genealogy – of the transvaluation of scientific and humanistic knowledge, and closely related ideals in liberal politics. This entailed a sketch of the rise and fall in the modern period of meta or grand narratives of emancipation or Spirit, which had served as vehicles for legitimation or criteria of ultimate value but had become obsolete in the age of network and digital technology. Discourses of knowledge had fragmented into so many smaller language games; but more crucially, knowledge, along with communication itself, was now transformed into an informational commodity. In this earlier version of Lyotard's theory of language, while the many moves in the games played in the university and in society may be commensurable or translatable, they are now played within digital networks that involve a new set of imperatives: to be performative, operable, and efficient – above all, to serve the greater goals of dominance, power, and control. These imperatives should be resisted, Lyotard argued, by cultivating respect for differences among language games and through 'paralogical' sciences (concerning undecidables, chaos theory) that yielded forms of knowledge not readily coopted by systems geared to maximize efficiency and power.

Setting aside Lyotard's program for resistance, his theory of the postmodern painted a radically different picture of the conditions in which political and social communication were beginning to unfold – one that anticipates much recent theory on networks and digital media (explored below). While both Rorty and Lyotard could agree on the obsolescence of consensus on metaphysical principles as a necessary ground for knowledge or debate, Lyotard's diagnosis of the values shaping discourse in the age of the network posed a challenge to Rorty's cultural politics. The emphasis in Rorty's program on the practice of translation – or an analogous practice important in his later work, that of 'redescription' of ideas conveyed in another vocabulary – might foster tolerance and solidarity, but in the world described in the *PMC*, these aspirations would confront significant new challenges, complicating them if not rendering them implausible. Here, knowledge and communication would be reformed in large part to serve the ends of efficiency and competition, in an environment less hospitable to the goals of mutual progress or improvement than to the pursuit of dominance and power.

Rorty gestured dismissively, at the end of his exchange with Lyotard at Hopkins, to the effect that in his earlier work, Lyotard had succumbed to a regrettable tendency in French theory to 'make philosophical hay out of current events' and a hastiness to read 'world-historical significance' into technological developments (Rorty 1985, 220–221). He favored the 'Anglo-Saxon' assumption that whether the 'development of the microchip was a decisive turning point or just more of the same' should be 'postponed until a century or so' before a reasonable assessment could be made (*ibid.*). Taking this view allowed Rorty to wave away much of the most prescient and still incisive aspects of the *PMC*, including its theory of how digitization was changing knowledge and politics.

This paper revisits Rorty's encounter with Lyotard with the benefit of some three decades of technological and political upheaval to explore the more forceful and potentially fruitful challenge *The Postmodern Condition* posed to Rorty's pragmatic politics and, more broadly, a liberal cosmopolitanism presently in conflict with populist and

authoritarian trends worldwide. It begins by briefly noting Rorty's limited engagement with the *PMC*, followed by a sketch of the main arguments of the book, highlighting aspects of Lyotard's theory that have enduring significance. A third part brings these ideas to bear on Rorty's liberal theory by foregrounding the absence in his politics of a concern with the challenge posed by changing technological conditions in which any attempt at translation or redescription might unfold. The paper closes by tracing the legacy of Rorty's missed encounter with Lyotard in the recent resurgence of interest in Rorty within political theory. A pervasive but unquestioned assumption here is that while Rorty's ideas about solidarity, redescription, and progress remain relevant, they are largely impervious to shifts in technology.

2. Rorty's limited engagement with *The Postmodern Condition*

Rorty wrote two essays in which he engaged with Lyotard's work in some detail. In addition to the paper, discussed above, that emerged from Rorty's meeting with Lyotard at Johns Hopkins in 1984 (Rorty 1985), Rorty published 'Lyotard and Habermas on Postmodernity' (Rorty 1984). In this earlier paper, Rorty drew on the *PMC* to explore differences in the status of metaphysics in the work of these two thinkers. I briefly sketch here Rorty's limited engagement with the *PMC* in this earlier paper to lend context for what follows.

One might imagine Rorty's motivation to write about the *PMC*, given the notoriety of Lyotard's 'report on knowledge' on its appearance in English in 1984, and Rorty's desire to address Habermas' much discussed theory of communicative reason, along with his then unfolding critique of French theory, gathered in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Habermas 1985). Rorty was also writing soon after *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), in which he set out an extended argument for a post-foundationalist turn in philosophy. In the essay on Lyotard and Habermas, Rorty placed the two in conversation, as he would with many other contemporaries, through his practice of 'redescription' of seemingly disparate theories into a single vocabulary, demonstrating what philosophy after metaphysics and, more broadly, a liberal politics of solidarity might entail.

Rorty took up Lyotard's insight in the *PMC* that modern scientific knowledge has differed from traditional narrative knowledge in its inclination to seek its ultimate legitimacy in a grand or metanarrative such as the emancipation of the subject or the fulfillment of Spirit (for reasons explored further below). Rorty affirmed Lyotard's theory that discourses of knowledge in the postmodern have relinquished a need for metanarrative as they cease to attempt to legitimate themselves beyond the many language games into which they have devolved. He also agreed with Lyotard that Habermas' attempt to articulate transcendent conditions of valid, undistorted communication that would point the way to universal commensurability – as a contribution to emancipation – entailed a futile attempt to erect another metanarrative. But Rorty thought Lyotard had erred in lauding the role of paralogy or suggesting that because science (and, by implication, politics) 'should aim at permanent revolution', this proved that 'consensus is only a particular state of discussion, not its end' (*PMC*, 65–66; cited in Rorty 1984, 165).

Rorty (1984, 175) faulted Lyotard for not taking seriously enough, as Habermas did, the need to retain an ethic of solidarity beyond the fragmentation of scientific and political discourse into so many smaller language games, and to act upon this by taking seriously the ‘daily problems of one’s community’ through reform rather than revolution. He casts Lyotard’s reluctance to do so as part of a dubious inclination in recent French theory to assume that ‘escaping from such institutions [i.e., of liberal order] is automatically a good thing, because it insures that one will not be “used” by the evil forces which have “co-opted” these institutions’ (*ibid.*).

Lyotard may have been wrong in singling out paralogical science or revolutionary politics as the most promising ways forward, but his claims about consensus no longer being the aim of inquiry or debate were part of a larger argument about an emerging *technological* order and a new set of values within which knowledge and politics unfold. Rorty’s discussion of the *PMC* largely overlooks this central aspect of Lyotard’s theory, and what it means for a post-foundationalist politics premised on cross-cultural translation. To shed light on the nature of this missed encounter, I briefly canvas Lyotard’s larger argument in the book about the rise and fall of the modern metanarratives supporting scientific knowledge and politics, and how both knowledge and politics come to be transformed in the digital age. The full arc of this story is relevant to the challenge the *PMC* posed to Rorty’s ideas and to liberal theory more broadly.

3. Lyotard’s theory of the transvaluation of knowledge

Lyotard had been commissioned to write *The Postmodern Condition* by the Conseil des Universités of the Canadian province of Quebec to report on ‘the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies’ (*PMC*, xxiii). Lyotard describes himself as ‘a philosopher, not an expert’ and his aim in the work as providing a ‘pragmatic analysis of certain philosophical and ethico-political discourses of legitimation’ (*PMC*, xxv). He does so by approaching the history of science – understood here to include all academic inquiry – in relation to two concepts: language games and narrative. In the *Differend* (Lyotard 1983) and other work, Lyotard would make less use of the phrase ‘language games’ in favor of ‘genres of discourse’, developing a more rigid and complex semiotics and a greater skepticism about whether discourses are commensurable or translatable. But in the *PMC*, he uses Wittgenstein’s concept of language games to refer to ‘the effects of different modes of discourse’ and the ‘various categories of utterance [which] can be defined in terms of rules, specifying their properties, and the uses to which they can be put’ (*PMC*, 10). Such rules are tacit or implicit; games evolve fluidly through new moves; and statements or moves in one game can have an ‘operability’ or commensurability by inspiring or provoking statements or moves in another game. Among the many kinds of language games – involving descriptive, prescriptive, denotative, or performative language elements among others – Lyotard is concerned primarily with the ‘language game known to the West as the question of legitimacy’ (*PMC*, 23), which refers to the attempt to ground claims to truth in scientific discourse and claims about justice in political discourse. Narrative, in ways to be explored below, offers a means for doing so.

The *PMC* tells the story of the transformation of the status and nature of scientific knowledge from the modern to the postmodern present, and its implications for facets of political and social thought in the West that have developed in close relation to science and its game of legitimation. Lyotard begins by noting the long-standing conflict between scientific knowledge and the knowledge contained in the traditional narratives of older cultures. Science had emerged as a form of knowledge distinct from that contained in traditional narrative by aspiring to universally valid truth and claiming absolute priority over other forms of knowledge – for Lyotard, a signal gesture of the modern and the root of the West’s ‘cultural imperialism’ (*PMC*, 27). By contrast, the customary knowledge embodied in traditional narrative – his example being the narrative told by a Cashinahua storyteller – is concerned with the know-how, abilities, and forms of judgment relevant to tasks and behaviors integral to a local culture (*PMC*, 20–21). An important feature of these narratives is that they derive their legitimacy internally: the person relaying the story and the story itself have credibility based on the teller having heard the tale from a cultural authority who features in the story. Scientific knowledge instead points outward. In making true or false statements and aiming at progress and universality, the ‘game of inquiry’ must derive its legitimacy external to the language game of science itself (*PMC*, 23). Yet, to provide the truth of its truth, science must make recourse to narrative.

Invoking Plato’s myth of the cave, Lyotard notes that science has, from the outset, relied upon narrative to legitimate its claims to truth (*PMC*, 28). Narrative comes to play a more important role in the culture evolving around science from Renaissance humanism through the Enlightenment, German idealism, and nineteenth century French historicism, not as an interruption or lapse but as a reflection of the ‘liberation of the bourgeois classes from traditional authorities’ (*PMC*, 30). Throughout, the ‘scientific attitude’ complements post-Enlightenment attempts at ‘sociopolitical legitimacy’ in a new, modern form of narrative knowledge. Legitimacy comes to rest on consensus among the people, who create norms through deliberation. ‘The people debate among themselves about what is just or unjust in the same way that the scientific community debates about what is true or false’ (*ibid.*). ‘The people’ come to be conceived in close relation to facets of scientific discourse, including ‘instituting deliberation’, ‘cumulative progress’, and universality, all ‘operators of scientific knowledge’ (*ibid.*).

In the wake of the Enlightenment, both science and politics seek legitimacy and coherence for these larger and complementary aims through resort to what Lyotard calls meta or grand narratives. Lyotard traces two predominant forms, revealing the close connection between knowledge and politics in the modern period. In the work of Humboldt, Schleiermacher, Hegel, and other German contemporaries, a narrative emerges in which ‘[t]he subject of knowledge is not the people, but the speculative spirit’ (*PMC*, 33). This spirit is ‘not embodied, as in France after the Revolution, in a State, but in a System’ and the ‘language game of legitimation’ here is ‘not state-political, but philosophical’ (*ibid.*). Philosophy in the Humboldtian model of the university plays a central role in this speculative function, grounding and unifying the various sciences, or providing a ‘discourse on the legitimation of all discourse’ (*ibid.*). For Hegel, the ‘development of learning, of society, and of the State’ form part of a larger story about ‘the realization of... the “Life of the Spirit”’ (*PMC*, 34). By contrast, in the ‘narrative of

freedom' or emancipation, predominant in French and American political contexts, the hero is 'humanity' (PMC, 31). Its goal is not to self-actualize by gaining knowledge, but to gain freedom by exercising 'self-management' (PMC, 35). Laws are just not by conforming to an external truth, but by reflecting the will of the people.

Yet the seeds of the demise of both metanarratives begin to be sown in the nineteenth century itself, in Hegel's skepticism of empirical knowledge as true or complete knowledge and in Nietzsche's anti-foundationalism resulting from 'the truth requirement of science being turned back against itself' (PMC, 39). By the end of that century, Lyotard contends, 'a process of delegitimation fueled by the demand for legitimation itself' becomes apparent amid the 'chance proliferation of sciences' (*ibid.*). This results in an 'internal erosion of the legitimacy principle' and a 'loosening [of the] weave of the encyclopedic net in which each science was to find its place' (*ibid.*). Disciplinary lines are blurred, new territories between them emerge. The 'speculative hierarchy of learning gives way to an immanent and, as it were, "flat" network of areas of inquiry, the respective frontiers of which are in constant flux' (*ibid.*). A parallel political process also unfolds here '[t]he social subject itself seems to dissolve in this dissemination of language games' (PMC, 40). By the early twentieth century, with no 'universal metalanguage', a pessimism prevails: 'the project of the system-subject is a failure, the goal of emancipation has nothing to do with science, we are all stuck in the positivism of this or that discipline of learning...the diminished tasks of research have become compartmentalized and no one can master them all' (PMC, 40). Where there was once unity, there is now a 'plurality of formal and axiomatic systems' no longer seeking legitimacy through metanarrative.

The fragmentation and devolution of inquiry and discourse then begins to gain speed, Lyotard argues, from roughly the end of the 1950s, with the advent of computerization and the embrace of information networks. The 'miniaturization and commercialization of machines' changes the way knowledge is 'acquired, classified, made available, and exploited' (PMC, 4). Knowledge can 'fit into the new channels, and become operational, only if [...] translated into quantities of information' (*ibid.*). In the process of digitization, a transvaluation begins to unfold. 'Along with the hegemony of computers comes a certain logic', Lyotard writes, 'and therefore a certain set of prescriptions determining which statements are accepted as "knowledge" statements' (*ibid.*). No longer a means of liberation or the realization of spirit, '[k]nowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange. Knowledge ceases to be an end in itself' (PMC, 4–5). Scientific or academic research must make a persuasive case for contributing in some way to 'the optimization of the system's performance' or it will be 'abandoned by the flow of capital and doomed to senescence' (PMC, 47).

The transvaluation of knowledge also affects politics. Those who govern society, its institutions, seek to manage the many local language games by use of 'input/output matrices, following a logic which implies that their elements are commensurable' (PMC, xxiv). But consensus is not the goal; the primary goal is the 'growth of power' (*ibid.*), or as Lyotard (PMC, 46) contends:

[t]he production of proof... falls under the control of another language game, in which the goal is no longer truth, but performativity—that is, the best possible input/output equation. The State and/or company must abandon the idealist and humanist narratives of legitimation in order to justify the new goal: in the discourse of today's financial backers of research, the only credible goal is power.

In both politics and science, the need to pursue power is valued as a means of 'optimizing the system's performance—efficiency' (PMC, xxiv). Lyotard dreads that the 'application of this criterion to all of our games necessarily entails a certain level of terror, whether soft or hard: be operational (that is, commensurable) or disappear' (*ibid.*). Where the 'operativity criterion' that governs is 'technological', the larger effect of communication in this new horizon – indeed, of all academic and political discourse, regardless of its content – cannot be to advance truth or justice based on consensus or solidarity for their own sake; the result can only be to boost the efficiency or effect of the moves one makes in a language game, which is to say, to increase the circulation of one's discourse, to maximize the likelihood of its utility to other players and games, and thus to gain power and dominance. A new form of 'legitimation by power takes shape' (PMC, 47). As Lyotard asserts, '[k]nowledge in the form of an informational commodity indispensable to productive power is already, and will continue to be, a major—perhaps the major—stake in the worldwide competition for power' (PMC, 5).

The postmodern present is thus marked by an 'incredulity towards metanarratives' (PMC, xxiv), even a 'loss of nostalgia for the lost narrative' (PMC, 41). The 'narrative function' is now 'being dispersed' among 'clouds of narrative elements', along with other semiotic elements: denotative, prescriptive, descriptive (PMC, xxiv). 'Conveyed within each cloud are pragmatic valencies specific to its kind'. The 'pragmatics of language particles' are not necessarily 'stable' or 'communicable'. There are now 'many different language games—a heterogeneity of elements' which 'only give rise to institutions in patches—local determinism' (*ibid.*). The 'postmodern condition' is one which assumes the 'obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation' (*ibid.*), with no unifying framework to lend coherence to societal undertakings, such as academic inquiry or democratic governance. The latter have fragmented into clusters of smaller language games ('clouds of sociality'), seemingly infinite divisions of knowledge into ever smaller sub-disciplines, with Lyotard pointing to a similar shift likely to unfold in the electorate itself, from staging a general conversation with itself in mass, broadcast media to many smaller heterogeneous conversations held in the different nodes of the network. Discourse in both cases might express ideals of collective emancipation or spirit, but much of it will be produced, exchanged, and consumed within a technical order that tends to foster the goals of efficiency, utility, profit-seeking, and domination.

Where, then, 'after the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside'? Lyotard asks – the legitimacy, that is, of a scientific undertaking or a political initiative (PMC, xxv). He rejects Habermas' view that it might be found in consensus through undistorted communication, since this does 'violence to the heterogeneity of language games' (*ibid.*). Habermas' goal of a 'rational' consensus is, for Lyotard, premised upon 'the regularization of the 'moves' permitted in all language games' (PMC, 66), and 'determin[ing]

metaprescriptives common to all' (PMC, 65) such games is no longer possible. Yet, while consensus may now be an 'outmoded and suspect value', Lyotard contends that justice is not (PMC, 66). An 'idea and practice of justice that is not linked to that of consensus' begins with a 'recognition of the heteromorphous nature of language games' and the notion that 'any consensus on the rules defining a game and the "moves" playable within it *must* be local' (*ibid.*). The aim now should be to cultivate 'knowledge of language games as such' and to 'assume responsibility for their rules and effects' (*ibid.*).

Lyotard ends the book by privileging a certain means of cultivating respect for difference and heterogeneity; namely, by embracing 'not the expert's homology, but the inventor's paralogy' (PMC, xxv). His notion of paralogy involves work at forefront of math and physics that reveals 'undecidables, the limits of precise control, conflicts characterized by incomplete information, "*fracta*,'" (PMC, 60), and so on. These bodies of knowledge entail 'a power that destabilizes the capacity for explanation, manifested in the promulgation of new norms for understanding' (PMC, 61). Lyotard valorizes paralogical science for deferring consensus and resisting (not avoiding) cooptation within systems governed by the goals of efficiency and power.³ However, his theory of paralogy plays a minor role in his argument about the present. The *PMC* may have concluded with the suggestion that paralogy offered the most promising means of resistance to the prevailing imperatives of the digital order, but the point stands apart from his core insights into the transformation underway.

4. Staging the missed encounter

The crux of the difference in viewpoints between Lyotard and Rorty – whether and how justice might be done today; how to sketch a politics after the dispersal of Enlightenment metanarratives into so many smaller language games – turns on Lyotard's claims about consensus in the *PMC*. Lyotard describes the goal of consensus in Habermas as being premised upon 'the regularization of the 'moves' permitted in all language games' (PMC, 66), which Rorty would agree is not possible. Lyotard and Rorty also share the view that searching for grounds of consensus, for a deeper map that would bring all language games together into one picture, is futile. But they draw different inferences from this. Rorty assumes that consensus is still a valid aim. It simply need not rest on metaphysical principles. In the *PMC*, Lyotard sees the goal of consensus as no longer realistic not only because it cannot be metaphysically grounded, but also because it has been superseded as a value in a technological environment that invites us to become more operable, performative, efficient, and to continue expanding our power – leading just as readily to domination rather than consensus. (In later work, his problems with consensus will be focused elsewhere.)

In highlighting this point of difference between Rorty and Lyotard relating to the *PMC*, my reading differs from that offered by Klein (1995). For Klein, when the two figures met in 1984, the crux of the difference of opinion between them about a politics of the postmodern turned on ideas about whether a cosmopolitan liberalism resurrects a form of 'narrative mastery' that entails a certain violence (Klein 1995, 286). From Lyotard's perspective, Rorty's idea of cosmopolitanism as the cultivation of solidarity through

empathy and inter-cultural translation involves ‘telling a metanarrative about the progressive emancipation of humanity from metaphysics and particular culture’ (Klein, *ibid.*) – thus failing to respect the heteromorphous nature of the many smaller language games that now prevail. From Rorty’s perspective, Lyotard’s theory of the differend and his positing of incommensurability of ‘genres of discourse’ also entailed a form of metanarrative, since for Rorty this involves any attempt to ground meaning on ‘timeless rules of reason or language’ (Klein, *ibid.*). On Klein’s view, the debate was over different ideas of metanarrative. This is true to the extent that, at that point in time, their debate focused on Lyotard’s theory of the differend. But the more important disagreement between them was to be found in Lyotard’s earlier account of technological regime underlying the ‘postmodern condition’.

Throughout Rorty’s two essays on Lyotard (Rorty 1984, 1985), and for at least the rest of the 1980s, Rorty assumed that politics unfolds at present in a world largely the same as the one before the microchip. Change in recent decades had mainly concerned social progress (greater equality, less cruelty), a growing doubt about metaphysics, and a recognition of our ethnocentricity – our being situated in local language games (Rorty 1989). Rorty (1985) assumed the problem to be addressed was how to sustain aspirations of collective or universal progress without a metanarrative of emancipation or spirit, without a metaphysics of truth. It could be done, he argued, by relying on smaller narratives of tolerance, the practice of translation, the cultivation of empathy, and an ethic of solidarity.

Lyotard, in the *PMC*, assumed that something had fundamentally changed. Metanarratives of emancipation and spirit had not simply ceased to be credible, leaving politics and culture open to a reworking of social democracy on post-foundationalist terms. A new set of values, new imperatives, new material and technological conditions had emerged that would largely shape what knowledge and politics could be in the present. Not only had the advance of science and technology fragmented knowledge and communication, and thus politics, into so many smaller language games, governed by their own rules. Conversation within and between these smaller games now unfolds in a distinct technological environment; within decentered digital networks, as flows of information, and in accordance with a set of imperatives fostered by the technology itself: operability, utility, and power. We can seek to engage in empathetic translation, to cultivate solidarity and tolerance, as Rorty advocated, but our communication, Lyotard warned, will be affected in large part by being channeled within a technological apparatus supporting different priorities. Theory, Lyotard suggests, should instead cultivate ‘knowledge of language games as such’ and to ‘assume responsibility for their rules and effects’ (*PMC*, 66), within this new environment. That Lyotard, after the *PMC*, would turn his focus away from this emerging technological problematic and develop an implausibly rigid theory of language and a skepticism of commensurability which Rorty persuasively opposed does not render Lyotard’s insights about discourse and technology in the *PMC* invalid. We still seem caught in the politics of ‘language games as such’, but within a ‘flat’ world of networks and information, giving rise to a set of issues that Rorty’s writing on Lyotard did not fully engage.

The *PMC* was prescient in outlining the contours of the epoch-defining shift still unfolding at present from the age of the letter to the age of the network. These contours would come into sharper focus as network technology became more pervasive in the 1990s, revealing aspects of the ‘postmodern condition’ to be early symptoms of a deeper restructuring of the academy and of society, as canvassed in works such as Readings’ *The University in Ruins* (1996), Negroponte’s *Being Digital* (1995), Castells’ *The Rise of the Network Society* (1996), and Benkler’s *The Wealth of Networks* (2006), among others. What was notable about this missed encounter between Rorty’s ‘postmodern bourgeois liberalism’ and Lyotard’s sketch of an emerging ‘postmodern condition’ was that it took place at a moment in time when two important observations crystalized: that liberal politics needed to be reconceived in non-metaphysical terms but still rendered compelling; and that, as with the printing press and now with networks, new paradigms of knowledge and politics were taking shape that reflected biases and imperatives consistent with the new technologies. The second insight had implications for the first.

Lyotard’s diagnosis of a shift in values unfolding with the embrace of networks and digitality – his prediction that the values of performativity, efficiency, and competition would become prevalent – is borne out on several fronts. As Dean (2004), Pariser (2011), Benkler et al. (2018), and others have argued, political communication, along with knowledge production inside and outside of the academy, takes places within so many discrete networks, understood today in the form of niches, tribal assemblages, and digital communities, shaped by competition for attention and for control over the flow of messages. This has allowed marginal voices to be heard and provided new avenues for dissent and mobilization. But in a larger sense, the shift from mass or broadcast to peer-to-peer forms of communication in decentered networks catering to discrete or niche interests has contributed, as many have argued (Benkler et al. 2018; Pildes 2021; Verovšek 2022), to the rise of polarization, populism, post-truth, anti-elitism, and other fundamental challenges to democratic government.⁴

Lyotard’s early sketch of the shift from a value placed on the content of knowledge or communication to the extent of its circulation has also proved prescient. As Eichorn (2022) has recently explored, by the early aughts, the word ‘content’ had come to denote any and all forms of cultural and political expression, reflecting the priority in digital media of circulation over signification or meaning. The embrace of the idea that everything is now merely ‘content’ marks a shift, she suggests, from a value placed on the substance of a message or work to the extent of its circulation. Not overtly sketched by Lyotard but complementary to his analysis is the relentless emphasis in digital culture on quantification. In the ‘metric society’ (Mau 2019), value and effectiveness in knowledge and politics are closely tied to measurable quantities, citations, followers, likes, and retweets. The collapse of all forms of expression into ‘content’, the imperative of being discoverable, maintaining a real-time presence, cultivating followers, going viral – all closely tracks Lyotard’s ideas in the *PMC* about the rising importance of information flows (performativity), being useful, relevant, and topical (operability, commensurability), and aiming for growth and dominance (power).

As both Rorty and Lyotard foresaw, conversation in these many communities of discourse, engaging in smaller language games, have no need to seek to legitimize their

ideals, truths, or values outside of the local game itself; no need to claim universal validity or truth. To the extent that a wider set of values pervades knowledge and politics, the values are germane to technological and economic imperatives. Higher education and academic research are now justified almost exclusively as a means of enhancing practical utility, often understood in blunt economic terms, rather than as a means of cultivating knowledge for its own sake or for humanistic ennoblement. To the extent that narratives of emancipation or spirit still circulate in liberal politics, they do so among factions, interest groups, minorities in overt struggles for power over forms of capital. Across the landscape of these countless smaller political campaigns, conversation – persuasion, commensurability – is conditioned by properties of networks; by discoverability, virality, and algorithms. Agreement can only make sense within a networked culture as a means of growing your following, your network, your power in the field.

The question Lyotard and Rorty sought to address in 1984 was whether a single story of universal human progress might still be told in a world governed by the politics of the postmodern – a world fragmented into so many smaller language games or narratives, which by then had seemed incommensurable to Lyotard. If Rorty was right and Lyotard was wrong that the different games were commensurable, that consensus could be achieved by persuasion rather than force, then a Rortian politics of solidarity through empathy and translation could still point the way, after metaphysics, to a cosmopolitan liberalism of global human progress. If Rorty was wrong about commensurability and Lyotard was right in seeing Rorty's hope for growing solidarity and global progress through translation and consensus as necessarily entailing a degree of force or violence to other discourses and cultures, then universal progress may prove to be an illusory (if not imperialist) goal. In hindsight, however, both were, by 1984, arguing over a secondary issue: whether language games, genres of discourse, were commensurable – as though the answer would settle whether a liberal cosmopolitanism was still plausible. Rorty drew false assurance about the prospect for liberal politics from his confidence in the possibility of commensurability and persuasion without force. Lyotard became diverted by the problem of the incommensurability and violence entailed in translation (his theory of the *differend*) as the source of the challenge posed to a progressive national or global politics. His *PMC* had offered the more incisive argument that even if commensurability and persuasion are possible in the age of the network, any social-democratic politics would confront a greater obstacle in the form of new technologically driven imperatives not readily compatible with an ethic of solidarity or larger cosmopolitan aims.

The problem for liberal or social-democratic politics, for utopian aspirations of Rortian narratives of tolerance and solidarity, would not be the commensurability of different discourses. It would be that any and every attempt at communication and debate would encounter a kind of friction in the form of properties and priorities of networks, platforms, and algorithms that transform all attempts at public discourse into discretely directed flows of data and information. It is almost trite at this point to assert that information is channeled and controlled by entities other than sovereign governments reflecting the will of the people, resulting in an ever more fractious and decentralized politics of more diverse groups. One might seek to foster an ethic of solidarity in political or cultural dialogue and debate, but much of this now unfolds within a horizon of relentless

competition for attention, engagement, and capture; a drive for growth, capital, and power.

5. The missed encounter in recent Rorty scholarship

Rorty failed to engage central features of what Lyotard theorized as the ‘postmodern condition’: the landscape of networked communication and the transvaluation of knowledge and politics within it. He focused on a narrow feature of the *PMC*, its critique of metanarratives, and took Lyotard to task for taking the advent of the microchip too seriously. Like Foucault, Lyotard was not attentive enough to the problem of cultivating an ‘untheoretical sense of social solidarity’ (Rorty 1984, 174). As Rorty asserted, ‘[i]f one had such a de-theoreticized sense of community, one could accept the claim that valuing “undistorted, communication” was of the essence of the liberal politics, without needing a theory of communicative competence as back up’ (1984, 174–5). Yet Rorty’s politics of social solidarity is premised upon something like face-to-face conversation, on ‘undistorted communication’ being a given rather than something to be attained. Missing altogether in his political theory is the presence of a technological order in which communication unfolds. The picture is one in which the Rortian liberal reads novels and poetry to cultivate empathy (movies and television are seldom mentioned) and they somehow converse directly with persons of other cultures, belief systems, and places. How and where the conversation takes place is a consideration that falls completely outside of the theory itself. Rorty’s politics of solidarity is assumed to be impervious to technology.

Rorty’s work has, from the outset in the 1980s, attracted significant interest among scholars, and in the past decade has seen a resurgence of interest in a spate of new monographs and edited collections, much of it focused on his political theory (e.g., Chin 2018; Groeschner et al. 2013; Malachowski 2020; Marchetti 2022; McLean 2015; Voparil 2022). Yet throughout the scholarship on Rorty’s politics, the assumption of imperviousness persists. Absent from the debate about the continuing relevance of Rorty’s contributions to liberalism, his ethic of solidarity and consensus, is any consideration of how the distortions of network technology and culture affect his core claims. A common thread here is the assumption that we can extract from Rorty’s corpus a series of ideas supporting a contemporary form of liberalism as though the internet, platforms, algorithmic sorting never happened or has no relevance.

Briefly, for example, Chin (2018) argues for the continuing viability of a Rortian cultural politics involving empathetic and effective redescription on which public debate can be modeled in pluralistic political orders. Redescription offers a way to bridge conflicting or disparate viewpoints among groups using different vocabularies, where there is no common criteria or external authorities to which to appeal. The theory outlines, for Chin, ‘a general governing ethos for the cultural-political realm that allows the pursuit of common social change among cultural-political diversity: commonality among nonhierarchical difference’ (2018, 209). Chin thus affirms the utility and importance of Rorty’s political theory in the present by adopting, without questioning it, the assumption running through Rorty’s work that the only impediment in the ‘cultural-political’ realm to

the project of ‘common social change’ is a diversity of vocabularies and the lack of a set of common criteria on which to settle differences of belief or opinion. ‘Intervocabulary exchange’ (Chin 2018, 206) and redescription are, for Chin, potentially useful solutions to these problems on the assumption that they would unfold in a space of undistorted communication. We can achieve ‘commonality’ by simply engaging in a special form of dialogue.

Koopman (2009) has taken a similar approach to Rorty in not considering implications of the technological horizon in assessing his politics but has taken technology into account in a recent discussion of Dewey’s political theory (Koopman 2019) – conceding a challenge in one case that readily applies in the other. Thus, in *Pragmatism as Transitionalism*, Koopman (2009) frames Rorty’s model of cultural criticism as a form of politics that extends pragmatism’s broader program of social ‘meliorism’. The impediments to progress Koopman contemplates throughout the book are strictly epistemological rather technological. By contrast, in his recent book endeavoring a ‘genealogy of the informational person’, Koopman (2019, 190) is critical of a failure on the part of both Dewey and Habermas to consider ‘the possibility that information can be a form of political impedance’. Koopman (2019, 191) describes Dewey’s ‘great communicative community as an experience of “face-to-face intercourse”’ (citing Dewey 2016 [1927]), and contrasts this with Walter Lippmann’s analysis in *Public Opinion* (1997 [1922]), which offered a critical view of Jeffersonian ideals of communication as ‘inapplicable to the age of radio and the newspaper’, citing Lippmann for the point that ‘conditions must approximate those of the isolated rural Township if the supply of information is to be left to casual experience’ (citing Lippmann 1997, 171). Koopman is left wondering: ‘[w]hy Dewey thought that full communicative presence was even remotely plausible in the global metropolises of the early twentieth century is difficult to say’ (2019, 191). At the end of the century, a similar question arises with Rorty.

Rorty’s politics of solidarity and empathetic translation may indeed be viable in the present, despite the obstacles and distortions arising in the current technological environment. The aim in this section has been to identify the issue as a potential problem for Rorty’s theory, and to note the pattern in recent scholarship of overlooking or ignoring it. Addressing the issue effectively would require a detailed exploration of facets of communication in the present analogous to the ones Lyotard sketched in the *PMC*, and consideration of their implications for specific concepts in Rorty’s politics, such as solidarity and redescription.

6. Conclusion

Rorty’s encounter with Lyotard’s work in the mid-1980s involved a complicated intersection of many evolving ideas and concerns. This paper has sought to frame the encounter that did take place, in Rorty’s 1984 paper on Lyotard and Habermas, and in the exchange of papers when Rorty and Lyotard met at Johns Hopkins that same year, as a missed opportunity – as an encounter largely focused on secondary matters. While differences of opinion among them about language games, the politics of translation, cosmopolitanism and social progress were all important, the more interesting and

profound challenge Lyotard's recent work had posed to Rorty's politics had to do with technology. The landscape in which knowledge and communication were unfolding had radically changed. This played a role not just in rendering metanarratives 'incredible', but also in dispelling the very nostalgia for them. Communication has continued to unfold in a landscape shaped by different values, inimical to the ideals of solidarity and progress. Time and experience have not affirmed Rorty's complacency about the unimportance of the microchip, or the sense that the business of political theory could carry on as usual for the time being. Revisiting this exchange compels those of us with an interest liberal politics, Rortian or otherwise, to return to this missed encounter, to the questions it raises, and to the challenge they continue to pose.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to Bruce Baugh for his insightful comments on an earlier draft of this paper and to an anonymous reviewer for their valuable feedback.

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Notes

1. The exchange at Hopkins is noted in the essay Rorty gave on the occasion (1985, 212) and was the focus of *Critique* 41 (1985), containing Lyotard's 'Missive sur l'histoire universelle et différences culturelles' and a translation of the original version of Rorty's essay in response, 'Cosmopolitanism Without Emancipation: A Response to Jean-François Lyotard' (Rorty 1985). *Critique* 41 also contains Vincent Descombe's 'Les mots de la tribu' commenting on the exchange. (This paper cites a later English translation of Lyotard's contribution to *Critique* 41: Lyotard 1985.)
2. Rorty's dialogue with Lyotard has been underexplored in the literature. An important exception is Kerwin Lee Klein's illuminating study of the evolution of the concept of 'master narrative' in Lyotard's work over the 1970s and 80s in Klein (1995), which includes a brief discussion of the debate with Rorty at Hopkins, positing an implicit difference of opinion between the two figures on the meaning of metanarrative (Klein 1995, 286). Klein's treatment is discussed further below. Other treatments of the encounter can be found in Gallagher (2002), providing a mostly descriptive account, and Kwiek (1996), focusing on disagreements about language and the differend.
3. I am indebted to a reviewer of this paper for querying whether Lyotard's notion of paralogy aggravates the fragmentation or incommensurability of discourses or whether it fosters a tolerance of difference among them. On one view, Lyotard's embrace of paralogical science reflects an approval of fragmentation, premised on a (postmodern) view of science and knowledge as part of a larger contest for power. On another view, paralogical science is premised on a respect for difference, for knowledge that cannot be rendered operable or efficient. It becomes the last bastion of knowledge sought for its own sake.
4. The point here is worth emphasizing that the shift from broadcast to network technology was only one among a host of other important contributing factors – material and social – that led to

the fragmentation of discourse in the late twentieth century, the incredulity of metanarratives in postmodernity, and more recently polarization and populism.

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