PART II

Introduction: Postmodernism

Postmodernism is a complex intellectual tradition, drawing on idealist philosophical frameworks that emerged during the century of the European Enlightenment. Despite shared commonalities—scepticism of the idea that objective existence is capable of being understood and accurately reported, opposition to manifestations of power and authority, hostility to material progress based on science, technological, and hierarchical forms of organisation—postmodernism is also composed of diverse strands. Prominent among these competing bodies of thought are the literary deconstructionism of Jacques Derrida and the postmodernism of Michel Foucault. As we have noted in the Introduction to this book, in their lifetimes, neither Foucault nor Derrida showed much affection for each other’s perspective. In Foucault’s opinion, Derrida was part of a failed “pedagogy” which, “in its waning light”, wrongly “teaches the student that there is nothing outside the text”.1 Derrida viewed Foucault’s analysis as “structuralist”, containing “totalitarian” implications that betrayed “historicist” and neo-Marxist influences.2 While none of the founding figures in French postmodernism—Derrida, Foucault, Roland Barthes, Jean-Francois Lyotard—showed much regard for a narrative approach to writing, in the hands of the late Hayden White and his many


English-speaking imitators, a narrative style has been used to promote an essentially Foucauldian perspective. The complexity of postmodernism, when combined with the marked divisions between its foundational theorists, makes the usage of a postmodernist framework an inherently difficult exercise. All too often, however, the complexities and inherent limitations of postmodernist frameworks are glossed over by would-be exponents. Recent evidence of this is found in *A New History of Management*, authored by Stephen Cummings, Todd Bridgman, John Hassard, and Michael Rowlinson. In outlining the book’s purpose the authors grandiosely declare that—inspired “by Foucault and the emergent cultural turn in management history”—they will “analyze and probe the nature of management history writing”, outlining in the process “alternative historical vistas” that “might inspire thinking innovatively”. The authors’ Foucauldian approach, we are also advised, provides the basis for overturning “accepted continuities and discontinuities”, revealing “the conditions in which human beings ‘problematize’ existence”. What the authors fail to mention are the things that become methodologically impossible once one embraces a Foucauldian perspective. First, one must set aside any objects relating to interpretation, that is, to explaining why such and such occurred. The reason for this, as Foucault himself explained in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, is that Foucault had “no great liking for interpretation”. Foucault’s disinterest in interpretation reflects the fact that Foucault was primarily interested in *describing* “discourses” and epistemes (bodies of knowledge), and how they are used, rather than in tracing their historical origins. As Foucault explained, “discourse must not be referred to the distant presence of the origin, but treated as and when it occurs”. In embracing Foucault one must also abandon any hope of establishing cause–effect relationships, with Foucault having declared his desire to leave “the problem of cause to one side” in *The Order of Things*. That Foucault’s work was opposed to

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the search for causal relationships is also evident in an assessment by Hayden White, who correctly observed that “Foucault … rejects all causal explanations, of whatever sort”. ⁹

Given the failings, limitations and often bitter internal feuds that characterise postmodernist thought, we may reasonably ask the question: Why has it enjoyed the intellectual success that it has? It is the contention of this book that much of the explanation for both the impact and the longevity of the postmodernist critique of the modern world is found in its long heritage; an intellectual heritage that goes back not decades but centuries to the idealist philosophers of the Enlightenment. This strength, however, and the debt that postmodernism owes philosophical idealism, makes it a difficult school of thought to understand—and an even more difficult school of thought to use in ways that are true to its foundational principles. To explore both the nature of postmodernism and its usage, Part 2 of this book is broken—as was Part 1—into three chapters. In Chap. 5 we explore how French postmodernism broke from the previously dominant “structuralist” approaches that characterised debates in politics (Louis Althusser), history (Fernand Braudel and the Annales School), anthropology (Claude Levi-Strauss), and, above all, linguistics (Ferdinand de Saussure). The ensuing chapter, Chap. 6, considers the commonalities and differences in the thinking of the key postmodernist theorists: Derrida, Foucault, and White, as well as those who profoundly influenced the thinking of this trio (Barthes, Emmanuel Levinas, Martin Heidegger). In the final chapter in this Part, Chap. 7, we consider the uses and abuses of postmodernism in a range of business-related disciplines: management, organisational studies, management history, and accounting.