Economics Faculty Research and Publications   Economics, Department of

1-1-1999

Postmodernism and Identity Conditions for Discourses

John B. Davis
Marquette University, john.davis@marquette.edu

10 Postmodernism and identity conditions for discourses

John B. Davis

Postmodernist thinking represents a collection of critical perspectives on modernist thought that together share the view that the modernist *episteme* of unified, certain knowledge is neither realizable nor coherent. One way in which this is often expressed is in the form of a critique of essentialism, or the idea that such classical epistemological notions as true, real, correct, logically necessary, and the like are required foundations for science and understanding. Many postmodernists doubt that these notions are ultimately viable, and argue that they rather function in an authoritarian and dogmatic manner to suppress discourses subversive of modern bureaucratic rationality. Essentialism, it is further argued, mistakenly makes our intellectual ideal that of a complete and systematic representation of the world. But intellectual activity on any candid reading, postmodernists insist, reflects undecidability, disorder, and indeterminacy on the one hand, and overdetermination and rivalry on the other. That is, we are both unable to ever really settle most things in life, and also unable to really narrow the range of competing discourses on virtually any given subject matter.

I think this critique valuable and insightful in many respects. It has been well developed by a variety of contributors across many contemporary disciplines,[1] and is persuasive in a variety of ways to an increasing number of thinkers, including many trained in and still largely sympathetic to modernist tenets. In this chapter I am chiefly interested in the future trajectory of postmodernism, especially as the efforts of its proponents are decreasingly directed toward the critique of modernism – with the success and growing acceptance of that critique – and more aimed at explanations of how discourses function to generate new thought. Surely one of the key perspectives postmodernism offers is the idea that thought is continuously dynamic and open ended rather than always converging toward a single set of static truths, the modernist ideal. Is it then too much to ask for further analysis of this dynamical process and for discussion of what this "un-system" involves? Some postmodernists might say that it is indeed too much, that we can only record moments of undecidability, disorder, and indeterminacy, and that epistemological nihilism is an inevitable and even healthy mindset.

I reject this view for two reasons, one theoretical and one practical. First, theoretically speaking, it seems that the topic of competing and incommensurate

discourses, whether at a point in time or across time, is a subject which we can coherently investigate in analyzing how people disagree with one another. This topic is the chief theme of this chapter. Second, practically speaking, it seems imperative from a progressive political point of view that postmodernists learn how to defend openness, pluralism, and tolerance in discourse against reactionary forms of modernism. Doing this, however, involves both showing clearly and reasonably persuasively how modernism can be morally and politically unhealthy for society, and also showing that there exists a handful of "essentials" underlying the non-anarchic play of competing discourses that explain how a postmodern world is livable. This topic is a secondary theme of this chapter touched upon in the last section below.

My position might then be best put as holding that nihilism – or the view that we can only record moments of undecidability, disorder, and indeterminacy – is misguided, but that what might alternatively be termed principled relativism – as will be set forth here – is meaningful and desirable. In what follows I try to investigate conditions that might fulfill and characterize a principled relativism, and then turn to look critically at postmodernist nihilism. In the first section, a dilemma is first posed for postmodernist discourse analysis that I suggest derives from its past path of development as a set of ideas critical of modernism. In the second section, one means of addressing this dilemma is set out in terms of a discussion of what I term identity conditions for discourses. In the third section, I turn to market exchange models used to elucidate interaction between discourses to give a specifically economic application of the idea of identity conditions for discourses, and then reexamine the original dilemma and its suggested solution from this new vantage point. In the final section, I briefly address the secondary theme of the chapter, argue in favor of principled relativism and against nihilism, and make a number of concluding remarks about political-ethical issues that postmodernism raises against modernism.

A postmodernist non-communication dilemma

In the collection of papers from the 1994 conference "Pluralism in Economics: Theory, History and Methodology" (Salanti and Screpanti 1996) in Bergamo, Italy, Warren Samuels argues – correctly in my view – that alternative economic methodologies each possess their "own internal limitation and there is no single, unequivocal, conclusive meta-principle" upon which we can rely to choose among those methodologies (Samuels 1996: 67). That economic methodologists have in the past sought some "single, unequivocal, conclusive meta-principle" may be due to a mistaken view of what the application of philosophical concepts to economics can accomplish. A modernist view of the matter would have it that philosophical ideas can provide firm, unproblematic foundations for economic ones, and that philosophical ideas once grasped are relatively uncontroversial and convincing. A postmodernist view of the matter might have it that philosophical ideas are complex and problematical, and that their use is better seen as shorthand reference to entire philosophical theories, each of which possess

strengths and weaknesses relative to competing theories and the philosophical ideas that summarize them. Given that philosophical debate appears to have all the characteristics of an undecidable exchange, it seems that Samuels is correct in inferring that prescriptivist economic methodologies in the Popperian–Lakatosian tradition are misguided in searching for "the principles of knowledge acquisition which permit accurate identification, description and explanation of the subject" (p. 68).

A second, stronger claim Samuels makes is that "there is a fundamental, tautological relationship between the assumed principles of knowledge acquisition and the knowledge which is produced" (p. 68). Perhaps "tautological" is too strong a term here, but it must at least be close to the sense of Samuels' position, which is also expressed in terms of an idea widely accepted among postmodernists that one cannot "step out" of one's own discourse; that is, there is something inherently contradictory about the idea that one might be detached from the way one sees things. I think that there is a dilemma here that results from conjoining this second proposition that knowledge is somehow tied to its conditions of production to the proposition in the previous paragraph that there are no unequivocal meta-discourses. This may seem odd, since on first glance the two propositions seem to be mutually supporting. Let me then expand upon and reconstruct Samuels' case in an attempt to bring out what I believe to be the dilemma in question. In his view:

1   knowledge is tied to its conditions of production; and
2   there are many distinct discourses on any given subject (because the conditions of knowledge production are diverse).

From this it follows that:

3   there can be no unique meta-discourse on any subject.

But from this one might also plausibly infer that:

4   different discourses and their producers are non-communicating.

This conclusion, however, surely poses a dilemma for postmodernism and its critique of modernism. On the one hand, if different discourses and their producers are non-communicating, then no one is in a position to confidently say that there is no single meta-discourse – and thus argue that the project of modernism is misconceived. In effect, undecidability across different discourses undermines defense of the (shared) claim that there is no single meta-discourse. On the other hand, if postmodernists agree that the modernist project is misconceived, then explicitly shared ground does seem to exist between discourses after all. This both raises doubts about the postmodernist critique of essentialist modernism, and suggests that knowledge production may not be that closely tied to its conditions of production.

I think this dilemma more difficult to discharge than many postmodernists might suppose. In a sense, it is one member of the class of the ancient one-and-the-many or unity-and-plurality paradoxes that first received especially clear expression in connection with Plato's theory of forms. Plato's problem was how instances of things dissimilar and yet related to one another each fell under some universal category representing their shared quality. Here in its contemporary form the problem is manifested in the dual demand that discourses be dissimilar in nature, yet also share a common, motivating moment (that there is no meta-discourse subsuming them, the project of essentialist modernism). The plurality side of there being diverse discourses is self-evident, but perhaps it seems odd to say that different discourses must share a unity in something's non-existence or in the absence of a meta-discourse. To say, however, that different discourses are each dissociated from a single essentialist language is to make one important claim about the origins and nature of each. It is to say that each possesses a specificity or particularity that derives from their like resistance to translation into one general language or logic. But then it is one general language that defines them all, if only in a negative sense. The dilemma at hand, then, concerns the implications of emphasizing either the plurality or the unity sides of postmodernism's combining a defense of diversity and a mutual distancing from modernist essentialism.

Of course all dilemmas are dispellable to the extent that one is willing to embrace the consequences of taking one horn or the other of the dilemma. For postmodernists, I suggest, the process of future adjustment will require becoming clearer about the idea that discourses appear non-communicating. Saying that different discourses are not backed by a common meta-discourse makes discourses out to be non-communicating in only one specific sense. Are there, then, other forms of linkage or communication between discourses compatible with this? And might these other forms of linkage or communication preserve both the specificity of different discourses in terms of their separate conditions of production and yet still support a critique of essentialist modernism? Samuels would allow that there are indeed forms of communication between discourses other than just the shared rejection of a single meta-discourse, since he does not embrace the conclusion of the reconstructed argument above that radical non-communication is a necessary implication of discourses having diverse conditions of production. In saying how else discourses communicate, then, we might attempt to resolve the dilemma above by showing that there are linkages between distinct discourses that do not imply essentialist categories.

Note that an alternative resolution of the dilemma here would be simply to embrace non-communication in a radical fashion, thereby giving up the search for a form of communication between discourses and also a shared critique of modernist meta-discourse. In effect, modernism would be defeated simply by the practice of individuals always operating in terms of self-contained discourses, rather than by argument. This nihilist solution, however, seems an undesirable way of dispelling the dilemma facing postmodernism, chiefly because an articulate critique of modernist essentialism is presumably important to the defense of

diversity. But before developing this conclusion in the last section below, attention ought first be given to how it might be thought that the dilemma set forth above has come about historically with the emergence of postmodernism.

My thesis here is that the dilemma facing postmodernism has its origins in the way in which postmodernism historically developed as a critique of modernism. Suppose – to tell a slightly apocryphal story – that scholars struggled for many years with the classic, modernist correspondence problem regarding how our representations of the world relate to the world. These scholars' difficulty for many years was that they believed there to be one underlying reality, though they found themselves committed to competing and often incommensurate ways of representing that reality. Finally after many years of frustration and fruitless debate over whose representation of reality was correct, some scholars asserted that the idea of a single, independent underlying reality must itself be contradictory, because – reasonably enough – the idea of a single reality is itself a discursive item, and all discursive items possess multiple senses. There only exist – these postmodernists then argued – different discourses, or different modes of representation. But now the dilemma emerges. That it was originally thought that there exist genuinely distinct, alternative discourses depended on the idea that, were there a single, unique underlying reality, then there had to be a single, unique mode of representation of that reality. That is, the idea of the distinctness of a discourse was rooted in the idea of its possible uniqueness as the only correct representation of a single reality. Yet if we now say that no single, underlying reality exists, then the past basis for saying that discourses are genuinely distinct and different from one another has been removed. Moreover, unless new criteria for explaining the idea of distinctness and difference are developed, it cannot be ruled out that discourses are more alike than different from one another – a development which might ironically then encourage neomodernists to argue that "different" discourses tend to, say, "converge" on the "correct" representation of a single, underlying reality.[2]

On this view, much current postmodernism preserves, if in a latent or implicit manner, an important presupposition of modernism in that postmodernism's concept of difference as uniqueness is an inadvertent inheritance from modernism. Uniqueness, it seems fair to say, is an essentialist notion in that it depends on the idea of a single correspondence to a single reality. To say something is unique involves making a complete and comprehensive survey of the world, in order to say that one and one thing only occupies a certain place in that world. But postmodernists need not explain difference in terms of the idea of uniqueness. There are other ways of explaining the concept of difference that postmodernism might adopt – ways which we would hope would make speaking about difference compatible with jointly denying a single meta-discourse exists, sustain the critique of modernism, and thus serve to dispel the dilemma above. What this suggests is that for postmodernist thinking to be successful it needs to be elaborated independently of that critique of modernism that specifically treats discourses as self-contained and non-communicating. What is rather needed, more specifically, is an account of discourses' relative autonomy from one

another, since an account of this sort would presumably make a discourse's distinctness a function of its lateral juxtaposition to other discourses, rather than a function of its possession of the essentialist property of uniqueness. I now turn to how such an account might be attempted.

Identity conditions for discourses

If essentialist reasoning tries to explain representation in terms of correspondence to something beyond representation, non-essentialist reasoning strives to remain within the ambit of representation, that is, it strives to account for distinct forms of representation in terms of the whole of representation or in a holistic manner. This involves explaining the relative autonomy of different discourses by reference to the principles that account for the boundaries between discourses, where focusing on the dividing lines between different discourses makes their distinctness a function of their relation to one another. Holistic reasoning, that is, operates in terms of concrete wholes whose parts are from the outset the (internal) determinations of those wholes. A concept of difference developed along these lines does not trade in the concept of uniqueness, since the whole's parts – here different discourses   are different from one another as related parts of one whole – or of discourse generally. Difference is understood immanently, as it were, rather than absolutely.

How specifically, then, should the boundaries between discourses be conceptualized? When we speak of boundaries between things we suppose we are simultaneously concerned with those boundaries and the distinct and identifiable things those boundaries permit us to distinguish. Further, to say that one has some distinct and identifiable item is to say that one could elaborate identity conditions for that item which would allow us to distinguish and reidentify that thing in a variety of settings and through change in the way we talk about things. Identity conditions, that is, are criteria used for singling out, identifying, and relabeling things we want to pay special attention to, and reflect the implicit ontologies of the language we employ. To say that there are identity conditions for discourses, then, is to say that there are criteria for singling out, identifying, and relabeling different discourses. The business of doing this, moreover, both establishes the boundaries between discourses and determines the relative autonomy or identity that different discourses may be said to possess.

Of course trying to say what makes one discourse distinct from another is a herculean task, since, in contrast to tangible things such as a table whose visual outline and tactile qualities offer us obvious starting points, discourses are changing collections of relatively elusive conceptual moves and practices that may well seem to lack any apparent identity whatsoever.[3] Nonetheless, I suggest that the relative autonomy or identity of discourses be understood in terms of the functional roles played by two different types of concepts operating in any given discourse, where these two types of concepts are distinguished according to the contributions they make to a discourse's unity and distinctness respectively. First, every discourse possesses concepts and notions which we may agree are

central to or constitutive of that discourse. Like core concepts in Lakatosian research programs, these concepts and notions may be thought key to that discourse's unity as an identifiable discourse in the sense of being unique to that discourse. Second, every discourse also possesses concepts and notions which, though not constitutive of its unity or specific to that discourse, nonetheless play a role in that discourse. Unlike in the Lakatosian conception, these latter, non-constitutive concepts may be regarded as boundary-markers, since they are both found in other discourses and yet still play a role in the discourse under consideration. As opposed to explaining the unity of a discourse, these latter concepts may be understood as means by which we establish the distinctness of a given discourse. In effect, they enable us to pick out just where the discourse in question comes into contact with other discourses.

Both kinds of concepts, then, are necessary to explaining the relative autonomy or identity of a discourse in terms of its unity and distinctiveness from other discourses. An example may help clarify this conception. In post-Keynesian discourse the notion of true uncertainty is regarded as a constitutive element in equilibrium unemployment arguments. In neoclassical-synthesis Keynesian discourse the notion of rigid wages is regarded as a constitutive element in equilibrium unemployment arguments. Each concept, then, contributes to the unity of these two Keynesian discourses. In contrast, the concept of an unemployment equilibrium, though it is employed in both post-Keynesian and neoclassical-synthesis Keynesian discourse, is constitutive of the unity of neither argument. As a concept, it thus contributes to our picking out the boundary between the two forms of argument. In effect, its differential appropriation in the two discourses tells us where the two discourses both come into contact and yet remain distinct.

Some, perhaps, will think this conception of a discourse with two different types of concepts cumbersome and unnecessary to explaining the relative autonomy or identity of discourses. Why not simply explain what makes discourses distinct and different in terms of their constitutive notions alone? The problem with proceeding in this manner is that it leaves us with postmodernism's apples and oranges, non-communication problem. If a discourse's constitutive concepts are specific to that discourse alone, then in attending solely to them we lack a way of relating discourses to one another. However, in differentiating between a single discourse's constitutive and non-constitutive concepts we put ourselves in a position to explain that discourse's identity specifically as a relative autonomy, or as an autonomy relative to other discourses. The key to this conception, it should now be apparent, is in being able to say that both types of concepts must operate in any given discourse. Not just a discourse's constitutive concepts, but also its associated penumbra of non-constitutive concepts must be seen as necessary to the understanding of that discourse.

Of course, saying that non-constitutive concepts are as necessary to a discourse as are its constitutive concepts sounds odd, but this is an entirely reasonable view to adopt if discourse is understood holistically. Then, though constitutive concepts are specific to individual discourses, they still need to be

understood as operating in conjunction with a further apparatus of concepts that are not specific to that discourse. Holistic reasoning generally operates with complex wholes which may not be disassembled without destroying the whole, and which also accommodate different functions for different elements in those wholes. Here it is suggested that constitutive notions account for discursive unity and non-constitutive notions point to discursive boundaries that together explain the relative autonomy or identity of discourses.

Does this conception, then, help us address the non-communication dilemma advanced above? The following section attempts to answer this question in a positive way by considering a rather different set of grounds for operating in terms of the approach outlined. It has been suggested, for example by Deirdre McCloskey (1994), that discourses and those who use them communicate much in the way that economic actors interact in markets, and consequently that we can develop an understanding of discursive interaction or how discourses communicate in terms of a model of market exchange. We thus turn to the market exchange model of discursive interaction in an effort to determine what more we might learn about communication from this perspective.

Market exchange and discursive interaction

Markets typically involve decentralized exchange between economic agents specialized in different types of production within an overall division of labor. Neoclassical economic theory generally gives the idea of exchange a decidedly modernist interpretation by representing economic agents as atomistic individuals, each with their own well-defined endowments and axiomatically described preferences, whose exchange with one another generates gains from trade for each, as if through the mechanism of an invisible hand. Taking this as a model for the interaction of different discourses, a neoclassicist might then say that though individual discourse producers each have their own linguistic endowments and conceptual preferences, their discursive trade and interaction with one another reflects an underlying logic or meta-discourse that to neoclassical economists works much like how universal constrained optimization results in a general equilibrium between independent producers. Just as, that is, seemingly very different economic agents' trade with one another reflects one, underlying meta-discourse of trade that may be captured in sets of equations whose joint solution can be proven to exist, so that discourses and their producers generally, on the traditional neoclassical model of market exchange, presumably share a common meta-language or deep grammar that makes communication possible.

There are ways, however, to represent market exchange as a model for discursive interaction that bypass the modernist features of the neoclassical account. Distinguishing between Methodology and methodology as does McCloskey (1994), we might say that discursive trade and interaction are not guided by an underlying logic or meta-discourse but rather by multiple, evolving norms of conversation. "There is ... no Methodology of economics ... only sustained verbal and written interaction which defies abstract characterization, because it

is inherent in the unavoidably concrete relationships obtaining between economists" (Davis 1990: 83). One reason to think this is that there is growing evidence that economic agents are not appropriately all modeled as individual, constrained optimizers each operating within a general equilibrium. Thus psychologists have argued that human decision making often does not satisfy the axiomatic requirements of neoclassical theory (cf. Thaler 1992), ethicists have argued that individuals in markets often act from non-self-regarding, non-utility-enhancing, altruistic motives (e.g., Sen 1987), feminists have argued that power and patriarchy socially determine the actions of women and men (Ferber and Nelson 1993), and a range of heterodox economists see class, corporate power, culture, social values, and a variety of other explanations of behavior as being centrally involved in markets. None of these types of explanations are nearly suited to producing a modernist determinacy in the analysis of exchange in markets. This strongly suggests that there are good reasons to believe that market participants do not share in a single higher logic in their respective interactions with one another, and that we accordingly ought to attend more carefully to different and changing forms of behavior in market activity. But if this is the case, then modeling discursive interaction as market exchange in terms of a formal symmetry of behaviors explicable in terms of a single mathematics is entirely misguided. Rather, we should seek to explain the changing and often incompatible means by which very different discursive agents negotiate exchanges with one another without supposing that a determinate formal apparatus lies behind the concrete phenomena.

Before considering how to go about this, however, we should note one very tangible advantage to using concepts of market exchange to model discursive interaction. Saying that individuals and discourses interact with one another much in the way that market participants engage in exchange implies that somehow discourses do succeed in communicating despite their origins in very different conditions of production. Indeed, this conclusion is only reinforced should we agree that, contrary to much traditional thinking in neoclassical economics, there is no single meta-logic underlying real-world market exchange. Then the fact that exchange does occur tells us that economic agents' particularity is compatible with their discursive interaction. The task that confronts us, then, is to explain just how discursive particularity is compatible with discursive interaction understood as a kind of trade. An example applying the discourse analysis developed in the last section is suggestive.

Consider household exchange between women and men in abusive domestic violence relationships where trade is treated as a form of discursive interaction. On the view above, constitutive and non-constitutive concepts characterize the respective discourses of women and men. How may we understand domestic violence in marriages involving production specialization and exchange in terms of these two kinds of concepts? Farmer and Tiefenthaler (1997) explain domestic violence in non-cooperative relationships where men derive utility from violence against women, and women derive utility from real income received in exchange. While the Farmer–Tiefenthaler analysis explains the behavior of both

women and men formally in terms of a single mathematics of constrained optimization, we may depart from and reinterpret their utility analysis to differentiate two distinct discourses in the different arguments of women and men's respective utility functions. Only men, not women, derive utility from violence perpetrated against women. Thus we may say that constitutive of the discourse of men engaged in spousal abuse is a set of concepts that tie self-esteem to spousal abuse. In contrast, women may be said to understand their status as a product of patriarchy. The concept of patriarchy is constitutive of their discourse. Thus though formally each may be said to have utility functions, a more concrete analysis of their preferences gives us a basis for saying that they each possess a core of specific concepts that make their discourses highly incommensurate with one another.

At the same time, however, there are non-constitutive concepts in the discourse of each which are specific to neither discourse, but which work together with each one's constitutive concepts. Here we may refer to concepts which each possesses that concern such things as the value of family and home, the importance of joint income, cultural expectations about married life, desire for companionship, and so on.[4] As non-constitutive, this latter set of concepts operates differently for women and men according to how they respectively integrate them together with those concepts constitutive of their two respective discourses. Thus women may understand the sacrifices to abuse they make personally for family and children as part and parcel of living in a patriarchal society. Alternatively, abusive and violent men may see family and children as further aspects of their own self-magnification. Each consequently shares a set of (non-constitutive) concepts, but those concepts function differently for each in two distinct discourses. Thus their two discourses are relatively autonomous and identifiable by having both a distinct core of concepts and by sharing concepts that mark out the points of contact or boundaries with one another.

The Farmer–Tiefenthaler analysis also explains the breakdown of abusive relationships and the termination of exchange between the women and men involved in them in terms of a threshold or threat point at which women cease to accept the marriage's combination of real-income transfers and spousal abuse. In our framework, the respective discourses of women and men cease to communicate. We might say, using the Farmer–Tiefenthaler emphasis on women's shelters and support networks as a form of real income, that in these circumstances women's discourse drops those non-constitutive concepts shared with men regarding family and home, and adds new non-constitutive concepts shared with other abuse victims regarding personal security and non-patriarchal family life. On the assumption that core, constitutive concepts still help locate different discourses specific to different groups of women in shelter and support networks, say, concepts regarding class, education, and social advantages, then discursive interaction reemerges when different women's discourses differently integrate their respective core, constitutive concepts with their shared, non-constitutive concepts, which mark out points of contact and boundaries between relatively autonomous discourses within shelter and support networks.

Using a market model of discourse, then, discursive interaction, like economic exchange, is periodic, interrupted, and shifting. Indeed, we may further complicate the picture above in two ways. First, on a postmodern view of discourse as a form of exchange, discursive parties presumably trade at many sites, in the process simultaneously reconstituting themselves in a variety of ways as they integrate multiple sets of shared, non-constitutive concepts with their constitutive ones. Second, nothing in the analysis here requires that core-constitutive concepts be unchanging. To the extent that we are successful in characterizing concepts specific to a discourse, constitutive concepts possess a degree of stability. But clearly on the exchange model of discursive interaction the abundance of contacts between discourses argues for change in core, constitutive concepts. Of course discourses also die and are born. Without attempting to say how changing interaction between discourses in terms of non-constitutive concepts impacts on core concepts, we may simply say that the continual resiting of discursive interaction contributes to the elimination, creation, and transformation of discourses.

Thus there is considerable undecidability and indeterminacy in the framework developed here to explain the relative autonomy and identity of discourses. Yet this undecidability and indeterminacy neither overturns that framework, nor leaves us with the non-communication dilemma set out above. Discourses do communicate with one another without recourse to a single meta-discourse (as individuals may interact in markets without a neoclassical formalism), and yet discourses may still be understood in terms of their distinct conditions of production. Does this framework, then, offer solid grounds for sustaining the postmodern critique of essentialism? The answer to this question can perhaps best be given by comparing nihilism and relativism.

Nihilism, relativism, and the politics of postmodernism

What is nihilism? In their recent discussion of Keynes, Jack Amariglio and David Ruccio (1995) take Keynes' late emphasis on animal spirits and uncertainty as an impenetrable barrier to calculative rationality, and thus as an important postmodern element in Keynes' thinking that helped introduce indeterminacy and undecidability into contemporary economic discourse. They see this as part of "a progressive slide into nihilism" on Keynes' part, but argue that Keynes should be praised rather than condemned for it.[5] Generally, then, nihilism for Amariglio and Ruccio and many postmodernists is the view that discourse is always incomplete, fragmented, and laden with indeterminacy. Embracing nihilism thus means rejecting the modernist practice of hierarchically privileging order over disorder, and recognizing that attempts to "domesticate" uncertainty are ultimately doomed to fail (also cf. Amariglio and Ruccio 1994).

This view would seem to imply that the discursive world cannot be made up of different, relatively self-contained discourses, since to suppose this would be to posit some degree of order over the disorder. While Amariglio and Ruccio, as

well as other postmodernists who have written on nihilism, are more disposed toward the idea of dialog between distinct, relatively self-contained discourses than the characterization of nihilism here would seem to suggest (cf. Amariglio, Resnick, and Wolff 1990; Ruccio 1991), it is nonetheless instructive to consider the consequences of nihilism for the dilemma set forth in this chapter. Thus, were uncertainty and undecidability pervasive, it would follow that communication and shared understanding between different postmodernist discourses would not obtain. In the thinking developed above, it would not make sense to say that these discourses shared a set of non-constitutive concepts pertaining to a shared critique of modernism. In effect, on a nihilist view diversity swamps common ground. But this jars with the evident common ground postmodernist discourses share against modernism.

There is a related consequence of embracing pervasive indeterminacy and undecidability. If disorder always conquers order, so that one can never hope to "domesticate" spheres of discourse, then difference dominates coherence absolutely. Radical uncertainty understood in this way, then, inverts the completeness and finality sought in modernist rationality, since it still claims that there is one, single reality (characterized now in terms of universal fragmentation and omnipresent disorder), and still proposes to work in terms of a single language (that of indeterminacy and undecidability). Nihilism, as argued above in connection with the historical origins of the concept of difference in postmodernism, simply works in terms of an alternative set of absolutes. In effect, it opposes core concepts of indeterminacy and disorder to modernism's core concepts of determinacy and order, but shares non-constitutive, boundary concepts of a single language and a single reality. Postmodernism understood in these terms is a form of discursive interaction with modernism, rather than an internally differentiated whole of postmodernist voices relatively autonomous chiefly in respect to one another.

I think the latter form of postmodernism – that is, one that differentiates postmodernist voices relative to one another rather than relative to modernism – is the preferred one. And in place of nihilism, I also recommend postmodernists adopt what was earlier labeled a principled relativism. On this conception particular discourses possess temporary and relative stability that enables their comparative investigation, though nothing in this suggests they can be arranged in any kind of hierarchical order. What can instead be achieved is a cross-discourse type of investigation that builds an account of differences between discourses in terms of their differential appropriation (via their respective constitutive concepts) of shared non-constitutive concepts. Generally, then, communication is relative to the discourse in which one operates, just as Samuels argued. But our ability to explain the relative character of discourse turns on the principles involved in reading across discourses – here tied up with the treatment of constitutive and non-constitutive concepts. Thus a principled relativism offers postmodernism a means of preserving an emphasis on undecidability and indeterminacy while also insuring a form of communication between different postmodernist approaches.

Nihilism, in contrast, suffers at least two important vulnerabilities as a postmodernist approach. In the first place, discursive exchange and interaction chiefly with modernism is unlikely to serve as an effective critique of modernism, since – on the model of discursive interaction adopted here – the core concepts specific to modernism are not noticeably at risk when nihilism and modernism discursively interact over shared commitment to a single (though different for each) language and reality. No doubt convinced modernists, perhaps neomodernists, will say that gaps, discrepancies, undecidable moments, and so on are just a part of an inexorable progress toward knowledge. In the second place, focusing on the relationship between postmodernism and modernism detracts from attention to multiple interactions among multiple discourses. But attention to the latter is not only important for understanding the dynamics of discourses – what might be thought the positive project in postmodernism – but also for simply demonstrating that there exists no single, meta-discourse.

This last point is a valuable one to conclude upon. One dimension of postmodernism that especially deserves emphasis is the form -of its political progressiveness. While historically Enlightenment modernism was politically progressive in defending rights of individuals against theocratic power, today postmodernism is politically progressive in defending tolerance and openness against modern bureaucratic rationality. Indeed, the defense of diversity and pluralism appears to be the chief practical consequence of postmodernist discourse. That program, in its many aspects and dimensions, seems well served by exhibition and analysis of the variety of forms of discourse and their modes of discursive interaction. The argument in this chapter attempts to map out some of this dynamic.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1 For economics, in particular, see the collection of papers in Samuels (1990).
2 Hausman's (1992) treatment of economics as an inexact science might be understood in these terms.
3 It is worth pointing out that there are many items just as amorphous as discourses in regard to identity that we customarily treat as distinct and reidentifiable. From the social world, for example, there are one's moral obligations, a certain group's employment prospects, the legal rights to those accused of crimes, political platforms, customs, and so on, seemingly in a list almost without limit. Indeed, most of the "things" we are interested in social life have rather intractable identity conditions. That we nonetheless deal with them regularly as distinct and reidentifiable implies we have coherent means of doing so.
4 Note that all these items may be framed in utility terms.
5 Coddington (1982) initiated the nihilism critique of Keynes and Shackle, but spoke of it pejoratively.

Bibliography

Amariglio, J. and Ruccio, D. (1994) "Postmodernism, Marxism, and the Critique of Modern Economic Thought," *Rethinking Marxism* 7(4): 7–35.

——(1995) "Keynes, Postmodernism, Uncertainty," in J. Hillard and S. Dow (eds) *Keynes, Knowledge and Uncertainty*, 334–56, Aldershot: Edward Elgar.

Amariglio, J., Resnick, S., and Wolff, R. (1990) "Division and Difference in the 'Discipline' of Economics," *Critical Inquiry* 17(Autumn): 108–37.

Coddington, A. (1982) "Deficient Foresight: A Troublesome Theme in Keynesian Economics," *American Economic Review* 72(3): 480–7.

Davis, J. B. (1990) "Rorty's Contribution to McCloskey's Understanding of Conversation," *Research in the History of Economic Thought and Methodology* 7: 73–85.

Farmer, A. and Tiefenthaler, J. (1997) "An Economic Analysis of Domestic Violence," *Review of Social Economy* 55(3): 337–58.

Ferber, M. and Nelson, J. (eds) (1993) *Beyond Economic Man: Feminist Theory and Economics*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hausman, D. M. (1992) *The Inexact and Separate Science of Economics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

McCloskey, D. N. (1994) *Knowledge and Persuasion in Economics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ruccio, D. (1991) "Postmodernism and Economics," *Journal of Post Keynesian Economics* 13(Summer): 495–510.

Salanti, A. and Screpanti, E. (eds) (1996) *Pluralism in Economics*, Aldershot: Edward Elgar.

Samuels, W. (ed.) (1990) *Economics as Discourse: An Analysis of the Language of Economists*, Boston: Kluwer.

——(1996) "The Case for Methodological Pluralism," in A. Salanti and E. Screpanti (eds) *Pluralism in Economics*, 67–79, Aldershot: Edward Elgar.

Sen, A. (1987) *On Ethics and Economics*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Thaler, R. (1992) *The Winner's Curse*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.