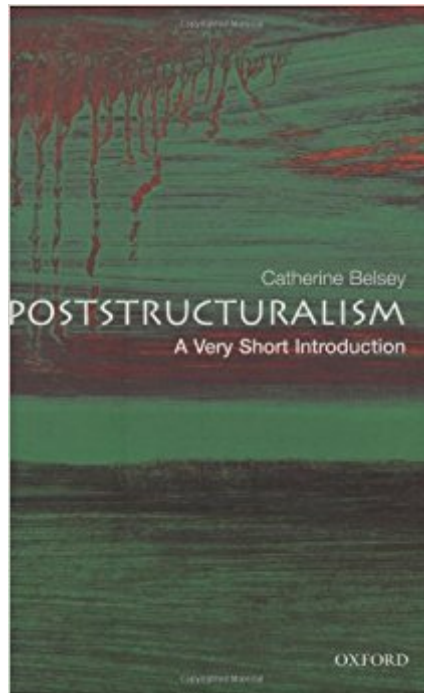




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# Poststructuralism: A Very Short Introduction



## Synopsis

Poststructuralism changes the way we understand the relations between human beings, their culture, and the world. Following a brief account of the historical relationship between structuralism and poststructuralism, this Very Short Introduction traces the key arguments that have led poststructuralists to challenge traditional theories of language and culture. While the author discusses such well-known figures as Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan, she also draws pertinent examples from literature, art, film, and popular culture, unfolding the poststructuralist account of what it means to be a human being. About the Series: Combining authority with wit, accessibility, and style, Very Short Introductions offer an introduction to some of life's most interesting topics. Written by experts for the newcomer, they demonstrate the finest contemporary thinking about the central problems and issues in hundreds of key topics, from philosophy to Freud, quantum theory to Islam

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## Customer Reviews

A wonderfully clear account \* Guardian \*

Professor Catherine Belsey was Fellow and Tutor at New Hall, Cambridge from 1969 to 1975. She currently chairs the Centre for Critical and Cultural Theory at Cardiff University.

Excellent!

This little volume has proven invaluable in helping me get a grasp on the complexities of post-structural philosophy. Many points of view and topics are broken down, but never watered down; the full range of the theory and its chief promoters are explained in thorough but compact detail. I highly recommend it.

First few pages were fascinating then it was all down hill from there for me. The sentences were disjointed, and at best I got a vague sense of what the author was talking about. I never finished it & ordered another book on the subject. Here an example - and compared to most of the book, this is lucidity itself "Societies recruit us as subjects, subject us to their values, and incite us to be accountable, responsible citizens, eager, indeed, to give an account of ourselves in terms we have learned from the signifying practice of those societies themselves" Right, got it.

Great!

great

French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's assertion that the relationship between a signifier (i.e., a word, symbol) and the signified (the phenomenon it describes) is arbitrary is the starting point for all forms of Poststructuralism. It reveals that language (and all signifying systems) actually create, rather than describe, the world we live in. Consequently, all our understandings of the world, be they through culture, knowledge, or ideology, are artificial constructs. While Poststructuralists do not necessarily deny the existence of reality, they argue that ALL understandings of reality are shaped by the signifying systems through which we must experience and understand it. Their objective, therefore, is not to dissect language/symbols in order to discover an ultimate Truth, but rather to reveal how language and symbols create meaning/reality. Here, Catherine Belsey shows how these ideas inform the work of diverse thinkers such as Roland Barthes, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Slavoj Žižek, and Jean-François Lyotard. Although Poststructuralism is not necessarily political, it can be seen as "subversive" since by revealing how signifying systems create our understandings of the world, the individual learns to recognize and deconstruct the "realities" that control us. While Poststructuralism is empowering in this sense, it also has obvious shortcomings: we can no longer assert any absolutes. This leads the author to conclude that "Poststructuralism is more useful in prompting the uncertainty

of questions than in delivering the finality of answers" (107). I think this work is a very good "general" introduction to the topic. For only 107 pages, I don't think anyone could expect anything more. But, for anyone already familiar with Poststructuralism, it may seem a bit superficial.

I have been involved in the patient personal scholarship of post structuralism for about 6 months in an attempt to see if contemporary social sciences, which base many of their arguments on power relationships, can add anything more useful than airy ideas which seem to be little linked in fact. If one is used to considering the world through a scientific methodology post-structuralism is profoundly weak in both explanation and predictability. The ground in Humanities is still split between hard-core empirical studies, mostly in economics and history, describing conditions and general trends verifiable but weak, or purposefully weak, on theory but high on practicality and pointing towards productive areas of research. Alternatively a lot of social science, post-structuralism in particular, is erected largely upon theory (some almost wholly erected upon it) with little, or no empirical research. This book describes a large chunk of the latter way of thinking: preconceived notions of power that are neither empirical nor subject to disproof. Post-structuralism offers unbridgeable propositions between the world of measurement and inquiry and that of pure theory. Post-structuralism moves so far away from any idea of a rational predictable and probability-base world that it completely erodes almost all of the substrates of traditional knowledge (classical rational inquiry and the scientific method) Post-structuralism is an attempt to cut loose from any intellectual tradition beyond very abstruse and subjective inquiries. It risks rendering traditional disciplines within the social sciences and newer "studies" as "irrelevant" disciplines.

Post-structuralism can also make anyone feel intelligent because it functions as an independent centre of "knowledge generation" - but not knowledge as is traditionally understood in the classical postivist tradition (a point to be considered elsewhere). Witness the fact of post-structuralism and its ability to erect an edifice completely outside any intellectual tradition that existed before WWII (except Marx and Freud). Moreover if you focus upon a certain point of theoretical knowledge and pursue it rigorously one finds that it either degenerates into a meaningless tautology - eg. such as the Foucault notion of power, or it trails off and merges in other ethereal theories that really have neither utility, nor, most importantly, meaning. In addition, this type of strained "intellectualism" stands outside the tradition of western thought. As such it remains aloof and immune to any ballast or stabilization afforded by empirical and scientific thought. All of this seems to bode well for such post-structuralism as a literary theory, which is a wonderful and intoxicating endeavour full of invention and wonderful manufactured meaning - it has little to do with reality and therefore should

not, and in fact is not, a social science. In this sense Belsey does a wonderful job of describing the intellectual sham that is Post-structuralism. The really pitiful state some of the social sciences have become is manifested in the deplorable thinkers and academics who are so enamoured with their theories and purported truth statements that describe unknown worlds -- worlds that bear no relationship to reality, worlds that are pure thought products -- that they actually think that some higher or useful purpose of social understanding or worthy endeavours (such as the striving for social justice) can be furthered with their line of explanation. People are not theory and the worst experiences of mankind have been based upon people trying to pound facts, and often people, into theory. So far these bumpy thoughts have been relegated to the nether reaches of self-referential departments outside classical academia. And there they should stay.

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