Reply: Why Discourse Matters, Materially

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Shrestha’s commentary on my *Annals* article, “What Causes Poverty? A Postmodern View” (86:707-28), presents a very unflattering picture of my work. I am told that it is “little more than an open surrender to the moral bankruptcy, social irresponsibility, and political expediency of those who are ever ready to see the poor as the problem in order to preserve their class privileges and insatiable greed” (p. 715). For good measure he advises the geography profession at large not to be duped by “such faddish pursuits . . ., [which] may very well help some to attain short-term academic gains, but only at the expense of secure disciplinary identity and integrity” (p. 715). Oh My! The man does have a bee in his bonnet. Shrestha’s commentary contains two kinds of remarks: First are some general criticisms of postmodern intellect; second are his specific objections to my postmodern view of poverty. I shall take each of these in turn. I hope my reply will help dispel the effects of his cynical distrust and ungrounded fear of the postmodern.

General Remarks on Postmodernism

Shrestha’s general criticisms of postmodern thought cover familiar ground because they are based on a derivative reading of previously published critiques by other authors. At no point does he directly examine the work of any well-known postmodern philosopher, historian, or social scientist. His writing makes no direct reference to the ideas of even the most famous of them all—Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, or Rorty. I was most surprised by his failure to mention the writings of Escobar (1984, 1993), who began to apply poststructuralist thought to poverty and development several years ago. I raise this issue because in the absence of any concrete references to postmodern writing, I found Shrestha’s remarks bland, nondirected, and very generic. I also found his insistent and repetitive reference to postmodern writers as “PoMos” both offensive and irritating. I shall focus on three objections he lodges against postmodernism: its use of obfuscating language, lack of materiality, and reactionary politics.

A Matter of Language

Shrestha objects strenuously to the way postmodernists use language. I quote from his comments: “Camouflaged in the dense language of complex vocabulary and syntax that PoMos have invented for themselves as a medium of their ‘tribal’ communication . . .” (p. 710). But this claim of “bad writing” is really no excuse to avoid a body of thought that, in the judgment of many serious scholars, is a significant watershed in the history of Western intellect. Today we have available a large number of well-written, highly readable introductions to postmodern thought—to name just a few, Sarup (1988), *An Introductory Guide to Post-structuralism and Postmodernism*; Best and Kellner (1991), *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*; Dickens and Fontana (1994), *Postmodernism and Social Inquiry*; Jones, Natter and Schatzki (1993), *Postmodern Contentions*; and Rosenau (1992), *Post-modernism and the Social Sciences*. Admittedly, Foucault and, particularly, Derrida are not easy to comprehend from a single reading, but there are now excellent introductions to the writings of these remarkable thinkers. On the other hand, Rorty (1979), a most important postmodern thinker, writes prose that is a model of extreme clarity and precision. Good ideas are not always easy to understand nor are they always expressed in clear language. Can you imagine the poverty of our intellect if we were to refuse to read Marx’s *Capital* because he employed a “dense language of complex vocabulary”?

Discourse Lacks Materiality

Some of Shrestha’s discomfort with postmodernism is directed at “discourse,” on the supposition that it gets away from facts, truth, and
material reality. Referring to my use of “discourse” in relation to poverty, Shrestha says, “[Yapa’s] aim is tantamount not only to aimless intellectual pontification of the poverty problem with little ability to capture its ground-level truth, but also to intellectual defeatism . . . .” (p. 710) and later, “In fact, can one seek . . . truth from facts when one denies the historical integrity of the social reality as Yapa does in his article?” (p. 710). I shall address the complaint at some length because, in my judgment, this matter of “materiality” has become the most clichéd objection to postmodernism. Critics ask: How can the world we live in be “discursively constructed” when the materiality of objects is so tangible to our senses, so concrete, and so real? Clearly, discourse theory is not an invitation to walk in front of a moving Mack truck to test the hypothesis that objects are discursively constructed. Every object in the world contains an infinite number of attributes whose form depends on the relations between that object and all other related objects. Naturally, the objects of our reflection and conversation can focus only on a few selected attributes; so the form of the object is discursively constructed. It could not be any other way. To say that the world exists independent of discourse is trivially true. The point is that the world we gaze at, investigate, and talk about—that world—is discursively constructed.

Consider the object denoted by the word “car,” and then consider the following statements all involving the object “car”:

1. Worldwide, there are 440 million cars.
2. With only 4.6 percent of the world’s population, the U.S. has 36 percent of the world’s cars.
3. The high-school graduate borrowed his grandfather’s old car for the prom because it had a roomy backseat.
4. Let the world envy your success. Make your next car an Infinity.
5. Since 1885 when Karl Benz built the first car, more than eighteen million people have died from motor accidents.
6. Now that he had enough money to buy the sports car of his fantasy, the aging man regretted not having enough energy to really enjoy it.
7. In the U.S., the car is used for 98 percent of all urban transportation.
8. An average car in the U.S. spews out about a ton of pollutants each year.

From this one can see that the object “car” is not a unique thing. As it enters into a myriad different conversations, the object “car” receives a form and meaning that is specific to each conversation. The word “car” has no intrinsic meaning or essence that is imparted to it from an object called “the car.” The exact meaning of the word is contextually and linguistically mediated as it enters into different conversations. It acquires meaning by its placement relative to other words; those words in turn derive meaning from still other words in a process of “infinite regress” and “endless deferral.” This is precisely what is meant when we say objects are discursively constructed. But this is not linguistic idealism. Saying that objects are discursively constructed does not mean that we cannot have interesting, intelligent, focused conversations, that we cannot have political projects, or that we cannot participate in social change. The notion of nonessentialist discursive materialism helps the cause of progressive politics and increases the chances of material change in society. That was a central argument of my paper. I am very sorry that Shrestha is not able to see that.

**Postmodern Politics**

Shrestha complains that postmodernism has no sense of progressive politics or a definite political project. He agrees with Hewitt (1993:79) that postmodernism is a form of “‘insidious political conservativism which undermines . . . the possibility of human liberation’” (p. 711). It is true that postmodernists do not believe in a grand project of human emancipation, but that does not come out of a sense of conservatism or from an abandonment of progressive politics. Postmodernists maintain that there is no one thing called “human emancipation” (Lyotard 1984). It is unwise to plan to arrive at a place that is not really there. The concept of “human emancipation” is a discursive convention that we have inherited from the Age of Enlightenment. In the judgment of many postmodern thinkers, “human emancipation” is no longer a helpful idea because it cannot animate a do-able, practical political project. To build a global project for human emancipation, first we have to assume that there is a coherent, generalized force in the world bearing down on a homogeneous population called “the oppressed masses.” But there is no institution, no
political party, no social movement, no social philosophy anywhere in the world that can be "just-and-true-for-all" oppressed people. People have always sought change in specific sectors relative to their own location and position. For example, the needs and aspirations of urban and rural poor in the Third World are not only different but often conflict with each other. In the U.S., the aspirations of inner-city minority women differ sharply from those of their more affluent white suburban sisters. It is not just rich people or capitalists who oppress women, persecute gays and lesbians, or abuse children. We know that racial prejudice crosses class and income boundaries. And who shall speak for endangered species, for air quality, for the mentally ill, and for the physically handicapped? The list goes on and on. In light of this, the very idea of a political project of universal human emancipation appears ludicrous to me. To quote Foucault (1980:126) on this very point, politics will be conducted by specific actors, "within specific sectors, at the precise points where their own conditions of life or work situate them (housing, the hospital, the asylum, the laboratory, the university, family and sexual relations). This has undoubtedly given them a much more immediate and concrete awareness of struggles."

There is nothing in postmodern writing that I am aware of that prevents people from participating in specific struggles of poverty, feminism, race, sexual orientation, and the environment. There is nothing in postmodern writing that I am aware of that proscribes people from forming political coalitions or expressing solidarity with other groups. Abandoning the metanarrative of global human emancipation is not a turning away from progressive politics. Quite the reverse: it strengthens the potential of participatory democracy.

Specific Remarks on a Postmodern View of Poverty

A Summary of the Postmodern Argument

Before I consider Shrestha's individual points of criticism, I shall summarize briefly my postmodern view of poverty. The concept of poverty is an abstract discursive convention that aggregates a large number of states of material deprivation related to food, clothing, shelter, health care, transportation, and so on. This taken-for-granted aggregation has permitted us to present poverty as an economic problem arising from lack of income. That economism in turn has allowed us to equate poverty with underdevelopment, making economic development the unquestioned and obvious solution to the problem. I believe that instead of asking the abstract question—why are poor people poor?—it is better to ask substantive questions as to why some people in particular places do not have adequate access to basic goods such as food, clothing, and shelter. The scarcity of these basic goods is socially constructed at each node of a nexus of production relations—technical, social, cultural, political, ecological, and academic. Hence the notion of multiple causes of poverty. Following postmodern reasoning, I maintain that even the categories describing the nodes of the nexus—technical, social, and so on—are not concrete sectors in the world; they too are discursive entities constructed to enable a conversation about poverty. Each so-called node of the nexus is completely determined by, and constituted from, the other nodes. The "real" world of poverty cannot provide answers as to which of these nodes is most important. In fact, poverty has no root causes.

Causes of poverty as we have come to know them differ from one paradigm to another. For example, neo-Malthusians focus on population growth, neoliberals speak of market failure, Marxists talk about capitalist exploitation of labor, and so on. In each case, the belief is (as is true of social science in general) that if we uncover the "true" causes of poverty, then we can adopt the right course of action. But there are no such things called the "true" causes of poverty, and, therefore, there is no single right course of action, certainly not one that is amenable to poverty policy.

It is important to realize that every social theory of causation empowers a particular set of agents specific to that social theory and disempowers others. Neo-Malthusians empower agents of population control; neoclassical economists empower development agencies such as the World Bank; and Marxists empower revolutionary leaders, political parties, and the socialist state. The empowering of these agencies flows directly from social theories of causation. As I stated in my article, it is important that we recognize that the four elements—cause-action-agency-power—are mutually constituted. My proposal was to reject the conventional social science logic that always begins with a theory of causes.
To return to the argument about scarcity of basic goods: if it is true that lack of adequate food for particular people in specific places is socially constructed through technical, social, cultural, political, ecological, and academic means, that implies each node constitutes a site at which myriad agents can creatively engage those forces that create scarcity. What the important causes of poverty (and therefore of action) are cannot be determined from an external logic resident in the material world of poverty. A particular agent has the right to decide “what is important” relative to her position, competence, and power in the world of poverty. For example, I see no value in telling nutritionists that they need not concern themselves with issues of food preparation and consumption until the issue of land reform has been solved because a certain social theory tells us that land ownership is the principal factor in poverty. This is the argument I laid out in the *Annals* article. The concept of multiple causes is not about “intellectual defeatism or political resignation” as Shrestha suggests; it is an invitation to do politics in a different way. I will draw on this summary in responding to the individual criticisms that Shrestha makes of my application of postmodern discourse to poverty. Again, I shall focus on three of his points: the role of class, of history, and of the author in poverty discourse.

The Role of Class in Poverty

If we look past Shrestha’s derivative, generic critique of my paper, there is one important matter he raises that is worth examining in some detail, namely the role of class in poverty. To quote Shrestha, “The main problem is Yapa’s failure to reveal poverty’s direct connection to class relations. . . . The social construction of scarcity itself is rooted in the class process, both historically and currently” (p. 712) and “class is a concrete social structure, and class relations form the metaroots of poverty no matter where it occurs in space and time. Yet, amazingly, class is entirely missing from Yapa’s fuzzy view of poverty. Is Yapa ready to believe, let alone prove, that class relations are no longer relevant to the social origin and perpetuation of poverty . . . ?” (p. 713). Let me open my response to this with a categorical remark: No, class does not form the metaroots of poverty for the simple reason that poverty has no metaroots. Besides, what we call “class” is a discursive category that is constituted from a large number of other categories and relations.

It should be noted that social relations of production are employed in my paper as a component element of the nexus of production. Furthermore, the concept of social relations is used in a manner identical to that employed by Marx. I do not, however, single out social relations (or for that matter the concept of class) as a privileged category of the analysis because that would not yield a satisfactory narrative of the social construction of scarcity. In my own research on South Asian agriculture, I found that categories such as landlord, peasants, and agricultural workers do not always yield analytically tractable or coherent groups of people. Often many individuals belong to more than one such class. In South Asia, the concept of class as a relation of the workplace does not correspond to clear differences in class consciousness; moreover, the significance of what we call “class” is actually played out through relations that have no immediate or obvious connection to the workplace. For example, the rapid diffusion of the technology of the Green Revolution turned some landlords into capitalist farmers and some peasants into wage workers. The story of the emergence of these class relations involves many agents: institutes of agricultural research; state policies in agriculture, trade, and research; the commercialization of agricultural inputs; marginalization of indigenous knowledge; devaluation of polycultures; and the substitution of the productive logic of industry for the reproductive logic of nature. The list goes on. Class relations are an integral part of this complex story but not a leading actor.

It is also important to realize that not all social construction of scarcity can be understood through the class metanarrative. For example, consider the promotion of chemical nitrogenous fertilizer in agriculture and the marginalization of other means of providing soil nutrients such as the use of locally available organic materials. This is an important subplot of the story of the impoverishment of South Asian peasantry. To say that the impoverishment of farmers caused by the diffusion of a particular fertilizer technology in South Asia “has metaroots in class relations” is senseless mumbo-jumbo.
Denial of Historical Integrity

Judging from the title of Shrestha’s commentary, his main contention seems to be that a postmodern view of poverty is a “denial of historical integrity.” I must confess that I do not have the vaguest notion of what he is talking about. Just where in my article does he see a repudiation of the role of history in poverty? Indeed a hallmark of Foucault, whose work has inspired my own, is his attention to historical narrative, as evident in The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences (1970) and in his later work on genealogy—Discipline and Punish (1979) and The History of Sexuality (1980). Shrestha says that my paper has little to say about colonialism and the history of capitalist production. But there is already a rich and vast literature on colonialism (Wallerstein 1979; Wolf 1982; and Blaut 1993.) It makes no sense for me to cover that same ground; besides, I wrote my article to make a few points that cannot be derived from a political-economy view of the world.

Yes, history is an important part of the story of poverty, but I do have two objections to the political-economy version of that history, namely, its teleology and economism. The main analytical category of the political economy of poverty is uneven development; it contains a binary logic where “developed” is the privileged category and “underdeveloped” is the subordinate category. If uneven development is the problem, then even development must be the solution that we should move towards—a sort of teleological goal. Even development is attained by launching underdeveloped societies on the path of economic development so that they end up being developed. It is my argument that poverty cannot be eradicated through economic development because lack of basic goods represents a development-induced scarcity (Yapa 1993; Sachs 1992). My second objection to the political-economy version of history is its economism. Political economy of colonialism and capitalism tells the history of social relations in modes of production. But every node in the nexus of relations, not just the social, has a complex history that is intertwined with histories of other nodes. For example, there are environmental histories (Worster 1988; Crosby 1986; Guha 1989), histories of academic research (Hewitt de Alcantara 1973–74; Jennings 1988; Kloppenburg 1988; Foucault 1970), and histories of discourse and culture (Said 1979, 1993). These histories are an integral part of the social construction of scarcity.

Location of the Author

A major refrain of Shrestha’s commentary is that a postmodern view of poverty has nothing tangible or practical to offer by way of a solution to the problem. Referring to my claim that a postmodern approach moves beyond poverty experts to numerous agents of social change, he asks, “Who are these agents of social change? How do they bring about such change?” I will not answer these questions here because I have already given very concrete examples in my article (pp. 720–22; see especially figure 5, p. 721). In the conclusion of that article, I try to locate my own work in relation to “a solution to the problem.” I write that, “It is not possible to describe ‘a solution’ to poverty in a manner demanded by the question, ‘What is your solution to the problem?’ . . . the academic work that I do on poverty is ‘my solution’; it is the practice of my politics” (p. 723). Shrestha takes special aim at this comment. He characterizes my position as a hollow and aimless discursive exercise that reduces the whole debate on poverty to fragmented episodes and self-centeredness (pp. 711–12). He wonders how such intellect can “empower the poor and those who are fighting against poverty day and night in urban trenches as well as rural fringes” (p. 710). I do not know if the School of Business & Industry at Florida A&M University where Shrestha teaches is very far from the urban trenches and rural fringes that he refers to. But I cannot imagine how a very short article in the Annals can prevent him or anybody else from getting to the frontline in the war against poverty. The principal hypothesis of my paper is that discourse is deeply implicated in the creation of scarcity. As an author, I am obligated by my hypothesis to address my concerns about discourse to those who produce that discourse—my academic colleagues. To say so does not mean that I oppose doing practical work in the world with poor people or that I have lost my “moral compass.”

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References


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