



Fundraising and postmodernity

An introduction to fundraising's place in the postmodern world

Part 1: Critical theory and postmodern critique

● PHILOSOPHY OF FUNDRAISING

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ROGARE
THE FUNDRAISING THINK TANK

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'Il n'est pas certain que tout soit incertain'
(It is not certain that everything is uncertain).

Blaise Pascal
Pensée
1669



'Everything is real.'

Not John Lennon
Not Strawberry Fields Forever
Not 1967

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Foreword – Do you want to know a secret? We're all already postmodern

I can pre-empt some of the comments that will be made on finding out that Rogare has published a paper on postmodernism in fundraising. They'll contain words such as 'overthinking', 'inaccessible', and 'elitist'. People might be saying things like 'what the hell has this got to do with how I do my job as a fundraiser', or 'this is all just academic posturing with no real-world application'.

Fair point, what on earth does an understanding of postmodernism have to do with coming in to work at a fundraising department every day? Actually, quite a bit.

For a start, we live in a postmodern world in which postmodernist ideas are all around us, in almost every walk of life.

Ever looked at a building that has a Chinese pagoda-style roof sitting atop classical Grecian columns (and if you're like me, thought what a total eyesore)? Postmodern architecture.

Community - postmodern sitcomtery at its finest.



Enjoy the filmmaking of Quentin Tarantino? Postmodern storytelling (no straight story arc, mixing up genres, having the viewer superimpose their own interpretation on the film, etc).

Peter Blake's montage for the cover of The Beatles' Sgt Pepper album? Yep, you guessed it. Along with all the other pop and op artists from the 50s and 60s such as Lichtenstein, Warhol and Riley, who were each in their own way part of the postmodern art movement.¹

Sitcoms such as *Community*, *Episodes* (and other such shows in which actors pretend to be themselves) and *The Simpsons* are all postmodern. So even might be The Beatles' *White* album (Whitley 2000).

The distinction between our culturally postmodern age and what came before it is not a distinction so much between postmodernism and modernism, but rather postmodernism and traditionalism and romanticism.

Modernism represented a break with traditional realistic and romantic ways of seeing the world, through surrealism, cubism, modern jazz and other similar art forms. Postmodernism is a break from this modernism, but, arguably, our dominant paradigm has been traditional/romantic.

Most films we see follow a very traditional narrative arc (*Star Wars*, for example). Most songs we listen to follow the conventions of tried and trusted traditional songwriting and composing - most of us don't listen to Cage, Stockhausen and other avant garde modernist musicians.

Lingering romanticism aside, we're all so culturally

¹ While some might argue pop art was modernist, you can make the case that pop art was postmodern in that it is/was a mix-and-match approach borrowing from different genres, including modernism. Inevitably, there is no clear delineation between genres.



The M2 Building in Tokyo, an example of postmodernist architecture. Postmodernism - with its freeform mix-and-match of styles and genres - represents a break from modernist ways of seeing, such as American artist Stuart Davis's visual representations of the musical motifs of modern jazz.

postmodern these days, it's hard to think of a time when we were not. In short, postmodernism is a way to see the world - it is a pick-and-mix and mash up of the bits you like from different styles and genres.

It's also a different way to think about the world.

With a stream of thought that began in the mid-19th Century, and grew wider and deeper from the 1920/30s, postmodernist thought - particularly in the form of **Critical Theory** - challenged the modernist Enlightenment notion that the world could be explained by 'grand narratives', such as a political ideology (democracy, liberalism, Marxism), religion, any form of economic idea such as capitalism or, even, science.

You could caricature postmodernist thinking with an adapted John Lennon lyric: Instead of 'nothing is real', 'everything is real'. All interpretations of reality are as valid as all others and no one grand narrative has any special claim to reveal what is 'true' about the world - not even science.

Postmodernist ideas challenge the **hegemony** of established **power structures** by providing alternative viewpoints to interpret and **critique** the same set of facts and ideas.

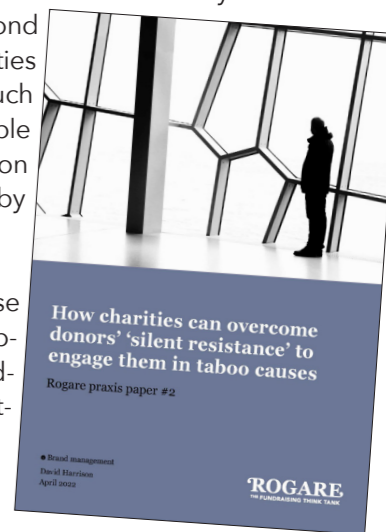
But they have also given us climate denial and the anti-vax movement. Neither of these would have been possible without the postmodern dethroning of science as the privileged arbiter of what is true (factual) and not true in the physical world.

So what, you're probably still thinking, what has this got to do with me? Why do I - a practising coal-face fundraiser - need an understanding of

postmodernity to do my job? Two reasons. The first is a matter of practice. Fundraising is a storytelling profession. You are telling stories to audiences that are culturally highly-literate and have imbibed postmodern influences for 50 years or more. Yet fundraising storytelling techniques are steadfastly traditional/romantic, by positioning the donor as the hero of their own story, who overcomes challenges in order to complete their mission and bring their story to a conclusion by helping some or other beneficiary. Fundraisers then tell donors how what has just happened could not have happened without them. Donorcentred fundraising communications and the donor journeys they recount often read like some kind of Grail Quest.

So, might there be other ways that fundraisers could tell stories, ways that use a postmodern approach to storytelling? How fundraisers could incorporate postmodern ideas in their practice is what Ashley Scott will look at in the second part of this series. Some charities are of course already taking such an approach - see for example the Rogare praxis paper on overcoming social taboos by David Harrison (2022).

The second reason is because many of the big contemporary challenges in fundraising are framed in post-modern discourse.



David Harrison's 2022 Rogare praxis paper on overcoming social taboos arguably describes a more postmodern approach to fundraising communications.

The challenge presented to 'romantic' donorcentred fundraising by Community-centric Fundraising (CCF) is a postmodern challenge, since CCF is a movement that is built on concepts and ideas that are probably underpinned, albeit perhaps unconsciously and unintentionally, by some kind of postmodern thinking and/or **critical theory**.² The challenge to the donor being positioned as the hero in their own story is a postmodern challenge based on **deconstructing hegemonic power relations**.

Arguments that structures and practices within the profession should be based on the **lived experience** of individual members of the profession rather than aggregated data about all members is a postmodern challenge to a scientifically modernist approach.

To properly make sense of these issues and debates, it's necessary to understand the ideas that underpin them. And it's also important from our perspective since Rogare takes an approach between modernism and postmodernism; between seeing and thinking; between theory and practice. That's why consultant Dr Ashley Scott has written the first of three papers on fundraising and postmodernity.³

In part 1, Ashley will take you through the key ideas that constitute 'postmodern' thought so you can unpick and read between the lines of current debates and issues in fundraising.

In part 2, Ashley will look at how postmodern ideas could be used more directly in fundraising practice.

And in part 3 he'll look at what postmodernity might have in store for fundraising in the future.

You may be tempted to skip reading part 1 and go straight to parts 2 and 3 (when published). But I'd urge you to take the time to read about the theory first. It'll be worth it. Also, if you at all interested in postmodern ideas but don't know where to start, Ashley's paper is one of the best layperson's introductions to the topic I've read. 6

Ian MacQuillin
Director

Rogare – The Fundraising Think Tank

2 Like Rogare, CCF is underpinned by critique and criticism.

3 Papers 2 and 3 will be quite a bit shorter than this one.

Glossary

Throughout this paper you'll find words in the text that are written in bold. These are ideas and concepts that are all contained in the glossary on p25 so you can quickly refresh your understanding of them rather than have to trawl through the paper to find the bit where they were first explained.

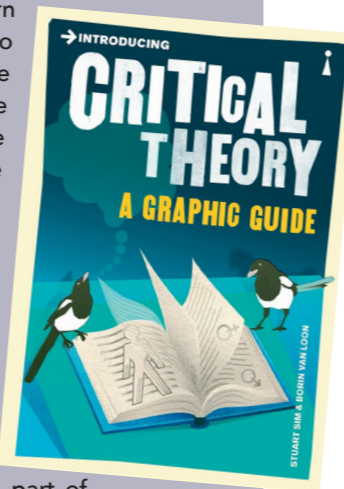
References and further reading

This paper doesn't contain a whole host of citations - at least, not as many as it could have contained. We've tried to provide an introductory overview to a very complex and difficult-to-understand subject (even the authors of postmodern tracts can't always explain them succinctly). In doing this, we haven't provided a citation for every nugget, claim or historical fact presented. Where we have done this, it's because of one three things:

- It's core part of postmodern thinking that you might want to check out for yourself. So we've given the original reference (Foucault is cited a couple of times). But mainly, we've endeavoured to reference accessible introductory texts to postmodern thinking, such as Sim and van Loon's (2012) *Critical Theory - A Graphic Guide*. Other times, where we haven't included citations - to avoid bogging down the flow of the text, and because some ideas are part of the postmodern canon and don't referencing (*Das Kapital*, for example) - we'll ask you to trust Ashley about the positions he's putting forward. Or don't - it's up to you.
- It references other Rogare work and papers (we'd be daft if we didn't point you to these).
- We're backing up things said about what's happened in fundraising's recent history.

When it comes to further reading, you might want to check out a couple of books from Oxford University Press's 'very short introduction' series:

- *Critical Theory* (Bronner 2017)
 - *Postmodernism* (Butler 2002)
- ...as well as making the most of the online and free:
- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy - <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/index.html>
 - or the slightly more accessible Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy - <https://iep.utm.edu>.



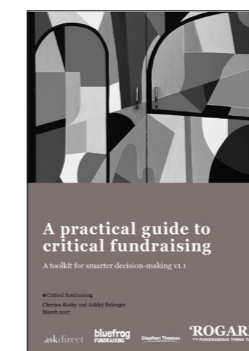
1 I want to tell you – Compulsory introduction

If you are thinking 'I really don't see how grappling with abstract notions of postmodernity is going to enhance my ability as a professional fundraiser', you'd probably be right. And, in that thought, you'd be postmodern too. Having said that, as we shall see, there are lots of examples of how postmodern thought as theory is impacting practice across the social sciences and related policy arenas. It's a world that fundraisers are very much a part of and a sector where the voice of postmodern **critique** is being heard more and more.

The aim of this paper then, is to introduce to readers who will not be familiar with these types of ideas a range of concepts that inhabit the landscape of postmodern thought, so we can use this as the foundation for exploring how they are emerging in the discourse around fundraising. If there is a case for such an attempt, which avoids standing in the line of fire for 'overthinking', then it is probably twofold:

- 1 Rogare already adopts a critical perspective on issues in fundraising - so it's worth thinking about how this sits within the pantheon of postmodern ideas
- 2 The postmodern mindset is ubiquitous - even if you don't realise it, you consume postmodernist ideas every day.

4 See pp18-19 of Rogare's (2021) *Rethinking Fundraising* paper, which you can download here - <https://www.rogare.net/rethinking-fundraising>.



Cherian Koshy's and Ashley Belanger's guide to critical thinking builds the bridge between theory and practice.

1.1 Think for yourself – Advancing critical fundraising

Rogare's approach to fundraising is not called *critical* for nothing. Indeed, Rogare has invested considerable time and effort in establishing the value of a **critical fundraising** proposition.⁴ Critical fundraising is a concerted attempt to critically and constructively evaluate the challenges and issues faced by the fundraising profession and provide evidence- and theory-based solutions to them, with two broad aims:

- to challenge some of the assumptions at the heart of fundraising, where that is beneficial to the sustainability of fundraising.
- to engender a culture change in how fundraisers use theory and evidence.

Rogare has also begun building the bridge between theory and practice through a practical, methodological guide to **critical fundraising** (Koshy and Belanger 2017), which points to the orientation from **critical realism** (see s5) and underpins Rogare's philosophical positioning.

This paper contributes to that project by proposing that postmodern critique:

- is fundamental to critical fundraising
- is useful in helping us think differently about the contexts in which fundraising happens wherever in the world, and
- offers the prospect of enriching our knowledge and understanding of how to make the world a better place.

To that extent this is just another input to the corpus of dialogue around fundraising ethics and insights from behavioural science that offer concepts, methods and tools that equip the fundraising enterprise. The justification lies in critical fundraising having the potential to offer alternate or novel approaches and methods for exploring issues that fundraisers encounter as people and professionals. 6

'If you are thinking 'I really don't see how grappling with abstract notions of postmodernity is going to enhance my ability as a professional fundraiser', you'd probably be right. And, in that thought, you'd be postmodern too.'

2.1 Here, there and everywhere – the ubiquity of postmodern mindsets

A second proposition is that, if we all think and behave in ways (the plural is important) that can be described as postmodern (as per Ian's foreword), it might be useful to have a sense of what that looks like in the minds and actions of fundraisers, donors and every other co-contributor alike.

The counter proposition is that if the postmodern mindset is so ubiquitous to be considered the natural state of any culturally-conscious person, then we all intuitively 'get it'. We don't need the postmodern mindset revealed to us because we already operate seamlessly within its provenances.

The case for the defence is that, as a contribution to **critical fundraising**, there may be insights into the reasons why we think and behave in response to the image of the world that is in our heads which are actually useful to a fundraiser.

It's useful not only in understanding ourselves as actors in the world, but also when working out the *what for's* and *how's* of the professional fundraising enterprise. **Critical fundraising** as applied critical thinking can influence and effect the change we want to see in the world. 6

Paper series structure

Part One: Critical theory and postmodern critique (this paper)

We begin with a knee-high wade into critical theory before beating a path through key themes in poststructuralism. We explore why critical realism is a helpful vehicle in the critical fundraising effort, finally circling back to the notion of critique and its relevance to fundraising generally.

Part Two: Key concepts for critical fundraisers

Part Two offers a number of concepts that could be thematic for enhancing fundraising theory and practice when viewed through a postmodern lens.

Part Three: Polycentrism and a transdisciplinary hermeneutic of fundraising

Part Three explores a future postmodern trajectory by introducing some emerging ideas that may frame the critical fundraising enterprise in future. Don't be scared of the working title. Once you've read Part 1, you'll know what 'hermeneutic' and 'transdisciplinary' mean, but I'll save an explanation of 'polycentrism' until Part 3.

A significant caveat in what follows in Part 1 is that it is not possible to do justice to the total narrative of postmodern thought that has dominated philosophy and the social sciences for over a century. Inevitably there is some selectivity and simplification in the task. The hope is that there are adequate and relevant entry points to prompt the reader towards further investigation.

Acknowledgement

I am immensely grateful to Ian for his oversight of and thoughtful advice during this project. And, especially, his creative contribution to it 'getting better' all the time.

2

Now and then – A brief history of critical theory

Understanding the postmodern condition throughout the 20th and into the 21st century has been the project of a broad sweep of thinking called critical theory. These days critical theory tends to surface in particular topics or social movements. Often with distinctive branding or labels, the activists' aim is to uncover, re-interpret and counteract forms of oppression and **power**.

The chances are that, filtered by your interests and motivations, your demographic, and a host of other factors, you will have encountered any number of 21st century expressions of the duplex of critical theory and postmodern **critique**:

- Some are more 'street', like hashtag movements around gender and race, Occupy (political economy), Extinction Rebellion (climate change)
- Some are more 'institutional', such as rights movements that get enshrined in law or policy directives (LGBT, equality, employment)
- Others are more emergent or more situated in the academy (DEI, Critical Race Theory, Decolonisation).

Arguably our everyday encounters as socially-conscious people reflect more the 'critical' than the 'theory', but nonetheless, uncovering forms of oppression and power is the stuff of postmodern critique and an important component of critical theory.

Critical Theory begins, fully capitalised,⁶ early in the 1930s at the Frankfurt School at the Goethe University, where names such as Adorno (1903-1969), Horkheimer (1895-1973) and Marcuse (1898-1979) adorn its hall of fame. In the latter half of the 20th Century the luminary-in-chief was Jurgen Habermas (b. 1929) who remains immensely influential today.

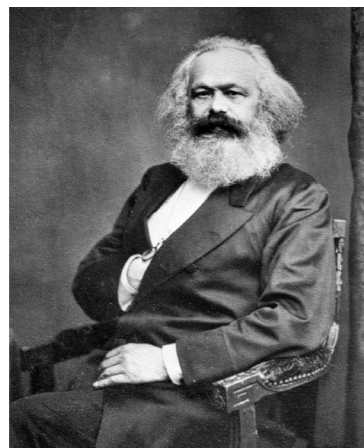
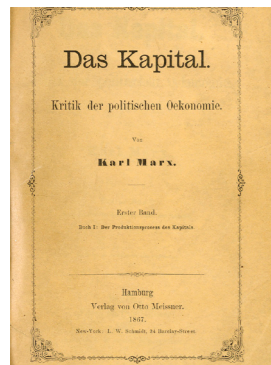


Critical theory and postmodern critique finds expression in protest movements such as Extinction Rebellion (the photo shows a protest in Brisbane, Australia) and Occupy.

Three of the leading lights of the Frankfurt School, photographed in 1964: Max Horkheimer (left) shakes hands with Theodor Adorno, while Jurgen Habermas fixes his hair.



6 I am indebted to the excellent Stanford University Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (Bohman 2021) for the helpful upper/lower case naming to distinguish between historical and contemporary characteristics of critical social theories.



The origins of critical theory can be found in the works, particularly *Das Kapital*, of Karl Marx (above), whose ideas, like those of the Frankfurt School, were steeped in the philosophy of Georg Hegel (right).



Critical Theory was capitalised because it was in the intellectual tradition of those 19th century social theories – most notably that of Karl Marx (1818-83) – that attempted to explain in universal terms how the world of humans was and what it would become. Like Marx, the Frankfurt School was steeped in German idealist philosophy, especially that of Georg Hegel (1770-1813).

Idealism takes the position that reality is shaped by what we think rather than the material world we experience. Physical things only exist because they are perceived as such by our consciousness, and we arrive at our perceptions through a method called **dialectics** (see s3.2). For Hegel, dialectics (see s3.2) was a mental exercise that creates all the concepts we need to make sense of the world, however fluid and diverse that seems (McQuillan nd). And this is where Hegel and Marx part company.

Marx's theory is famously set out in *Das Kapital*, which is actually much more an economic than a social theory. The theory is encapsulated as a political treatise in the *Communist Manifesto* pamphlet of 1848.⁷ *Das Kapital* is organised around a big idea called historical materialism, which explains the progress of humankind through history.

Historical materialism is important because, unlike Hegelian idealism, it argues that it is the **dialectic** around the material conditions of existence that determine⁸ what makes the world what it is, not the

7 Originally published in German in February 1848 and quickly followed by French, Polish and Danish versions, it was not published in English until 1850.

8 Historical materialism is essentially a *deterministic* philosophical position. Because of inherent contradictions in the socio-economic system, the outcome is causally inevitable. Marx's version of historical materialism was a bit more sophisticated because he wanted to explain the ideas of class consciousness and class struggle as the principal causes determining social change.

6 *'The aspiration towards fairness and social justice – a belief that the world can be a better place and that challenging the exploitative nature of ideological power is integral to that process – is, perhaps, not far from the minds of many a fundraiser.'*

power of one set of ideas over another. This secular world view removes the religion of Christendom as the primary source of truth in the world, which had dominated European philosophy since the Renaissance.

So, a characteristic of early Critical Theorists is their interest in metatheory (theories about theories). For Marx, metatheory concerned modes of production, particularly the inherent contradictions in capitalism that he sets out in *Das Kapital*, that would lead inevitably to the revolutionary overthrow of the Bourgeoisie class (owners of capital) by the Proletariat class (providers of exploited labour).

Maybe because he died and *Das Kapital* was published posthumously, Marx never quite gets to the bottom of precisely how the proletariat gets to the tipping point where revolution ensues automatically, although the *Communist Manifesto* declares the political and economic circumstances of the day were ripe for revolution in several parts of Europe at the time, and issues the famous rallying call: 'Workers of all Countries, Unite!'

By the time we get to the 1930s, the Marxist-Leninist model of a socialist state in Russia was not looking quite the utopia Marx predicted; while the ideas of democratic freedom and emancipation were looking bleak against the inter-war rise of fascism.

What is more, capitalism continued to thrive, notwithstanding the major hiccup of the Great Depression, and it would be less than a generation before the 'You've never had it so good' trope was circulating around the political machinery of the US and Britain.

It was becoming clear to those in the academy who thought about such things that Marxist metatheory as a universal world view required something of a

rethink. Consequently, in the Frankfurt School and among other European philosophers and social theorists, attention was increasingly focused on the nature and manifestation of **ideology** that is still with us today (Sim and van Loon 2012, pp36-39).

The study of ideological forms was a way of explaining how the inherent contradictions in the capitalist mode of production were held in tension in the collective consciousness over time. By digging away beneath deterministic theories, like Marxism, the critical theorists unpacked:

- how **power** in the structures of society came to be
- how they were reproduced – which is called **hegemony**
- how we each come to hold a subconscious picture of those structures in our heads through which we live and make sense of our lives – which is called the 'social imaginary' (Thompson 1984).

It's important to recognise that **capitalised Critical Theory** was both explanatory and normative. That is, it offered an explanation of how the world is, but was also **ideological** in its aspirations of a utopian future and what social change is required to achieve a fair and just society.

Critical Theory, generally speaking, was anti-capitalist, pro-democracy and it's 'truth' lay in some future state of universal freedom and responsibility. Also, as it migrated out of philosophy departments, it became increasingly pluralistic, appealing to all social science disciplines.

The aspiration towards fairness and social justice – a belief that the world can be a better place and that challenging the exploitative nature of **ideological** power is integral to that process – is, perhaps, not far from the minds of many a fundraiser. If so, it suggests that **critical theory (uncapitalised)** could be the natural habitat of the thoughtful fundraiser. 6

3

What goes on – Three important concepts in critical social theory

3.1 I, me, mine – Critical reflection and relativism

Reflexivity and the relativity of human knowledge are two concepts vital to critical theory approaches.

Capitalised Critical Theory was in part constructed on a **critique** of positivism. **Social positivists** held that there is an objective social reality out there that can be observed and researched empirically in order to discover social facts. They further argued that the knowledge and understanding generated by this scientific method would be objective and value-free. The positivist aspiration was that if you could uncover the cause and effect of human social behaviour then you could formulate proposals for making the world a better place.

By contrast, **Critical Theorists** argued that emulating the scientific method in the social sciences will not uncover social reality because the knowledge and experience of the human subject is inevitably folded into the process. Simply, you cannot sit outside of the world you are a part of so there is no such thing as value-free observation. The best the empirical data can offer is an improved interpretation on which to build. Empirical data is *explanatory* (it explains what we see) and sometimes *normative* (it suggests how we should improve what we see). But it is not necessarily true (this how the social world really, actually is).

Critical theorists – including modern day **critical realists** – argue that the progress of human history is

complex and that there will always be a variety of valid accounts of social reality that cannot be reduced to universal laws.

Consequently, **uncapitalised critical theory**, without the deterministic sure footedness of its capitalised ancestry, has significant implications for how we view the world. Firstly, if knowledge that explains the way society and culture are can only ever be a best guess interpretation of social reality, then how do we know what we know is a good interpretation?⁹

Second, and this is central to the critical theorists' enterprise, if what we think we know is only one interpretation of many, and interpretations can be distorted by **ideological power**, then not only is knowledge socially constructed, it is always relative.

So, the relativity of knowledge and the rejection of absolutist truth claims become a key characteristic of postmodern thought. And, **critical reflection**, the ability to think consciously about self-conduct, becomes essential to the idea of critique and has to be considered as an innate characteristic of human consciousness.

Thus, for the critical theorist, in a world without objective truth, the best tools to help approximate the best truth we can are going to come from the reflexive application of dialectical thought. 6

'In one of the big contemporary issues in fundraising, donorcentred fundraising can be seen as the thesis and Community-centric Fundraising as the antithesis. We don't yet have a synthesis of the two approaches.' 6

⁹ The study of the question 'how do we what we know' is known in philosophy as epistemology.

3.2 Two of us – Dialectics

Critical theory today retains one central concept that, along with hermeneutics (see s2.3), stretches back through the Frankfurt School, Marx and Hegel's idealist philosophy, and all the way to ancient Greek philosophers Plato and Socrates, and that is the idea that truth is approached through process called dialectics.

The dialectical format that informed European continental philosophy in the 20th century starts with two contradictory positions ('thesis and 'antithesis') aimed at resolution ('synthesis'). Synthesis is some kind of improvement on what we knew before or, just as likely, the identification of two further inherently contradictory positions, and away you go round the loop again. As we have seen, for Marx, the dialectic of historical materialism saw the inherent contradiction embodied between the proletariat and bourgeoisie, with the synthesis being the overthrow of the latter (false consciousness) by the former (true consciousness) and the establishment of socialist utopia.

It was the Frankfurt School's 20th century deployment of dialectical method in the face of the persistent growth of liberal market economies on one hand and

the rise of totalitarianism on the other that made them so downbeat about the prospect of the left-leaning social revolution they had conceived.

While contemporary critical theories retain a dialectical posture, **critique** has become more granular and focused around critical 'readings' (see s3.3). 6

Dialectics in the clash between donor-centred and community-centric fundraising

In one of the big contemporary issues in fundraising, donorcentred fundraising can be seen as the thesis and Community-centric Fundraising as the antithesis.

We don't yet have a synthesis of the two approaches, though this is precisely what Rogare tried to do with the 2020 paper *The Donorcentred Baby and the Community-centric Bathwater*, presenting two possible syntheses in what the paper termed 'total relationship fundraising' and 'integrative fundraising' (MacQuillin 2020).

And there are many fundraising practitioners, particularly in CCF chapters, who are working hard to find that practical synthesis between the two approaches.

3.3 We can work it out – Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is for anyone wanting to systematically understand human communication – fundraising copywriters, for example.

Described as both an art (by Schleiermacher 1768-1834) and a science (by Habermas), hermeneutics is a method of interpreting both the content and context of communications (including any communicative activity of **lived experience**) to come up with the best understanding we can of the meaning being communicated, conscious that our understanding is never perfect, and our truth only approximate.

Hermeneutics is at the heart of pretty much all qualitative research methods – everything from an online donor survey to full blown attitudinal research – that seek to generate data that backs up our hypotheses. So, donor surveys that appear to be just fact gathering will reflect hypotheses that are not explicit in the questions you ask. For example,

a transactional hypothesis aimed at repeat giving is understood from a marketing perspective; whereas, a relational hypothesis aimed at building affiliation and connectedness is understood from a psychological perspective. If you are interested in understanding what makes for donor loyalty, then **critically reflecting** on the derivation of your survey questions is an exercise in hermeneutics.

When people exercise agency (see s4.5) – rather than instinctive impulse – in consciously interpreting what is communicated, you can end up with a hermeneutic preceded with an adjective. Often these are called 'readings' – taking people's 'best' understanding and translating it purposefully into a means to an end. So, no surprise there is Marxist hermeneutic, but we encounter black, feminist, queer, green, post-colonial, biblical and so on readings which are 'applied hermeneutics' with particular outcomes in mind. 6

4

Things we said today – Critical Theory and poststructuralism

Poststructuralism has been ‘lower-case’ from the beginning, never aspiring to emancipatory ‘upper-case’ **Critical Theory**. However, poststructural critique is every bit as influential in 21st century and embraces a number of concepts relevant to critical fundraising.

To understand poststructuralism we have to shift our attention from the German academy of the 1930s to that of France in the 1950s and after. Every bit a product of 20th century postmodern thought, poststructuralism is distinguishable from critical theory in a number of ways.

Critical theorists focus more attention on the structure of society and culture, and social theory. Poststructuralists are focused on language and theories of knowledge. But the interrelation and overlap of ideas makes for a better understanding of the world, even when the terminology can be very different and distinctive.

Both critical theorists and poststructuralists acknowledge that there is a real material world that affects how people behave physically, psychologically and emotionally. Indeed, it is our **lived experience** of the real world that throws up the competing and conflicting ways of knowing the world that stimulates **critical reflection** in the first place.

Both employ a **dialectical** approach to their postmodern **critique**. While for Marx it was the dialectic of historical materialism, for many critical social theorists it’s the dialectic between competing **ideologies** within social structures, whereas most poststructuralists are concerned with a dialectic of discourse (see s3.2).

Both approaches are entirely sceptical about the idea of objective truth and understand that knowledge is relative and meaning fluid.

Both assert that people carry a picture of the material world in their heads. For the critical theorist, the emphasis is on the ‘social imaginary’ (see s2); for the poststructuralist, it’s to do with an individual’s personal identity best analysed in terms of the stories people tell about themselves.

4.1 The Word – Structuralism (and being ‘post’ it)

The ‘structuralism’ that poststructuralists are ‘post’ is an early 20th century philosophical approach principally concerned with linguistics.

Like **(social) positivism**, structuralism asserts that there is a reality that has a reliable order to it (a structure) that helps us understand the truth of how the world is, but that reality is socially constructed, not natural. These truths carry fixed meanings that are observed in the language we use to talk and write about the reality-out-there.

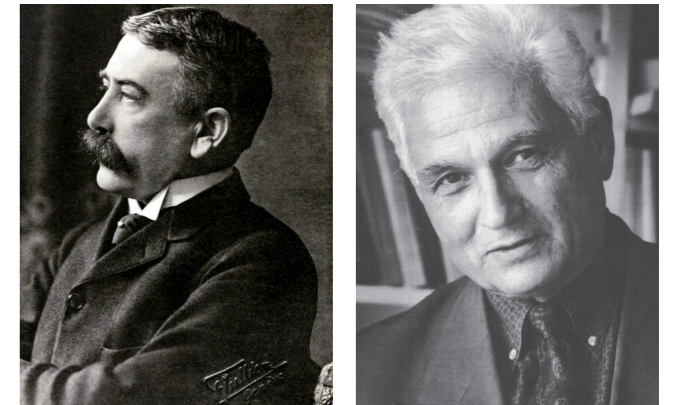
So, it was the ‘structure’ of language that the emergent poststructuralists used as the entry point and basis of their **critique** to destabilise the idea that what things are taken to mean are fixed and timeless.

One of the founding fathers of structuralism, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), took the reasonable view that language as speech precedes writing of language as text. After all, we learn to speak before we learn to write. So, language is a truer, more natural version of events because text can only be a representation of speech and sound and is, therefore, inferior. For de Saussure, writing gets contaminated by culture and can be used politically to serve some interests over others (de Saussure 1959/2011).

Although de Saussure had begun to challenge the idea of fixed meaning by arguing that meaning was more multi-layered and dependent on social context, it was Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) who approached the linguistic problem of meaning another way and opened the vista to contemporary poststructuralist thought.

According to Derrida, the claim to the superiority of speech can only be made in opposition to the idea of writing as being inferior. That is, once you live in world of both speech and writing there’s no going back to the original state of speech-only, at which point the nature of the relationship between the two is arbitrary. So, *saying* the word ‘fundraiser’ is no different from *writing* the word ‘fundraiser’.

Derrida makes a lot more of the opposition between speech and writing in his work but there is one key take-away: you can begin to understand the **critique** of power through the history of binary concepts, upon which structuralism is founded. (Sim and van Loon 2009, p90)



Ferdinand de Saussure (left) posited that language is ‘truer’ than written text. Jacques Derrida (right), took the idea of speech and language as a binary concept as the basis for understanding power, which is often founded on binary oppositions, such as man/woman, Western/Eastern or donor/beneficiary, and how these are ‘deconstructed’ (see s4.2).

If you look back through history, you can see that language contains lots of binary categories whose meanings derive from the difference between them – so, female/male, Christian/pagan, Western/Eastern, slave/free. In the fundraising sector we can offer up the history of the use of donor and beneficiary as a binary.

Superficially, the meaning of each word is a given, but you don’t have to think about it too hard to see that the relationship between the words is not neutral. Rather they contain socially-constructed hierarchies that come to communicate **power** and control. A culture that asserts the superiority of one category tends towards ‘othering’ the second and rendering it inferior. It’s a short conceptual step to see that once contaminated in this way, the use of binary categories linguistically has served to justify symbolic and actual violence in the real world.

In fundraising, Community-centric Fundraising’s position is that an assertion of the superiority of the donor (‘because of you, the donor, something good happened’) has been at the expense of harm caused to the community of ‘beneficiaries’, through othering, stereotyping and saviourism.

For Derrida, questioning the historical basis for the relationship between binary categories was the fundamental ‘why’ entry point for **critique** and the start point for **deconstruction**. ⑥

4.2 Helter skelter – Deconstruction

The idea of deconstruction is what Jacques Derrida is probably best remembered for. Derrida has provided different definitions of 'deconstruction' (Lawlor 2023), but, essentially, it is the idea that any meaning you can find in a text or narrative is unstable because it relies on arbitrary language to describe that meaning. Or to put it another way, there is not a single meaning you can find in any text, narrative or idea, but multiple meanings that are often in conflict with each other, and that any concept can thus be substituted for another concept (Derrida 1967/2016). The process of 'deconstructing' something is to reveal those conflicting meanings and to destabilise binaries (Sim and van Loon 2009, pp88-90).

Furthermore, since deconstruction insists that once you adopt the concept that language is repeatedly socially constructed through history, and only related to reality in terms of its efficacy in the moment, we are back to the idea that there is no universal truth, but multiple truths and meanings that are fluid over time.

One way to look at what Community-centric Fundraising is doing (see box on p13 and visit the CCF website)¹⁰ is the deconstruction of the binary relationships (see s4.1) between donors and communities of beneficiaries (as these relationships are mediated by fundraisers), by revealing the language that canonises donors but 'others' beneficiaries, and substituting one concept of fundraising (one that centres the donor as a 'hero') with a different concept (one that challenges the power and privilege of donors).

There is a binary in the genealogy of our sector – between charities and commerce. Indeed, charities are regularly defined as what they are not, namely nonprofit organisations.¹¹ In the USA, this is related to tax-exemption status, which is similar in Canada, and in the UK, Australia and New Zealand by registration with their respective charity commissions. Interestingly, in the UK, Companies House (for commercial corporates) and the Charity Commission were established by Acts of Parliament within 10 years of each other in the mid-19th Century. As with speech and writing, it doesn't matter that Companies House was first (1844) and the Charity Commission second (1853). And, the relationship between the two forms has not been neutral and continues to change.

Take, for example, the issue of institutional trust where

there is a longitudinal general downward trend around the world. In the UK, while charities may have held some moral high ground over relative trustworthiness, in the latter half of the 2010s there was a justifiable hit over their behaviour towards the donor public compounded by several media scandals. While, the idea of trust is itself socially constructed and, therefore, complex, the evidence suggests that there remains a higher quotient of trust in charitable institutions compared to business, and that the correlates of trust are honesty, transparency (about use of funds) and ethical behaviour (Charity Commission 2022).

Globally, however, while there is a parallel tendency to distrust institutions, in a period marked by the Covid-19 pandemic, it is business that is perceived as more trustworthy.¹² The data suggests that the reason business scores higher is that while nonprofits are considered highly ethical and reasonably competent, business is perceived as more competent to resolve societal issues. And, it is the reasonably ethical/high competence box that correlates with trust.

So, trust is both socially constructed and context dependent. And we see it elsewhere. For example, statutory definitions of charitable (to do with public benefit) and commercial (to do with shareholder return) entities make explicit their different cultural meanings. But, these different meanings give rise to zeitgeist moments where pro-business, and usually right-wing, politicians find themselves having to declare that profit 'is not a dirty word'. Meanwhile, charities perform minor contortions to clarify that 'primary purpose trading' is 'not profit', and socially-responsible corporates with ever-more sophisticated ESG (environmental, social and governance) strategies have to disclaim against accusations of greenwashing. Then, there are the media-fuelled reactions to big nonprofit and for-profit CEOs who have to respond to public opprobrium about high salaries and mega-bonuses respectively.

Of course, there is a reality which says there can be no charitable sector without a wealth-creating private sector (notwithstanding those charities with significant historical endowments or investment portfolios).

But the point is that the cultural dialogue, wherein lies the meanings of what it is to be a charity, are exercised largely in relation to the *other*. ●

● *'Charities perform minor contortions to clarify that 'primary purpose trading' is 'not profit', and socially responsible corporates with ever-more sophisticated ESG (environmental, social and governance) strategies have to disclaim against accusations of greenwashing.'*

4.3 I'm looking through you – Cultural discourse

Another concept in **poststructuralism** is discourse which concerns the contexts in which language is experienced. Here the thinker-in-chief is Michel Foucault (1926-1984) (Sim and van Loon 2012, pp91-95). His work has been elaborated significantly by his acolytes and these days the concept of discourse is used in a variety of ways in the poststructuralist corpus.¹⁷

For the sake of brevity, and because I want to hold on to the notion of **dialectic** shared by critical theorists and some poststructuralists alike, I am emphasising two uses of the concept of discourse – 'constitutive' and 'representative' – as they most correspond to how people make meaning individually and collectively, and act according to the meaning they make in society (Fairclough 2003).

- Constitutive discourses are to do with how people as individuals create their personal identities (see Section 4.5).
- Representative discourses occur in social interactions with groups of individuals. Representative discourse gives rise to collective positions, including policy prescriptions and social action, based on shared beliefs about how the world is.
- Both combine to construct the social reality that suffuse our **lived experience**.

Also, whether constitutive or representative, some discourses are more regulated (particularly in institutional contexts like education, law and work), others are more relational (such as peer groups), and still others are socio-cultural and to do with gender, ethnicity and other demographics. It's not hard to see



Michel Foucault - thinker-in-chief of cultural discourse.

that these are not mutually exclusive categories.

The general constitutive and representational **poststructuralist** position is that through **discourses** we create knowledge and understanding which is never fixed but always in a state of being formed and reformed.

In the 1950s and 1960s the attention of poststructuralists was exclusively on linguistic discourses represented as text and speech; later it took on language as symbols and signs (semiotics). These days, arguably, you can take a poststructuralist position on any communicative composition including performance and the arts. So, for example, the toppling of Edward Colston's statue in Bristol in 2020 can be:

- analysed as a discourse around a written text (inscribed on the statue plinth)
- embodied as a symbol of power in the form of a statue
- articulated as resistance by protesters with the context of a wider social discourse – Black Lives Matter.

¹⁰ <https://communitycentricfundraising.org>

¹¹ There is an equivalent in the 'non-governmental organisation' nomenclature.

¹² See <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2021-trust-barometer> and <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2022-trust-barometer>.

¹³ For those wanting a deeper dive into discourseology research there are journals to accompany you on the journey, such as Discourse and Society – <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/das>.



Some charities might be harassing or persecuting members of the public, ChildLine founder Esther Rantzen says
by July 2015 by Hannah Birkwood
The broadcaster was giving a plenary address on the final day of the Institute of Fundraising's convention

OLIVE COOKE
KILLED BY HER KINDNESS
OLDEST POPPY SELLER
BRIDE & VROOM
POOR OLIVE
was hours
other cha
10 bet
letters a

Bombarded by charity appeal devotees

FOUNDED NO DEATH BY COLD CALLERS

The reaction to the death of Olive Cooke in the 'fundraising crisis' of 2015 in the UK can be interpreted as resistance to the power that charities/fundraisers are perceived to hold over donors/members of the public. The Fundraising Preference Service was the solution to redress that power imbalance (see s4.4).

FPS FUNDRAISING PREFERENCE SERVICE

The outcome of the discourse among Bristolians was to put the statue in a museum and keep the plinth in its place with a new inscription (see box, below). How long it stays that way will depend on where the discourse goes next.

In a fundraising context in the UK, the death of Olive Cooke in 2015 (Salmon nd) can be:

- analysed as written text (the media stories about her death - which is what Rogare has done in its work on how to understand why some people hold what appear to be ideological objections to fundraising)¹⁴
- presented as a symbol of the power relationships (see Section 4.4) between charities/fundraisers and donors/public
- championed by the resistance to that power, both by individuals, such as Esther Rantzen, in a plenary

at the Institute of Fundraising convention in 2015 (Birkwood 2015) and Lord Grade in his role as chair of the Fundraising Regulator (MacQuillin 2017); and institutions and organisations in the form of the Department of Media, Culture and Sport and the NCVO working group led by Sir Stuart Etherington (Etherington et al 2017).

The outcome of this discourse was the Fundraising Preference Service, which enables anyone to opt out of receiving any form of direct marketing (not just fundraising) from named charities. 🗳️

¹⁴ Much of this has not yet been published. You can find out about Rogare's work on ideological objections to fundraising here - <https://www.rogare.net/public-engagement> - including the Canadian Fundraising Narrative, for which discourse analysis of media coverage was employed.

On 13 November 1895, a statue of Edward Colston (1636-1721) was unveiled in Bristol celebrating him as a city benefactor. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the celebration of Colston was increasingly challenged given his prominent role in the enslavement of African people. On 7 June 2020, the statue was pulled down during Black Lives Matter protests (right) and rolled into the harbour. Following consultation with the city in 2021, the statue entered the collections of Bristol City Council's museums.

You can read how this position was arrived at in this report from the 'We are Bristol' History Commission - <https://www.bristol.gov.uk/files/documents/1825-history-commission-full-report-final/file>.



4.4 Twist and shout – Power

As we have discovered, critical social theorists look for power-as-ideology in the structure of society and material conditions of life, particularly in the institutions that literally and metaphorically govern how we live. Not only are institutions the source of what is sometimes coercive **power** in society, but the embodiment of **ideological power** in institutions such as schools and courtrooms helps to explain how, and why, social structures are recreated through history (that's **hegemony** again).

By contrast, **poststructuralists** see power as being represented in language and **discourse**. Moreover, you can trace the sources of power by observing human relationships.

Foucault uses the concept of the 'nexus of knowledge and power' to explain how this works (Foucault 2007, p61, and see Sim and Van Loon 2012, p91-93). Foucault sees **power**, not as an **ideological** form, but as a granular and decentralised phenomenon located in any set of human relationships where some people are influenced by and internalise a set of norms and meanings provided by others.

This kind of internalised knowledge can be that imparted by the expert - such as the professional fundraiser - within a social discourse. The point about the nexus for Foucault is that we only understand it to be power when we detect resistance to it.

For example in the UK, we have seen this nexus in play during the pandemic. Early in the **discourse** we encountered tropes from the government asserting that we 'listen to the science' (as pronounced by the experts who flanked former UK prime minister, Boris Johnson on TV) in order to justify decisions about tightening or relaxing Covid restrictions.

But this can work both ways and emphasises the **dialectical** nature of discourses. The mood of the public in early 2020, similarly informed by the science, was more pro-lockdown than were government ministers. Subsequently, Boris Johnson reluctantly accepted the need for lockdown in response to the perceived widespread sentiment among the general public.

Arguably, the tendency in public life has been to take the uncovering of power through **critique** as a good thing and the exercise of power as something to be stopped. Foucault would probably argue that an examination of the nexus may just as well uncover a power for good. But you will only know when you embark on the process.

So, in our sector, fundraisers often struggle to have our 'power-for-good' as experts taken seriously or listened to. Fundraisers are sometimes described by colleagues with the 'necessary evil' epithet; and, attempts to explain and justify fundraising overheads anger our audiences rather than educate them; whereas, critique of the 'power-for-bad' of fundraisers - for example, in the discourse around Olive Cooke - is readily adopted.

In working with the Association of Fundraising Professionals Canada, Rogare has tried to find alternative ways to frame the critique of fundraising, by introducing a new power-for-good narrative into the discourse intended 'to better engage with people who object to the way modern fundraising is professionally carried out'.¹⁵ In essence the approach combines both ideological critique and dialogue into a single framing. 🗳️

¹⁵ See <https://www.rogare.net/canada-narrative>.

'The weakness at the core of contemporary postmodern critique is that it is exemplary at tearing down the walls but not always so good at explaining what better to replace them with.'

4.5 Got to get you into my life – Personal identity and agency

Poststructuralists, like critical theorists, rely on the idea of the self-conscious, self-reflexive ‘subject’ who finds their personal identity through the theatre of discourses in which they participate culturally. Personal identity is expressed in autobiographical terms as:

- personal narratives grounded in inner dialogue
- mutual storytelling among the social groups we participate in, and
- the exercise of agency.

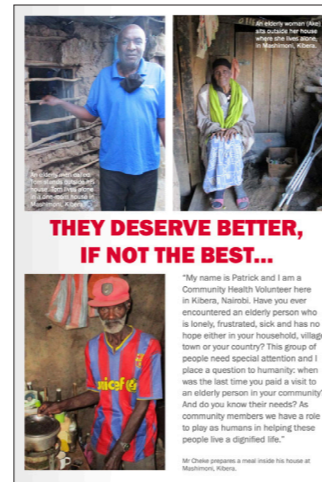
When **discourses** are encountered within social groups and institutions, some narratives about the ‘way things are’ dominate our **lived experience** and provide meaning for us until such time as they are replaced by other meaningful narratives. These so-called ‘discursive’ meanings make no claims to be absolute or true but are contingent upon the discourse and the parties involved.

The important point is that as social *subjects*, lived experience involves investment in any number of discourses over time, such that we constantly modify our knowledge and understanding of the world as we are shaped and reshaped by them.

Put another way, the formation of personal identity can be described as a process of *meaning making*, and how we behave in society in a way that is *meaningful* to us is the exercise of agency. Sometimes, the idea

of agency is relegated to a clever synonym for making choices in life. But it is better conceived as the conscious resistance to social compliance or vice versa. Agency, from a poststructuralist perspective, concerns the extent to which individuals – and, by extension social groups – can exert control over the discourses that *make meaning*. This involves both **critical reflection** and **power** over the material conditions of life. It is this constant discursive social construction of personal identity that determines the social actions that people are empowered (or powerless) to take.

For example, Rogare’s work on the framing of beneficiaries aims to resolve the poverty porn dilemma by basing a solution not on whether communications are better at raising money, or whether they protect beneficiaries from wrongs such as saviourism or othering, but on whether beneficiaries are able to exercise agency in telling their own stories (MacQuillin, Crombie and Smyth 2022; MacQuillin 2022). 6



Recent research (Crombie and Girling 2022) supports the idea that beneficiary-led fundraising can be just as effective as that generated by fundraisers.

4.6 It’s all too much – the problem of poststructuralist theory

Perhaps the biggest distinction between critical social theory and **poststructuralism** is that poststructuralists steer clear of big theories and methods that try to explain life, the universe and everything. Not for them the normative explanations of the way the world is and what it will become.

Indeed, Jacques Derrida, in responding to the notion that his concept of **deconstruction** could be used as a ‘method’, expressed the view that the very idea would defeat the object of deconstruction.

So, if poststructuralist approaches are neither theories nor methods, what use can they serve? Here are two.

One, in the absence of any grand narrative to filter our understanding, any narrative is as valid as another in social discourses, which opens the prospect of listening to voices from the margins; and, two, the meaning made through any social discourse offers the prospect of achieving change through the exercise of agency at any nexus of knowledge and power.

On the other hand, because poststructuralism is not aimed at normative explanations (i.e. telling us how things ought to be), it is inclined to succumb to a weakness at the core of contemporary postmodern **critique**: It’s exemplary at tearing down the walls (the antithesis) but not always so good at explaining what better to replace them with (the synthesis). 6

5

Come together – Rogare and critical realism

Rogare’s preferred lens on **critical theory** takes critical realism as the principle methodological paradigm to underpin its philosophical approach.

Critical realism arose in the 1970s – so late to the party – as a further critique of positivist methodologies, but nevertheless aiming to better understand the complex array of human behaviours in culture and society in a ‘scientific’ way.

Taking climate change as our example – and a lot of the explanations of critical realism rely on natural phenomena to get the idea across – the rationale from critical realism would go like this.

If global warming is an objective reality, then climate change deniers are making subjective interpretations of that reality that are wrong. But to explain why they are wrong, it’s necessary to have some empirical data about people and society as evidence to analyse and explain the bias, power and mis-interpretation of the facts by the denier.

On the one hand, critical realism has a philosophical basis (called an ontology) for its critique that parallels that of positivist science. It argues that there is an observable, social reality and components of that reality – things such as the patriarchy and the laws of cricket – are real, in a literal sense, in the same way that aspects of the physical world, such as bridges and aeroplanes, are real.

This social reality can be framed conceptually in the expectation that research into that reality will generate data that improves our understanding of that social reality.

This is a key aspect of how Rogare incorporates a critical realist methodology, by looking at where there are problems in social reality and recommending interventions to fix them, which is perhaps best illustrated by the work directed to dismantling the patriarchy in the fundraising profession (Hill et al 2022).

But, on the other hand, as we have seen, because observers are part of the social reality they engage with, they also need to employ the general features of all critical theory, namely dialectics and critical reflection, in the process.

Indeed, critical realists argue that understanding social reality is really, really complex and multi-layered, and no single angle of enquiry is going to reveal all it would be good to know; and, so there is an appeal to methods across different disciplines to help in their ontological enterprise.

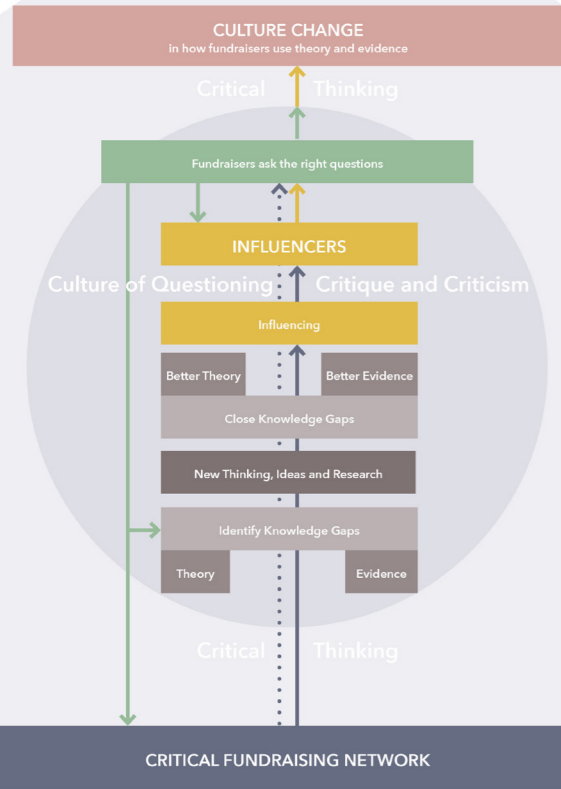
Take neuroscience which is the neo-positivist¹⁶ discipline behind the behavioural science increasingly beloved of fundraisers. The importance of neuroscience to fundraising is seen through the growing number of courses and accreditations afforded within a psychology of fundraising. Fundraisers can gain insight into the kinds of triggers that stimulate certain types of donor behaviour and

6 *‘I’ve never heard a fundraiser talk about donor behaviour in terms of a millisecond switch in the millivolt polarity of an electrical current in someone’s brain.’*

16 Along with quantum mechanics, neuroscience is ‘neo’ because unlike good old school biol, phys and chem, it’s harder to observe the properties of the science when they are at particle level. You tend to have to look for evidence of something else to prove your data empirically.

ROGARE
THE FUNDRAISING THINK TANK
Theory of change

→ Influence from Critical Fundraising Network
→ Influence from 'Influencers'
→ Fundraisers asking right questions



Rogare's Theory of Change encourages fundraisers to critically reflect on the fundraising profession's knowledge through critique (see p23) and questioning. To download a PDF of the Theory of Change, visit <https://www.rogare.net/theory-of-change>.

Being transdisciplinary

Being transdisciplinary means synthesising a single, overarching conceptual and theoretical model from a variety of disciplines. This is different to multidisciplinary (incorporating ideas from outside your silo/discipline) or interdisciplinary (working with people across silos/disciplines) in that its vision and ambition is much larger.

Further reading

For more on Rogare's critical realist and transdisciplinary approaches, take a look at pp18-21 of Rogare's (2021) *Rethinking Fundraising* paper, available here - <https://www.rogare.net/rethinking-fundraising>.

consider how donors can be motivated to behave in particular ways.

Now, at the most reduced level, neuroscience has it that all our behaviours, thoughts and feelings are the sum of the electrical impulses passing along nerve cells and leaping the nano-chasm from one neural membrane to another. And, because this configuration is different in every single person, this activity in the brain and nervous systems is what makes everyone unique.

However, I've never heard a fundraiser talk about donor behaviour in terms of a millisecond switch in the millivolt polarity of an electrical current in someone's brain. And, this is unsatisfactory for the critical realist too as you cannot know all there is to know about human behaviour - or predict how humans will behave - through neuroscientific methods alone. Rather you need to employ other methods of enquiry if you want to understand more about, say, what consciousness is, why love makes people cry, or how religious faith contributes to altruism.

Taking a transdisciplinary (see box, this page) approach to **critical fundraising** is consistent with Rogare's stance on critical realism because it offers the prospect of coming up with explanations that, while they might be complex, provide a rationale for action (Scott 2019). And this stance sits well in the pantheon of critical theory as today there is barely a discipline in the humanities and social sciences that doesn't have its 'critical' component.

The idea that as humans we cannot sit outside of the enquiries we engage in and need to reflect critically on our part in the process helps make sense of another stalwart of the critical fundraising enterprise - praxis. Praxis is the essential dialectic of Rogare's critical realism. Praxis is about the relationship between theory (where you formulate propositions) and practice (the enactment of theory), and the critical reflection through which knowledge and understanding is better codified.

The appeal of praxis to fundraisers is the insistence on putting ideas into practice and then evaluating outcomes critically so that you can do better next time round. ●

6

Glass onion – What is critique?

The term critique has been peppered throughout this paper without being defined.

Critique relates to a culture of questioning. Indeed, Rogare's Theory of Change (see p22) refers to a culture of questioning that involves critique and criticism as part of a process whereby theory and evidence together forge culture change.

Importantly, *critique* is not the same as *criticism* (Darkins, 2017 and see Butler, 2001). Criticism focuses on fault finding and removing a social problem by replacing it with something else within the range of options presently open to us.

Critique serves to destabilise what it is we think we know or take for granted by suspending the value judgements that come with criticism in favour of thinking through the alternatives with the prospect that we may arrive at a point of new knowledge and understanding. Critique is the heartbeat of the **dialectic** sensibility.

Poststructuralist critique serves to problematise areas of social life in ways that generate practical knowledge that helps better explain the conditions of human existence. Because critique addresses where and how **power** operates, these explanations are most useful when they result in changes to social or economic policy that - in the broadest sense - bring about greater social justice in the face of power.

There may be a common understanding among all critical theorists that critique serves to disrupt conventional thinking and uncover the partiality or **ideological** basis of truth claims. The disinclination of poststructuralists to confer a wider theoretical understanding from their critique seems to set both apart.

Nevertheless, Foucault (2007, p42), when defining the nature of critique says that it "only exists in relation to something other than itself". And, this idea, along with another that critique can mean different things, is something critical social theorists and poststructuralists agree about!

The health warning is that postmodern critique, from whichever angle you approach it, can take you on an abstract trajectory of permanent ambivalence and confusion, where the answer to the question (the explanation) seems perpetually out of reach. It can take you in ever-decreasing circles where you never get to the point of saying 'and, therefore, this is how we live' because there is always the 'yes, but have you considered this' that forces you around the critical loop one more time. ●

7 The End – Summary

Critical social theory and **poststructuralism** offer a postmodern take on the world that is broadly consistent, particularly for anyone with transdisciplinary (see box on p23) motives. We can reasonably take the position that, while the history of postmodern thought is rooted in different philosophical schools, social **critical theorists** – including Rogare’s **critical realism** – and **poststructuralists** are made of the same stuff. Undoubtedly, the focus of critical theorists is more on social structure, culture and institutional frameworks; while poststructuralists focus more on individuals, language and knowledge. But together they provide a convergent philosophical, conceptual and methodological take on the postmodern condition.

Along our tour of critical theory, we have looked at a number of the key themes within its ever-changing corpus that reach across most, if not all social science and humanities disciplines:

- Critical reflection and relativism
- Discourse
- Dialectics
- Power
- Hermeneutics
- Personal identity and agency
- Poststructuralism
- Critical realism
- Deconstruction
- Critique.

From a Rogare perspective, **critical fundraising** plays out in an approach from **critical realism** that is *transdisciplinary* in intent, focused on *praxis*, and employs **critical reflection** in seeking to consolidate a model for making progress in philanthropic endeavour.

From a postmodern perspective, critical realism may provide a best-of-both-worlds. Conscious that knowledge is relative and that, therefore, explanations are interpretations not objective fact, we do well to utilise the best methods of enquiry to organise around to get the closest approximations of social reality we can. The case is that the methods will improve as they become more transdisciplinary.

For Rogare, critical fundraising is the quest for better **hermeneutical** science using the best hypotheses we can figure to test; hypotheses that are built around a roster of disciplines and critical methods. This will include approaches from qualitative research, framework analysis, psychology and behavioural science, moral philosophy, sociology, economics, neo-anthropology, linguistics, text analysis, discourseology and so on. We are not alone in this. In a recent paper, two former fundraisers-turned-academics have called for more research and practice to be conducted using a critical lens (Alborough and Hansen 2023).

And, the outcomes will be practical. In researching this paper I found examples of treatises framed within critical theory in international relations, global politics, classroom practice, legacy fundraising (Routley 2011), framing (Bhati and Eikenberry 2019), and voluntary sector policy development (Prestidge 2010; Eikenberry, Mirabella and Sandberg 2019) to name a few. OK, so these pieces of work tend to be more academic, but nothing beyond the remit of Rogare’s quest for thought-through and well-researched analysis.

It could be that critical theory is an essential component to a postmodern fundraiser’s conceptual and analytical toolkit. I’d say it almost certainly is. 🗨️

Appendix – Glossary

Critical fundraising

Rogare’s approach to thinking about issues in fundraising – founded in both critical thinking and **critical realism** – that aims to provide evidence- and theory-based solutions to the structural challenges faced by the fundraising profession.

Critical realism

A school of critical theory originating in the 1970s that underpins Rogare’s ontological positioning. Critical realism posits that the real world (including social reality) exists independently of our theories about the world. The role of critical realism is to identify the mechanisms, which are often hidden or unactivated, that explain or cause these real world phenomena.

Critical reflection

The ability to think consciously about self-conduct. See s3.1.

Critical Theory (capitalised)

The raft of ideas and theory originating with Marx and Hegel and flourishing through the Frankfurt School in the 1920s that attempt to explain the social world by identifying the power structures it contains. It is capitalised because it refers to specific sets of ideas that are fully formulated into theory, unlike the uncapitalised generic usage. See s3.1.

Critical theory (uncapitalised)

The generic term for social movements that analyses the social world in terms of **ideology** and **power** dynamics. See s3.1.

Critique

There is no singular definition of critique in the social sciences. But critique is an essential tool in the armoury of **dialectical** process. In general terms, it seeks to prise open a normative social phenomenon by asking the ‘why’ question and then the ‘why not’ to better understand the power that holds the norm in place. See also s6.

Dialectics

An approach to resolving challenges that seeks to find a solution (synthesis) between two opposing or conflicting positions (the thesis and the antithesis). See s3.2.

Deconstruction

The idea that any meaning you can find in a text or narrative is unstable because it relies on arbitrary language to describe that meaning, and the process by which that inherent instability is uncovered and brought to the surface. See s4.2.

Discourse

The analysis of texts to reveal hidden meanings and power relationships. See s4.3.

Hegemony

The process by which power structures inherent in the social world are reproduced.

Hermeneutics

The art and/or science of interpreting meaning in texts. See s3.3.

Ideology/ideological

In the context of **Critical Theory**, how **power structures** in society come to exist, how they are reproduced (**hegemony**) and how we subconsciously imagine those processes so we can make sense of the social world and our lives.

Lived experience

The knowledge that people have through their first-hand interaction with/in relevant events, contexts and situations. For example, we might consider a person’s lived experience as being part of a power structure.

Poststructuralism

The philosophical movement that opposes the fixed meanings of **structuralism**, and posits multiple, often hidden meanings, which are revealed through **deconstruction** and **discourse**.

Power/power structure

Power – in the context of sociology, political theory and critical theory – refers to the production and reproduction of social relations, which have the capability to determine what happens to the various stakeholders in these social relationships. A power structure is a hierarchy through which this power is distributed, with those at the top of the hierarchy having more power (i.e. more control over the production of social relations) than those at the bottom.

Social positivism

The idea that there is an objective social reality out there that can be observed and researched empirically in order to discover social facts.

Structuralism

The theory of linguistics that views social reality as contingent on and emerging from the spoken language we use to describe it, and that this language carries fixed meanings about the world, which are often based around binary concepts, such as man/woman. See s4.1.

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Ashley Scott likes nothing better than to use cutting-edge thinking to help organisations operationalise complex ideas into workable plans. He has a taste for transdisciplinary approaches that help bridge the gap between how people think and how organizations can achieve their objectives.

Ashley spent two decades as an executive-level leader in international nonprofit agencies with fundraising, communications and strategy development remits. As well as gaining hands-on inter-cultural experience, he has a track-record of business planning, organisational development and international capacity building, alongside his marketing and development expertise.

He has been a freelance consultant since 2012, taking on interim senior management roles in the UK, and anything else that motivates him, from international event management to strategic reviews, from coaching to copywriting. And, anything with the word 'research' or 'polycentric' in the brief.

Holding a PhD in sociology from the London School of Economics, an MBA from the Cranfield School of Management and being a member of CloF, he feels like the Rogare is his natural habitat. 🐾

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