



Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers

From structuralism to postmodernity

John Lechte

R O U T L E D G E

Also available as a printed book
see title verso for ISBN details

FIFTY KEY CONTEMPORARY THINKERS

From structuralism to postmodernity

John Lechte



London and New York

FIFTY KEY CONTEMPORARY THINKERS

In this book, John Lechte focuses both on the development of structuralist theory and on key thinkers opposed to this tendency. For the specialist and the general reader alike, it is an indispensable reference book on this century's most important intellectual revolution. In each of the fifty entries, John Lechte skilfully illuminates complex thought with unusual clarity. He also provides comprehensive bibliographical information and suggestions for further reading.

From early structuralism, *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers* guides us through post-structuralism, semiotics, post-Marxism and Annales history, on to modernity and postmodernity. It includes chapters on Bakhtin, Freud, Bourdieu, Chomsky, Derrida, Lacan, Kristeva, Saussure, Irigaray and Kafka among others. Literary figures who have changed the way language is conceived are considered, together with philosophers, linguists, social theorists, feminists and historians.

Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers shows that thought in the twentieth century emphasises the relational dimension of existence rather than an essential dimension. This kind of thought leads on to nihilism, but also to the point where nihilism might be overcome. In explaining new developments in literature, art and philosophy, John Lechte helps readers to achieve a more profound understanding of the underpinnings of post-war thought and culture.

John Lechte, a former student of Julia Kristeva, teaches social theory and the sociology of representation at Macquarie University, Australia. He has also worked in the fields of history, semiotics and politics, and has an abiding interest in psychoanalysis. He has taught and published widely on many aspects of modern thought.

First published 1994
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2001.

© 1994 John Lechte

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

ISBN 0-203-02318-8 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-415-05727-2 (hbk)
ISBN 0-415-07408-8 (pbk)

To the memory of my grandmothers who valued education

Carolyn Lechte (1885–1978)

Muriel Garner (1896–1979)

CONTENTS

PREFACE	vi
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	viii
EARLY STRUCTURALISM	1
STRUCTURALISM	40
STRUCTURAL HISTORY	101
POST-STRUCTURALIST THOUGHT	108
SEMIOTICS	137
SECOND GENERATION FEMINISM	182
POST-MARXISM	197
MODERNITY	225
POSTMODERNITY	260

PREFACE

This book follows the very admirable model provided by Diané Collinson's *Fifty Major Philosophers* (1987). Thus I offer the reader both an overview of each thinker's work together with biographical information. Like Ms Collinson, I also aim to introduce, sometimes in a fairly detailed way, one or more aspects of the *oeuvre* in question, and particularly as this relates to that aspect of thought inspired by structuralism. And I often engage with that thought – differ with it, or appreciate its insights. My hope is that the reader will get a real sense of the flavour, style, and, in many cases, the truly innovative character of the thought in question.

My task, however, was both easier and more difficult than Diané Collinson's, for while I did not have to treat the entire history of the Western canon of philosophy in writing my entries, I had to choose fifty *contemporary* thinkers. And although, of course, one can debate about who should be in the philosophy canon, there is less doubt about the fact that a canon has been extraordinarily influential, even to the point where people are speaking Plato, Hobbes or Sartre without knowing it. To some extent, then, Diané Collinson's task was to make explicit forms of thought which have already formed us. My task, by contrast, has been to distil key elements in the work of thinkers who are sometimes not yet widely known, but who are becoming so. Most people will at least have heard of Plato; but will they have heard of Saussure? Most will know that idealism is located somewhere in Plato's philosophy; but do they know that 'difference' is a key notion in Saussure? Clearly, I believe that the answer is 'no' in both cases.

It is not only the general reader's knowledge that I am actually alluding to here, but also my own. For the contrast that I am trying to bring out is that between a relatively stable canon with which I am familiar, if not in detail, and a series of thinkers whose thought is often still evolving, both because many are still writing and thus have not completed their work, and because, by definition, it is not possible to have a deep familiarity with thought that is essentially contemporary and innovative. In other words, whether I have chosen the most important or illuminating angle on the thinkers in question will be, and should be, a cause for debate.

In response to this difficulty, my wager on behalf of the reader is that the light that I do shine on the thought I have explicated is an informed one, but that even if it turns out to be but one possible way of understanding the thinker in question, this is still informative and educative in the sense that I intend. And this sense is that to (be able to) disagree with me is to understand me.

What of the choice of thinkers, however? Here, the subtitle of the book should convey the orientation of the choices I have made. The thinkers chosen serve to deepen an understanding of the post Second World War structuralist orientation in thought, which arose largely, if not exclusively, in France. In my expositions, I have tried not to belabour this point; for each of the fifty thinkers treated is irreducible to a movement. Although the focus is primarily on the post-war period, it is not exclusively so: I have tried to include thinkers who, chronologically, might have been of another generation (Saussure, Freud, Nietzsche), but who have been of seminal importance, and are of great contemporaneity, intellectually speaking. 'Contemporary', therefore, means more than chronologically contemporary.

As the orientation of the book is largely towards presenting those thinkers who represent a structural–post-structural, modern–postmodern, orientation, I have also included a number of indisputably important thinkers (Adorno, Habermas) who are unsympathetic, or at least less sympathetic, to this orientation.

As to the material presentation of the book, I have grouped the thinkers in nine categories: early structuralism; structuralism; structural history; post-structuralist thought; semiotics; second generation feminism; post-Marxism; modernity; and, finally, postmodernity. A short introductory note, intended to give the reader a broad overview of the intellectual orientation concerned, precedes each group of thinkers. Some may see these groupings as too reductive. My view is that they signal an orientation only, and help the reader to appreciate the global significance of this collection, a significance which should not go unnoticed and which, used intelligently, can assist understanding at a more individual level.

For each thinker, I have aimed to provide information about recent as well as early work in the listing of major works, as I have also attempted to provide recent further readings.

Finally, I should address briefly the question as to how this book might be used. It would have been farcical, I believe, to have claimed to have presented these fifty key contemporary thinkers in a way which obviated the need for the reader to do additional reading to consolidate his or her understanding. This book offers a way in to understanding the thinkers concerned; it is not a substitute for reading them oneself. After Heidegger, I am not providing learning; I am trying to let learning take place.

John Lechte

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Gill Bottomley has been inspiring in discussing the issues raised by the thinkers in this book, as she has also been untiring in her material support. My deepest thanks thus go to her. Eduardo de la Fuente is becoming a world authority on Adorno, and gave me the benefit of his advice and knowledge in this regard. He also assisted in researching key bibliographical items. Several people read, and commented upon, entries. These include Gill Bottomley, Murray Domney, Eduardo de la Fuente, Barry Hindess, Ephraim Nimni, and Paul Patton. I thank them all, but of course take full responsibility for any errors that remain in the text they so generously helped to improve.

Finally, I would, very sincerely, like to thank my publisher, Richard Stoneman, for the idea for this project, and especially for his extreme forbearance in light of a project, which, I am loath to admit, went way over a number of deadlines.