3.4 Challenges from Outside the Mainstream

> "While we are not afraid to challenge
> the assumptions of others,
> we should not shrink from
> challenging our own either."
>
> *A Strategy Scholar in an Interview*
> *when Comparing the Strategy Field*
> *with other Discourses*
> *(quoted in Meyer 1991: 830)*

Throughout the years there has been no shortage of articles and books that critically examine strategy research. Nevertheless, compared to the overall increase in articles and books on strategic management relatively few scholars have been prepared to challenge the core beliefs and assumptions of the field (Pettigrew et al. 2002: 6). We provide an overview of the critical literature to assess what we already know and what we should know. To be consistent in our argumentation, we only discuss those contributions that critically assess the assumptions of the dominant logics. This makes our review selective since other critical scholars have raised different issues.[55]

We start by identifying four levels of critical strategy research (section 3.4.1). Next, we review those voices that can be ascribed to the first and second level of critical strategy research (section 3.4.2 and 3.4.3, for the differences between the levels of analysis see section 3.4.1). We argue that although these critiques have provided important insights, they do not fully dismiss the dominant logics. To dismiss the dominant logics one needs to expose their paradoxical nature; only by recognizing their impossibility (i.e. paradoxical foundation) can one justify their infeasibility for coping with strategic problems. Accordingly, the third and fourth level of critical strategy research correspond to a discussion of the paradoxical nature of the dominant logics. The third level (section 3.4.4) argues that critical strategy research has to discuss paradox to show that paradoxical reasoning dismisses the dominant logics. Critical strategy research on the fourth level (section 3.4.5) asks how paradoxes can be used positively to inform future research. In consequence, sections 3.4.4 and 3.4.5 demonstrate why there is a need to introduce deconstruction as a critical strategy to expose

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[55] For instance, compare works that criticize scholars' management-centered perspective (Levy et al. 2003: 96), the ill-defined nature of the concept of competitive advantage (Klein 2001), the neglect of emotions in theorizing (Calori 1998: 295), and the disregard of influences from stakeholders (Shrivastava 1986: 368).

the paradoxes that are attached to strategy context, process, and content and hence pave the way for a discussion of deconstruction in chapter four.

3.4.1 Levels of Critical Strategy Research

Although some scholars have challenged the sticky belief structures of strategic management, strategy research has not yet developed a thorough critical tradition (Pettigrew et al. 2002: 11). Critical pieces usually appear quite decoupled from one another and have a hard time gaining momentum. In the end, most critical practice in strategy vegetates on its own. To assess the current status of critical practice, we can refer to different levels of critical strategy research (see Figure 14). These levels represent an '*escalation of reflexivity*' about the nature of strategic management.

Level of Critical Strategy Research	Strategy Context	Strategy Process	Strategy Content
Research in strategic management abides by a functionalist ideology that inhibits future knowledge accumulation. *discussed in section 3.4.2*	Critical research at this level does not distinguish between context, process, and content issues. The emphasis is on the general set of positivistic assumptions that scholars attach to their work.		
There are certain dominant logics that strategy scholars refer to. These logics are built around oppositions which are hierarchically structured. *discussed in section 3.4.3*	Critical research shows that the environment is regarded as objectively given and there is need for adaptation.	Critical research shows that thinking (formulation) and action (implementation) are separated.	Critical research shows that rules and resources are conceptualized as if they were full of meaning.
Dominant logics come into existence because of the underlying either/or-logic that obscures paradox. *discussed in section 3.4.4*	Critical research shows that adaptation means self-adaptation which always possesses a blind spot due to self-reference.	Critical research shows that preferences for strategic decisions are constituted in the course of implementation. Strategic decisions that are fully justified *ex ante* are impossible.	Critical research shows that the existence of rules and resources implies their modification through application. To *strictly* follow a rule or apply a given resource is impossible.
Paradoxes only indicate the limits of knowledge we can have about the nature of things and are thus unfolded by temporalizing complexity. *discussed in section 3.4.5*	Critical research shows how actors start using distinctions naively to guide operations. Research demonstrates how a strategic identity is formed despite paradox.	Critical research shows how preferences are formed throughout action and how actors deal with the undecidability that is attached to every decision.	Critical research shows how rules and resources are filled with meaning over time and how strategists circumvent the paradox that is attached to rules and resources.

Fig. 14. Levels of Critical Strategy Research

On the first level there are those authors who acknowledge and criticize the narrow ideology on which strategic management rests (see section 3.4.2). Usually, those researchers do not distinguish between context, process, and content issues but argue that there is a lack of progress in research because scholarly activity has been ensnared by the rituals and paraphernalia of ideology (Daft and Buenger 1990: 82). On the second

level there are those scholars who recognize that context, process, and content research have sustained particular dominant logics (see section 3.4.3).[56] Certainly, most critical approaches remain on this level. On the third level, we find those scholars who not only identify a dominant logic but also ask: Why does this dominant logic exist the first place? On this level, critical strategy research recognizes that the dominant logics exist because of their underlying oppositions; these oppositions obscure the paradoxes that inevitably arise once scholars try to justify the existence of the dominant logics. On the fourth level, research appreciates paradox, yet proposes that paradoxes only indicate the *limits* of knowledge we can have about the nature of strategy and thus unfolds the self-contradicting reasoning in a useful way.

These four levels of analysis relate to this study as follows. The first and second level represent existing critical approaches to strategy research and are introduced in the next two sections. Our own critical discussion of strategic management in chapter six rests on the third and fourth level of analysis. Since deconstruction begins with an encounter of the paradoxes that must be overlooked to make dominant logics seem undeconstructible, Derridean thinking primarily addresses the third level of critique. Deconstruction uncovers the paradoxes of strategy research. Yet, deconstruction needs to be supplemented by other theories if one wishes to move to the fourth level of critique to unfold paradox in order to learn how strategic management becomes possible *despite* its paradoxical character. If we consider that there is no study that discusses all four levels of critical strategy research with regard to strategy content, process, and content, it is not unreasonable to claim that a systematic critique of the field is conspicuously missing from the literature. After all, this study attempts to fill this gap.

3.4.2 Demanding Reflexivity in Strategy Research

Critical approaches that address the general monotonous tone in the field and call for more reflexivity often remain unheard. Pettigrew et al. (2002: 14) recognize that only a limited amount of the output of critical strategy

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[56] Scholars use various disguises for the term dominant logic. Prahalad and Hamel (1994: 6) talk about 'outdated assumptions', Bettis (1991) calls it a 'straightjacket', and Daft and Buenger (1990: 83) speak about 'normal science'. The latter notion may be misleading, at least in the context of this study, as normal science, when following Kuhn (1996), occurs with a regard to a paradigm. However, the metatheoretical assumptions that are attached *to* a paradigm need to be distinguished *from* a paradigm itself.

theorists is published in established journals. Many of the writings still circulate as unpublished papers or in edited books. It is thus time to take notice of some of these voices. Already 25 years ago, Evered (1980: 541-542) pointed out that he is

> "left with a real concern that the field may be sliding in the direction of positivism […] Positivism would be even more disastrous for policy/strategy than for other areas of the social sciences […] The ideal research paradigm is presumed already known and important inquiry options are closed out too early."

In a provocative article, Hirsch et al. (1988: 91) discuss the risk of romance with economic models for strategy research. After assessing the problems with a purely economic view, they conclude that "[i]f and when policy takes such a wholly narrow economic view of organizations, there should be less need for either 'strategy' or 'management'." Recently, Farjoun (2002: 588) even speaks about the predominance of a mechanistic approach.

> "Almost from its inception, the strategy field has to a great extent relied on a mechanistic perspective on strategy. This perspective, unified by an epistemologically coherent base, has gradually moved out of alignment with its context."

In a similar manner, Daft and Buenger (1990: 91) criticize strategy scholars' loyalty to one dominant set of assumptions which they feel oversimplify the complexity of strategic issues.

> "We have characterized the social science assumptions driving strategy research as singular and positivist. Our feeling is that most strategists adhere strongly to a belief in systematic, definable strategy procedures and structures that can be described measured, analyzed and compared."

Bowman (1990: 26) emphasizes the resulting narrow methodological focus. In his view there is no systematic questioning or introspection of the underlying methodological assumptions.

> "Is the bad money of statistical methodology driving out the good money of strategic substance? I am not saying we shouldn't do this kind of work; I simply hope that we don't continue down this road to the point where 90 percent of the empirical work in strategy can be described this way."

Similarly, Hambrick (1990: 243) argues that there is a clear tendency toward multivariate 'number crunching' and Bettis (1991: 316) states that much current research is based on concepts developed decades ago on the basis of analyses of organizations as they and their environments were constituted then. Shrivastava (1987: 88) advises us that missing reflexivity in the scientific discourse of strategy also has consequences for practitioners because "many strategic management practices and norms are

grounded in past successes, outdated theories or unquestioned ideologies." This perspective is largely consistent with the one introduced by Whipp (1997: 270) who asserts that it is critical strategy research which offers the most exciting practical insights because it challenges the logic of applied projects.

What all these voices tell us is that *reflexivity* is a precondition for moving beyond any established ideology. Reflexivity is needed because it makes scholars aware of the metatheoretical assumptions that underlie their work; it produces self-awareness and fosters the engagement with as yet marginalized perspectives. Yet, reflexivity takes different forms (Lynch 2000). Reflexivity can mean to be self-critical of one's own beliefs and assumptions and thus promotes a kind of self-consciousness and self-knowledge. Certainly, self-awareness is desirable but suffers from the fact that one is often 'trapped' in the scientific discourse itself. This makes it impossible to uncover many of the blind spots of theorizing. What is needed on all four levels of critical strategy research is a kind of meta-reflexivity, one that requires a form of ironic detachment, a stepping back from the object of analysis to have the ability to see and critically revalue what others take for granted (Lynch 2000: 30). Meta-reflexivity implies that we constantly need to allow the *unseen* to disrupt the order, to not become trapped in habit, repetitiveness, or eventually dogmatism (Weick and Westley 2003). We now discuss the second level of critical strategy research (i.e. existing critical reflections on the dominant logics).

3.4.3 Critical Reflections on the Dominant Logics

Strategy Context – Strategizing in a Non-Determined World

The 'necessity of adaptation' has been criticized under various disguises. First, there are contributions that simply acknowledge the adaptation-based logic that accompanies the organization/environment distinction. Knights and Mueller (2004: 56), for instance, criticize dualisms in strategy and remark that the economics-based strategy literature tends to treat industry structure as objective. Foss (1996: 11) follows a similar line of thought when stating that in strategy research "there is much about the 'environment', but little about the 'company'." Lowendahl and Revang (1998: 761) argue that the concept of a boundary surrounding an organization as a unit adapting to an environment 'out there' becomes close to meaningless when considering the increasing complexity, both within and outside the organization.

Bourgeois (1984: 586) provides a general critique of determinism in strategic management and argues that when upholding the deterministic perspective, strategizing becomes a reactive waiting game to exploit contingencies as they arise in the environment. Shrivastava (1986: 371) argues against the dominance of fixed structures that organizations simply have to fit into because such a structural view of industries overlooks that actors proactively shape the structure of competition. Smircich and Stubbart (1985) put this argument in more precise terms when arguing in favor of an enactment perspective of markets. In their view, managers should encourage multiple interpretations of the environment and not view them as communication problems.

Besides these contributions that only shape awareness for the problem, there are also more substantial discussions of the 'necessity of adaptation'. Farjoun's (2002) 'organic' perspective on strategy assumes a continuous co-alignment between the firm and its environment. Although, Farjoun (2002: 572) explicitly recognizes the need to influence the environment (e.g., by altering governmental regulations), he still believes that there is *one* environment that guides and is guided by organizational conduct. Farjoun's argument remains stuck in the dominant logic as it denies the omnipresent paradox that adaptation to the environment is only possible as self-adaptation. To fully move beyond the 'necessity of adaptation', it is not enough to conceptualize the environment as a variable that needs to be managed by firms. To give reference to the paradox, we need a conceptualization of the organization/environment-relation that considers the environment as something constructed by the organization because if the environment is constructed and an organization wishes to adapt to this environment for the sake of strategy formation, it actually needs to adapt to itself.

Strategy Process – Corporate Planning as a Ritual Rain Dance

Out of the three dominant logics, the 'primacy of thinking' has gained the most attention of critical strategy scholars. We owe much of this attention to the work of Mintzberg (1990a, 1994b) and his colleagues. In his well-known book *The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning,* Mintzberg (1994a) describes three fallacies of planning: predetermination, detachment, and formalization. While discussing the fallacy of detachment of planners from strategy making, he argues that thinking and acting need to be connected. Action and thought must interact if plans are to come alive (Mintzberg 1994a: 291). Plans, in Mintzberg's view, often paralyze people because they are too precisely formulated and obsolete once actions are finally taken. Although we appreciate such a perspective, Mintzberg does not dis-

cuss the deeply held ontological assumptions that led to the disconnection of thinking and acting in the first place. The gradual production of decision premises in the course of action remains unexplored (let alone the paradoxical foundation of decision-making itself). His basic point is fair: postponing actions while becoming obsessed with planning is dangerous. Yet, this argumentation does not reach beyond the dominant logic; to get to the core of the dominant logic requires admitting that strategic decisions are paradoxical, yet not fully arbitrary but come into existence under consideration of existing path dependencies.

Mintzberg also gained popularity for his definition of strategy as "a pattern in a stream of actions." (Mintzberg and Waters 1985: 257) Conceiving strategy that way makes it an *ex post* phenomena, something we can retrospectively appreciate but are unable to control. So, why should we study strategy in that way? According to Mintzberg and Waters (1990: 1-2), actions leave traces that can be easier studied than decisions.

> "For years, we studied the process of strategy formation based on the definition of (realized) strategy as 'a pattern in a stream of decisions'. Eventually it occurred to us that we were in fact not studying streams of decisions at all, but of actions, because those are the traces actually left behind in organizations (e.g., stores opened in a supermarket chain, projects started in an architectural firm). Decisions simply proved much more difficult to track down."

At first glance, this sounds reasonable. On closer examination, though, Mintzberg only *reverses* the thinking/action-opposition that underlies the 'primacy of thinking' in favor of the so far neglected pole. He moves from the thinking/action-opposition, which is favored by classical strategic planning approaches (Andrews 1971), to an *action/thinking-opposition*. Hence, we face yet another opposition that is matter for deconstruction. This reversal is attempted without considering the deeply held ontological assumptions associated with the priority given to decisions over actions.

Chia (1994: 786-789) examines the position of Mintzberg and Waters (1990) and argues that in their perspective action is conceptualized without prior commitment. Action, then, becomes an ill-defined concept because decisions seem to play *no* role anymore; one simply looks back from the perspective of the identified actions to see whether it is possible to identify some decisions that fit to the actions. This is why Mintzberg and Waters (1990: 5) claim that the commitment that precedes action can be vague and confusing or is even absent at all. After all, Mintzberg and Waters move to the other extreme by privileging action over thinking and consequently have a hard time in devoting attention to the intended part of strategy making (Whittington 2004: 67). The latter may not play *the* role in strategizing

that is ascribed to it by classical process thinkers, yet it surely plays some role.

A variety of other scholars have criticized the 'primacy of thinking'.[57] The message of these contributions is that one cannot predict the future and that long-term plans are neither necessary nor possible. Ackoff (1981: 359), for instance, concludes:

> "Most corporate planning is like a ritual rain dance: it has no effect on the weather that follows, but it makes those who engage in it feel that they are in control. Most discussions of the role of models in planning are directed at improving the dancing, not the weather."

Whereas these statements tell us that perfect planning is illusive, they do not inquire into the consequences of such a perspective. From the perspective of deconstruction, the consequence would be the recognition that strategic decisions face a paradox. Within strategy research, only Clegg et al. (2004: 23) give reference to this paradox. This moves Clegg et al. (2004) beyond the 'primacy of thinking'. Unfortunately, the authors do not develop this idea to tell us how and why this paradox comes into existence and, at least equally important, how strategists make strategic decisions despite paradox. This, however, is necessary in order not to conclude the impossibility of strategizing. What is needed to advance the discussion is to take the paradox as a point of departure for discussing the rich relationship between thinking and action to finally explore how decisional preferences are constituted in the course of action (Ortmann and Salzman 2002: 215).

Having discussed existing critiques of the 'primacy of thinking', we conclude that, even though a lot of scholars have emphasized the unpredictable nature of the future and the resulting impossibility of planning, there is virtually no discussion of the paradoxical foundation of strategic decisions and the resulting need to conceive of strategies as something constituted through the interplay of thinking *and* action. Although recent research has introduced a variety of strategy process models (e.g., evolutionary and political ones, Chakravarthy et al. 2003) and these perspectives add valuable insights to our understanding of strategy making, the paradox on which strategic decisions rest has remained unexplored thus far. Within this study, we show that we need to open strategy making for a consideration of paradox. Yet, we have to do this without concluding the impossibility of strategy formation over time and/or reducing strategizing to mere luck as Markides (1999: 6) does.

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[57] See, for instance, Calori (1998: 286), Farjoun (2002: 578), Lowendahl and Revang (1998: 762), McKiernan (1997: 795), and Vaara and Kakkuri (1999: 13).

Strategy Content – The Impossibility of (Meaningful) Generalization

It comes with no big surprise that critical strategy scholars have noted that most strategy content research is overly concerned with finding generalizable results.[58] Shrivastava (1986: 369) even argues that there is real pressure to find generalizable results, which has led to an uncritical acceptance of abstracted empiricism. Searching for generality deemphasizes the context in which results occur and in which they are supposed to be meaningfully applied. General findings need to be *applied* to a context in the sense that they are turned towards the unavoidable restrictions and special circumstances that every context holds. It is this neglect of the process of application that we criticize, not the construction of strategic rules and emphasis on strategic resources. Scholars act as if they were in control of things, as if rules and resources could define their conditions of application, while in fact they deliver emptiness (a necessary and inescapable emptiness).

Concerning strategic rules, Ortmann and Salzman (2002: 211) are well aware of the necessity of applying generic strategies to a context. They argue that what is needed is an in-depth examination of the relationship between general strategic rules and their process of application. This argumentation is also true for strategic resources which are usually conceptualized as *a priori* given, whereas they are only potentials; potentials that need to be filled with context-specific meaning through the process of application (Duschek 2001: 60; Priem and Butler 2001: 33; Steen 2003: 7). The paradox that is attached to strategic rules and resources comes to the fore when considering these contributions, since their general character is always already undermined by the need for local modifications. Yet, there are still questions to debate. First, while these scholars tell us that paradoxes are at the heart of the market and resource-based view, they do not tell us how strategic action is incited by them. Second, because strategists unfold the paradoxes in some way and consequently 'fill' the related emptiness of rules and resources with contextualized meaning, research needs to find out how this filling occurs. Our remarks in section 6.3 will consider these issues.

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[58] See Borgeouis (1984: 588), Franklin (1998a: 318), Göbel (1997: 12), Knights (1997: 5-7), Parnell (2002: 2), Seidl (2003a: 6), Shrivastava (1986: 369), Statler and Roos (2002: 10-11), Thomas (1998: 11), and Vaara and Kakkuri-Knuuttila (1999: 5-7).

3.4.4 Paradox and Dominant Logics

Having introduced the first and second level of critical research, we move to the third level of analysis that, together with the fourth level, reflects *our contribution* to critical strategy research. Regardless of whether we agree with Popper (1970: 53), who argues that science is essentially critical, we need to ask why the dominant logics, that various critical strategy scholars acknowledge (section 3.4.3), should be disclaimed? Addressing this question, some scholars (Gharajedaghi and Ackoff 1984; Lowendahl and Revang 1998; Sarason and Huff 2005) have claimed that the *altered societal conditions of our epoch* make the three identified logics less appropriate for further research. While we appreciate these perspectives and believe that certain altered societal conditions make the identified dominant logics less appropriate for thinking about strategic management, our answer to the question why the dominant logics should be disclaimed rests on a different line of reasoning. As indicated in section 1.1, we suggest that the dominant logics of strategy research should be rejected because they obscure their own impossibility (i.e. paradoxical foundation). To discuss what critical strategy research at the third level of analysis implies, we outline the relation between dominant logics and paradox in more depth. This will help us to better understand the argumentation in chapter six and to assess the contribution that this study makes to critical strategy research in general.

The third level of critical strategy research suggests that dominant logics come into existence because of a neglect of their underlying oppositions (e.g., environment/organization with regard to the 'necessity of adaptation' in strategy context). Because these oppositions are neglected, the dominant logics are able to obscure their own paradoxical foundation. How can this be? Recall that a paradox occurs if two mutually exclusive elements occur at the same time. As long as we obey oppositions, the two elements (i.e. the ends of the opposition) are kept apart. To keep the elements of the oppositions apart, research establishes one end of the opposition as an 'origin'. For instance, within the 'necessity of adaptation', the environment is defined as 'the origin'; the environment is *the reason* (viz. origin) for organizations' strategies. The appraisal of an 'origin' for strategic reasoning needs to be justified. In fact, one needs to give a reason why the 'origin' really is an origin and not based on any other concept to come into being. To put it in the context of our example above: one needs to prove that the environment really is 'the origin' for strategic conduct.

As will be shown in the following chapter, deconstruction proposes that whenever we try to uphold oppositions, we obscure paradox. In other words, there is no final, self-defining 'origin', but what the dominant

logics establish as an 'origin' already depends on its apparent opposite (i.e. the other element in the opposition). We cannot pull both apart. Deconstruction demonstrates that, strictly speaking, both elements of the opposition come into existence at the same time. If this is the case, there is paradox. To put it in a nutshell: once we try to justify the metaphysical 'truths' that the dominant logics offer, we expose paradox. If the dominant logics 'see' their paradoxical foundation – which they cannot 'see' with their current set of beliefs – they recognize that the 'origins' they try to establish bring about paradox. In the light of paradox, the dominant status of the dominant logics disappears as the 'necessity of adaptation', the 'primacy of thinking', and the 'fullness of strategic rules and resources' are shown to be impossible and thus lose their ground for argumentation. The dominant logics are dominant only as long as they obscure paradox. Once paradox is accepted, the relentless search for 'origins' within strategic reasoning comes to a halt and scholars see the *unity of the distinction* that underlies the oppositions that make up the dominant logics.[59]

It is vital to recognize that neither this study nor deconstruction in general criticizes the existence of paradox; paradoxes *inevitably* occur once we try to justify 'final truths' or 'definite origins'. Paradoxes tell us that to think in categories of 'truth' and 'origins' is impossible (i.e. paradoxical). We criticize that, because of the fundamental assumptions of the dominant logics, strategy research has not recognized paradoxes as necessary limits to reasoning. Of course, our argumentation is based on one specific perspective (i.e. deconstruction) and cannot claim to be itself generally valid (see section 1.2). After all, this would contradict our own assumptions. Although we have no definite proof that our argumentation is '*the* right' one, to argue that paradoxes can be neglected and thus assume that there is a possibility of establishing an 'origin' for strategic reasoning results in one of the alternatives of Albert's (1985) Münchhausen trilemma (see section 1.1). If metaphysical solutions are unacceptable, then paradox has to be accepted (Czarniawska 2005: 128; Hofstadter 1987).

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[59] Czarniawska (2005: 130) describes this in a less formalized way: "The image of human beings as rational decision makers controlling the environment requires a linear vision of the world, in which conflict and ambiguity are temporary aberrations to be removed by the next rational action. Much can be said about the practical advantages of such a vision of the world; as usual, however, focusing on certain aspects forces us to gloss over others. In this case, the inherent paradoxicality of human and social life is the victim."

3.4.5 Strategy Because of and Despite Paradox

On the fourth level of critical strategy research, the paradoxes that are exposed by research on the third level are used as 'inputs' for a reconceptualization of certain assumptions in strategic management. As indicated above, every paradox brings about impossibility. To show that this impossibility can be creatively employed by future research and is *by no means* 'the end of strategic management', research on the fourth level demonstrates that every paradox only indicates the limits of knowledge we can gain about the nature of strategic phenomena (e.g., strategic decisions in strategy process research). As will be demonstrated in chapter five, paradoxes can be unfolded through deparadoxification (see section 5.2). Deparadoxified paradoxes are *not* about reintroducing conceptual oppositions (that result in dominant logics) but means to explore how both ends of an opposition are recursively related and thus supplement each other. Our argumentation in chapter five explains these issues in more detail.

To conclude, this study discusses the third and fourth level of critical strategy research and thus adds new insights to already existing critical approaches. To move to the third and fourth level of analysis, we need a theory perspective that guides our discussion. We need a theory perspective that exposes the paradoxical foundation of arguments that are based on apparently non-rejectable truth claims. In the following chapter, we introduce deconstruction as such a perspective. Deconstruction, as will be shown, enables us to discuss the third and fourth level of critical strategy research. It endows us with a set of terms and a logic of thinking that dismantle the dominant logics.

4   Deconstruction and the '(N)either/(N)or'

The work of Derrida is often associated with and discussed in the realm of postmodern philosophy. To understand the broader context of Derrida's philosophical thinking, we need to examine the discourse around postmodern philosophy (section 4.1.1). Since most applications of postmodern philosophy refer to organization theory, yet not to strategic management, we review the existing literature (section 4.1.2), since these writings have an influence on the *implications* of a deconstructive analysis of strategy research. Based on these remarks we develop an in-depth understanding of Derrida's notion of deconstruction and its relevance for the social sciences (section 4.2). Because deconstruction has been applied to questions of organization theory, but not strategic management, we look at and classify the existing literature (section 4.3), as these writings have an impact on our own deconstructions in chapter six. Finally, to prepare the ground for an application of Derrida's thinking to strategy research, we define strategic management as a 'deconstructible text' (section 4.4).

4.1 The Meaning(lessness) of Postmodernism

4.1.1 The Philosophical Discourse Around Postmodernism

The prefix 'post' enriched by the suffix 'ism' is an inflationary used label for academic discourses. We do not wish to elaborate on the usefulness of these linguistic endeavors, but focus our analysis on what entered philosophical debates under the umbrella of postmodernism and/or poststructuralism. Although the existence of these 'post'isms' in philosophical discourses assumes that we can distinguish both terms, we have to agree with Agger (1991: 111) that a clear distinction is not possible as different authors cut the theoretical pie in any number of ways. To aggravate the situation, philosophers, who are often associated with either one or even both terms – the popular among them being Foucault, Lyotard, Deleuze, and Derrida – did not identify themselves as poststructuralists and/or postmodernists (Münker and Roesler 2000: IX). Therefore, we will not

elaborate further on the postmodern/poststructural distinction, but focus on the basic tenets of what is 'commonly' referred to as *postmodern philosophical thinking*. Inevitably, this discussion needs to include remarks on *modern thinking* as only such a distinction can help us to better understand the debate.

The fact that the abovementioned authors did not identify themselves with 'post'isms' points to an important insight: postmodernism is not a properly formulated theory, and neither are the philosophical approaches of its advocates (Weiskopf 2003b: 11). Philosophical postmodernism is a diverse field of study with no clearly definable methods and models. This does not mean that the label postmodernism is meaningless, as Alvesson (1995) claims.[60] Rather, it highlights the necessity of discussing the contours of the field to make sense of proposed arguments and to cope with the theoretical heterogeneity by 'inventing' postmodernism within our own writing. At its best, (post)modernism represents a fairly underspecified paradigm within the field of philosophy.

Notwithstanding our discomfort with the underspecified nature of the modernism/postmodernism debate, we need to look for ways to differentiate both discourses. Oversimplifying battle cries like "modernism is totalizing and controlling" (Cooper and Burrell 1988: 94) and postmodernism can be associated with the "death of reason" (Power 1990: 110) give no reference to specific arguments and risk ending up as empty clichés. Instead, authors like Koch (2003: 75), Kirsch (1997: 548), and Giddens (1987: 196) propose to approach the discussion on the basis of 'central issues' to find some common ground.[61] An overarching concept for such issues is provided by what Welsch (1996) calls a *radical critique of a unified conception of reason*. According to Welsch, postmodern thinking transforms reason from an Enlightenment-based unified conception of rationality as a source of knowledge to a pluralistic one. Whereas modern philosophy assumes that a natural order exists which can be discovered by reason in order to represent and control social conditions, postmodernism destroys this faith in rationality by no longer viewing reason as a distinctive human

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[60] Alvesson (1995) claims: "The term pomo [postmodernism] has perhaps received too many attributions already able to function as a fertile point of departure or even as a reference in discussions of the various themes currently carried out under the umbrella of pomo." (Alvesson 1995: 1064, annotation added) "The message in this paper can be summarized under this slogan: The word pomo has no meaning. Use it as seldom as possible!" (Alvesson 1995: 1068)

[61] Koch (2003: 66-84) also introduces other criteria to distinguish modern from postmodern philosophy, for instance by giving reference to key authors, philosophical traditions (e.g., phenomenology), and the form of the debate (Is the debate reflected from a modern and/or postmodern angle?).

faculty anymore. A critique of reason and affirmation of plurality sets the framework for thinking about the contributions of a diverse set of post-modern philosophical concepts, most of them stemming from French con-temporary philosophy. Within this framework, we identify four central issues that relate to the works of Lyotard, Foucault, and Derrida and act as the 'battle field' of the modernism-postmodernism debate within philosophy: a consideration of the *discursive nature of society*, the assessment of the *relation between knowledge and power*, a discussion of the *role of the subject*, and a debate about *epistemological and ontological questions* (see Figure 15).[62] These central issues are discussed now.
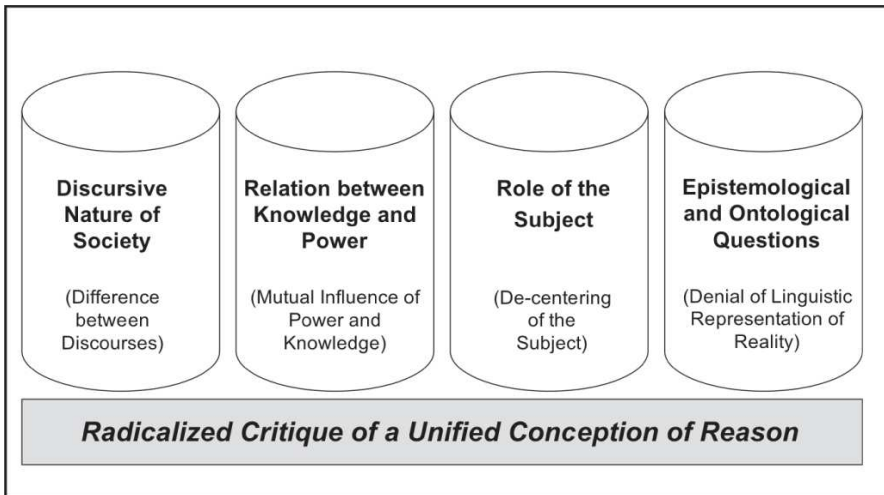

Fig. 15. Central Issues of Postmodern Philosophy

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[62] This classificatory framework is contingent and is *based on the authors* that are used as a 'common ground' to identify the central issues. For instance, we could have also included the debate concerning the *possibility of ethics* in which Habermas (1996a, 2001), who we refer to as an advocate of 'reflexive modern-ism', tries to establish a moral basis for society at large by seeing the lifeworld as an integrating concept for his basic theoretical categories 'action' and 'dis-course'. He assumes that an understanding across different discourses can be reached via communicative rationality. The unity of reason can be identified in the presuppositions faced by actions that are oriented towards reaching under-standing about moral conflicts. Lyotard (1988) counters this argument by claim-ing that any moral position is the product of an ethical discourse which is, how-ever, just one among many possible discursive species. A postmodern conception of ethics faces competing merits of different ethical conceptions that could each be consistent with their own discourse rules, but incompatible with one another.

The radical critique of reason, which makes totalizing theoretical concepts impossible, is reflected by each of the four issues. However, the most common notion of postmodernism is associated with Lyotard's (1999) claim regarding the 'collapse of grand narratives' that addresses the *discursive nature of society*.[63] The central question for him is how knowledge can be legitimized. In his argumentation he follows a language-games approach in which knowledge is based on a diverse set of discourses. He argues that modern knowledge acquires its legitimacy through reference to grand narratives (e.g., the idea of Enlightenment, Lyotard 1999: 42-43). All discourses, then, need to submit to the legitimization criteria provided by the grand narrative – a universal discourse becomes possible. Postmodern knowledge rejects the legitimacy of these grand narratives and favors an incommensurable coexistence of different discourses.[64] No one discourse is privileged because each one possesses its own legitimization criteria for knowledge. A universal legitimization across different discourses is revealed to be impossible. The validity of knowledge becomes localized within each discourse and the plurality and fragmented nature of discourses need to be accepted. Consensus is just a temporal state within a local discourse, but never its goal (Lyotard 1999: 190). Similar to Lyotard, Foucault (1982) argues that truth claims are relative to the discursive framework within which they originate. Discourses follow historical-contingent rules that exist independent of the conscious speaker. The production of truth is not based on an accurate representation of reality but can only be understood in its historical context.

Within his later analysis of discursive practices, Foucault (1980a) discusses the *relation between power and knowledge*. Whereas modern thinkers supposed that power and knowledge can be treated as separate analytical entities (Weber 1972: 28), Foucault argues that knowledge is integral to the operation of power. He perceives knowledge to be constituted in and through discourses and understands power as a positive social force not residing in commodities but discursive relations among social actors. Power is not bound to individuals or institutions but relational by nature: a power-

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[63] The reason for the widespread association of Lyotard with postmodernism is due to the name of his book *La Condition postmoderne* (*The postmodern condition,* [Lyotard 1999]) and his attempt to clarify the meaning of the phrase (Lyotard 1997a). He admits that the term, as he used it, was misunderstood by many critics as well as advocates (Lyotard 1997b; Reese-Schäfer 1995: 121-122).

[64] Lyotard (1999) distinguishes, for instance, the denotative discourse (in which the true/false distinction is relevant) from the prescriptive discourse (working with the just/unjust distinction). Incommensurability between these discourses is justified by supposing that different discourses have different purposes (e.g., to come up with moral judgments or to persuade other people).

ful subject is created in the course of exercising power. Foucault (1995) establishes a relation between power and knowledge by considering power to be a creative force that inevitably creates knowledge *in actu*. For Foucault, power is coupled with the desire to know because power produces knowledge in the sense that it gives rise to discourses that run through society. Conversely, knowledge can be seen as the operation of power because knowledge defines 'truth' which provides the basis for social action and intervention – the operation of power. Knowledge, which is perceived as false, does not affect actions and therefore represents no power. For Foucault, knowledge formation and the exercise of power are not neutral as the one always contains the other. Or put differently: knowledge and power do not exist independently.[65]

Giddens (1987: 204) identifies the discussion of the *role of the subject* as another important topic within the debate. Modern thinkers like Descartes (1641/1992) presume a unified subject that is fully conscious of itself, perceives the world in an objective way, and has the capability to act rationally. This idea of the subject believes in a static, centered, and in-control notion of being in which individuals remain self-identical through time and space. Postmodern thinkers de-center the subject to show the ways in which it cannot have full autonomy of cultural or social (or any kind of) discourse. The subject is not something limited and autonomous but a product of history. This is why Giddens (1987: 213) claims that human beings do not make history, but history makes human beings. Contrary to the notion of a subject whose consciousness precedes and governs all social operations, 'truth' is not something that can be discovered by a subject as an accurate representation of reality, but that truth is produced within a system of discourses that exist independently of the conscious individual (Foucault 1982). The Cartesian *cogito* remains 'empty' and is filled by the discourses that emerge within history. Foucault therefore stresses that consciousness is not a given but emerges in a diverse set of discourses, and that consciousness is not indivisible but the product of a discontinuous social process. This is why Foucault (1980b: 117) suggests that

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[65] Foucault (1980a: 51-52) states: "Now I have been trying to make visible the constant articulation I think there is of power on knowledge and of knowledge on power. […] The exercise of power itself creates and causes to emerge new objects of knowledge and accumulates new bodies of information. […] The exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power. Knowledge and power are integrated with one another, and there is no point in dreaming of a time when knowledge will cease to depend on power."

"[o]ne has to dispense with the constituent subject, and to get rid of the subject itself, that's to say, to arrive at an analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework."

This does not mean that postmodernists deny the existence of a physical subject. It is only the self-constituting character that is questioned by the notion of de-centering. Giddens (1987: 206) sums up the position of a de-centered subject by recognizing that Descartes's claim 'I think, therefore I am' is disqualified in a number of ways.

"The 'I' is not immediately available to itself, deriving its identity as it does from its involvement in a system of signification. The 'I' is not the expression of some core of continuous selfhood that is its basis. The 'being' suggested in the 'I am' is not given through the capability of the subject to use the concept 'I'."

Epistemological and ontological questions, which represent the last central issue, are often regarded as 'the' central topic within the modernism-postmodernism debate. To contrast both mentalities, we can refer to modernism as symbolizing epistemological and ontological realism by favoring an ideology of representation in cognitive styles and language-theoretical logic. It was Descartes (1637/1960, 1641/1992) who introduced this style of thinking by tearing the world into the *res cogitans* (the mental nature) and the *res extensa* (the corporeal nature). This Cartesian conception sees the subject as sovereign and autonomous able to describe and grasp reality 'out there' on the basis of its analytical intellect. Only those things that can clearly be perceived in the corporeal nature are considered to be true. This ultimate rationalistic view can also be applied to language-theoretical arguments, which act as the basis for the postmodern critique. A modern conception of language assumes that a direct linguistic representation of reality is possible because there is a one-to-one correspondence between forms of representation (e.g., words or symbols) and an objective, external world. It is assumed that language fully describes reality since the structure of language directly relates to the meaning of the world. These strong ontological commitments carry with them epistemological consequences because any theory of knowledge needs to entail some theory of the nature of reality. Epistemological modernism, of which positivism is a part, argues for the existence of realist knowledge based on empirical observations. Modern science portrays the world as true and fully observable, making theories attempts to mirror reality (Chia 1996: 47-51). Within this objectivist view of science, progress depends on the cumulative discovery of scientific facts.

Postmodern thinkers like Derrida (1999a) criticize these assumptions from a language-theoretical perspective by claiming that language cannot

represent an objective reality. Words (signs) do not refer to an external referent but only to other – and always different – words. For instance, to know what 'cost leadership strategy' means, we need to know what cost leadership is *not* (i.e. its difference to 'differentiation strategy', 'focus strategy', etc.), but 'differentiation strategy' and 'focus strategy' also lack meaning and are only defined with regard to yet other signs. There are only differences and differences of differences and so on. Differences always change; we can never get to the bottom of meaning (see also section 4.2.3). Depending on the context in which a sign is used, there can be an infinite number of meanings. Language does not provide a stable structure on which meaning can rest but defers meaning from one linguistic sign to another. Consequently, there is no essence on which to base the meaning of a certain sign because the latter obtains its meaning only from other – and always different – signs. Meaning in a postmodern sense rests on an infinite play of differences among signs; an objective signification of reality by language becomes impossible.[66]

This perspective results in what Chia (1995) calls an ontology of 'becoming' in which the ephemeral nature of reality is accentuated. This anti-representationalist view of language rejecting the notion that language can fully describe an objective reality also has epistemological consequences. Postmodern knowledge is conceptualized as contingent in nature and not based upon a universal legitimization. Researchers can no longer claim authority for the meaning and truth of their investigations because research produces nothing more than texts for which there is no solid ground. Accepting this view of knowledge indicates that we cannot think of scientific facts as hard and 'ready made' final solutions to our problems. We rather need to agree with Latour (2002) that scientific statements are a product of a power-laden negotiation process among actors (see section 3.3.1). Truth claims are not the result of a logical process, which determines factual relationships through empirical research, but a temporal and social phenomenon. What we call 'true' may hold in a specific interpretative com-

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[66] This notion of language has consequences for the de-centering of the subject. If consciousness is a result of signification, no subject can derive its identity entirely from itself but only from the system of signification it is involved in. Thus, subjects are not fully self-conscious beings but gain their identity from the differences in language. Derrida (2002: 70) argues in this context "that the subject, and first of all the conscious and speaking subject, depends upon the system of differences […]." Since these differences are in a state of flux, a subject with a stable identity and unified consciousness becomes out of reach. Postmodernism assumes that our world is made up of language and that individuals can only 'know the world' through the differences that our language creates (Hassard 1999: 176).

munity of knowledge producers and consumers, but can just as well be rejected by other communities as non-valid (Gergen 2002: 73-75). A postmodern understanding of knowledge stresses the localized and unstable character of science.

To conclude our discussion of postmodern philosophy, Welsch's (1996) treatment of postmodernism as a radicalized critique of reason is reflected by all of the discussed central issues. Central to our critique of modernism is not only the assertion that reason itself is pluralized, but also that this pluralization is embodied in the concept of *difference*. We discussed this thinking in differences with regard to four central issues: (1) that discourses gain their identity only in difference to other discourses, (2) that knowledge is constituted by different discourses and relates to power which is relational by itself, (3) that the subject is a product of differences in language, and (4) that the meaning of language cannot be grasped because the latter is made up of a play of differences between signs. If we understand postmodernism in this way, as a style of thinking which is based on difference, we realize the intellectual proximity to other theories, especially Luhmann's (1994) outline of social systems theory which bases the identity of a social system on the distinction between system and environment. Since this overview must leave the broad philosophical bases from which different authors draw support unexplored, we (a) need to acknowledge that the discussion around postmodern philosophy in general cannot be adequately reproduced here and (b) need to recognize that the discussed authors have contributed to more than one of the identified central issues.

These remarks on the modernism-postmodernism debate leave us with the question of how we are supposed to assess the relationship between both discourses. Do postmodern claims *dismiss* or *extend* modern ideas? Does *modernism maybe even come to its end* with no subsequent theoretical offerings at all? Whereas Gmür (1991) finds advocates for all three conceptual relations, we characterize the relation between both styles of thinking from a postmodern perspective by perceiving them as mutual supplements. Lyotard (1997b: 45) has described this supplementary logic as follows:

> "A work can only be modern if it is first postmodern. Thus understood, post-modernism is not modernism at its end, but in a nascent state, and this state is recurrent." (translation A.R.)

Modernism is nothing but a consequence of the suppression of the postmodern mentality (*et vice versa*). That is why postmodernism acts as the very condition for the articulation of modernism (Chia 1995: 580). Notwithstanding this relationship, we have to admit that a certain degree of

meaninglessness remains attached to both terms. Therefore, the only way to make sense of the discussion is to develop specific versions of both terms without excessively relying on platitudes. We have developed such an understanding for the specific needs of this treatise to appreciate and understand Derrida's argumentation later on. Before we enter the discussion on deconstruction, we need to look at the treatment of postmodern ideas within organization theory. This will help us to better understand and classify the intellectual context of subsequent arguments with regard to strategy research.

4.1.2 Postmodernism in Organization Theory

While section 4.1.1 described postmodern philosophy in general, we now discuss how scholars within the field of organization theory have used these ideas. We focus our analysis on organization theory, since (a) postmodern thoughts have mostly been applied to organization studies but not to strategic management and (b) several of our *implications* of a deconstructive analysis in chapter six refer to 'postmodern organization theory'. Postmodernism entered organization studies in the late 80s and early 90s with a series of articles by Cooper (1989), Burrell (1994, 1988), and Cooper and Burrell (1988). Parker (1992) shaped the contours of the debate by treating postmodern ideas in an *epochal* sense (How do we recognize a postmodern organization?) and an *epistemological* sense (How can we use postmodern philosophy to see organizations in a different way?).

The epochal orientation examines the changing structural characteristics of organizations. Clegg (1990), for instance, argues that postmodern organizations move beyond the bureaucratic, hierarchical, and rationalized form of organizing that Weber (1972) was concerned with. Clegg argues that due to changes on the societal level like globalization and the availability of information technology, organizations move towards a new historical epoch characterized by flexibility, de-differentiated labor, and network-based forms of organizing. Even though these remarks on organizational design are labeled postmodern, they are still based on a realist epistemology because authors such as Clegg (1990) still search for features of the external world that confirm their hypothesis of a new historical epoch of organizations.

Because our understanding of postmodernism is based on philosophical questions, we focus on the epistemological discourse. Similar to the debate around postmodern philosophy, the field of epistemological postmodern organization theory is heterogeneous and hard to classify. Several articles and books make postmodern philosophy a subject of organizational analy-

sis.[67] When looking at these books and articles, one can identify three 'central issues' that *roughly*, yet not conclusively, represent the work of scholars: *organization as processes of organizing*, *organizational members as de-centered subjects*, and *contextual dependency of organizational actions* (see Figure 16). These issues do not represent genuine postmodern concerns but are well-established subjects within organizational analysis. Kieser (1998), for instance, while developing a constructivist perspective on organizations, highlights the contextual dependence of interpretations. Similarly, Weick (1979) has shifted our attention from the clear-cut phenomenon 'organization' to the many-sided processes of organizing that give rise to the former. Postmodern organizational studies enrich these discussions by interpreting their concerns from a different perspective to shed light on as yet unexplored issues that are of relevance to further theorizing. In the following, we will discuss these three 'central issues'.

Concerning the first central issue (*organization as processes of organizing*), if meaning is not a steady-state phenomenon because language is ambiguous by nature, there is no reason to assume that organizations consist of a stable set of structures (e.g., rules) that can be adequately described. A structure-determined view is well reflected by the assumption of modern organizational theorists that social entities and their properties can be isolated for the sake of systematic analysis. By contrast, postmodernists understand organizations as an emergent, linguistically constructed phenomenon consisting of an evolving network of actors. There is not *the* organization, only processes of organizing. Chia (1995: 579) portrays organizing as depending on an ontology of becoming in which "reality is deemed to be continuously in flux and transformation and hence unrepresentable in any static sense." Postmodern organizational analysis focuses on the underlying (often invisible) processes that apparently stabilize organizations. It was Weick (1979: 3) who first examined such stabilizing processes by defining organizing as "a consensually validated grammar for reducing equivocality by means of sensible interlocked behaviors." Within his definition Weick draws our attention to equivocality that pervades all organizing and accordingly represents the inevitable status of disorganiza-

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[67] See the articles by Alvesson and Deetz (1997), Calás and Smircich (1999), Chia (1995), Gergen and Thatchenkery (1996), Hassard (2002, 1999, 1994), Kilduff and Mehra (1997), Knights (2002), Kreiner (1992), Parker (1992), Weik (1996), Weiss (2000), and Welge and Holtbrügge (1999). There are also several books which discuss postmodern philosophy within organization studies, for instance Chia (1996), Hassard and Parker (1993), Holtbrügge (2001), McKinlay and Starkey (1998), Schreyögg (1999), and Weiskopf (2003a). A summary and critical discussion is given by Koch (2003). Studies with a focus on deconstruction are excluded as these are discussed in section 4.3.

tion. Disorganization is a status of 'no meaning' and 'no structure' motivating organizing processes to construct manifestations which we then label organizations.
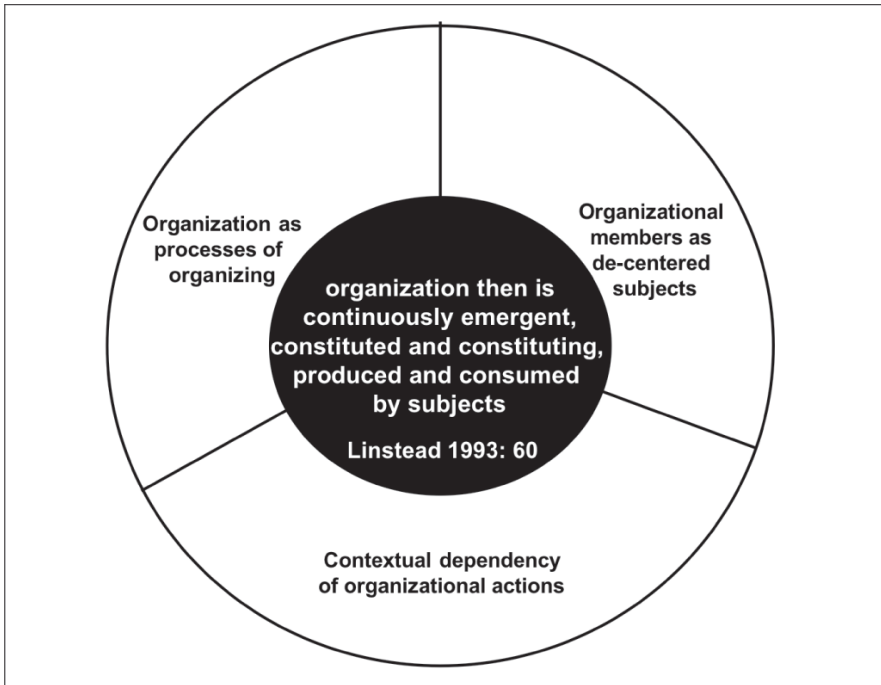

Fig. 16. Central Issues of Postmodern Organizational Epistemology

The second central issue of postmodern organization theory is the idea of seeing *organizational members as de-centered subjects*. Whereas modern thinking conceptualizes managers and employees as autonomous, self-evident entities with a secure unitary identity, postmodern studies see subjectivity as a heterogeneous effect of discursive settings. Organizational members become a producer and an effect of a power-laden network of discourses. The focus of analysis shifts to examining the process by which individuals are rendered knowable. Chia (1996: 154) argues that this view moves beyond the egocentric assumption of methodological individualism, whereby some invisible barriers separate subjects from social structures. Such an understanding of subjectivity is opposed to the Weberean model of authority that places power in the hands of autonomous individuals ('masters') who gain acceptance through the enforcement of rational rules (Weber 1972: 549). By contrast, a postmodern theory of organizational authority is depersonalized and relational by conceptualizing authority as a

matter of social interdependence (Clegg 1994). Power is inherent in organizational discourses and structures different forms of knowledge that in turn delimit 'what can be said' and 'what people are' (Linstead 1993: 63). Knowledge becomes a powerful device because it aids in defining subjects.

This Foucauldean view of a production of the subject by correlative elements of power and knowledge has been applied by Townley (1993, 1998) to show the functional orientation of traditional human resource management practices:

> "The individual is the basic unit of analysis underpinning many HRM practices, that is, an essential human subject whose nature is to be discovered or uncovered, and who is to be motivated through the exercise of correct procedures of recruitment, selection, appraisal, training, development, and compensation." (Townley 1993: 522) "Rather than thinking in functional terms of [these practices], in this [Foucauldean] perspective an emphasis is placed on how HRM employs disciplinary practices to create knowledge and power. These practices fix individuals in conceptual and geographical space, and they order or articulate the labor process." (Townley 1993: 541, annotation added)

Obviously, Townley is not concerned with examining the predefined practices of autonomous actors (e.g., HRM managers), but the heterogeneous and power-laden network of social relations that gives rise to the body of knowledge labeled 'HRM'. This body of knowledge defines individuals and thus makes them analyzable and describable.

The last central issue of our conception of postmodern organizational analysis, the *contextual dependency of organizational actions,* is rooted once again in the critique of the philosophy of presence which we discussed with regard to ontological and epistemological questions in the preceding section. While modern organizational studies treat the presence of objects as unproblematic and believe in the capacity of language to represent them (e.g., contingency theory takes the situational factors as 'given'), postmodernists highlight their indeterminacy of meaning. The objects of analysis (e.g., resources) gain meaning only with regard to a situation. In other words, there is a contextual dependency of organizational actions. Because the existence of multiple meanings makes generalizations impossible, postmodern organization theory appreciates the contextual, affirms ambiguity, and accepts the paradoxical (Schreyögg and Koch 1999: 18). To conclude, the three 'central issues' influence our analysis in chapter six when we inquire into the implications of a deconstructive analysis of strategy research.

4.2 Deconstruction in a Nutshell?

> "It is not that bad that we try to encapsulate
> deconstruction in a nutshell. Let me offer you an
> anecdote. One day, two years ago, when I was
> in Cambridge […] a journalist took the microphone
> and said 'Well, could you tell me, in a nutshell, what is
> deconstruction?' Sometimes, of course, I confess,
> I'm not able to do that. But sometimes it may
> be useful to try nutshells."
>
> *Jacques Derrida*
> *(during a roundtable discussion*
> *at Villanova University,*
> *see Derrida 1997: 16)*

A way of thinking that has become widely recognized in the discourse of postmodern philosophy is Derrida's notion of deconstruction. We present this approach, or at least what we conceive it to be, as straightforward as the twists and turns of his argumentation permit. Because of these twists and turns, Derrida is often accused of writing in an incomprehensible, impenetrable way that refuses a fixed system of theoretical propositions.[68] To respond to these critiques, we need to realize (a) that Derrida's terminology deliberately changes in almost every text that he writes because deconstruction resists any clear-cut definitions, (b) that it is not Derrida's intention to come up with a self-contained system of thoughts since this would imply a structure that is conceptualized in terms of a 'center' that acts as a fixed point of reference (Derrida 1976: 422-442), and (c) that deconstruction never exists in the singular; there is not *the* deconstruction as an identifiable method. Deconstruction, like any other term, remains 'to-come'.[69]

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[68] Rorty (1977: 674) writes about Derrida: "Sometimes he talks as if there were some common project (Heaven knows what) on which he and Condillac, Humboldt, Saussure, Chomsky, Austin *et al.* were engaged, and as he has arguments for the superiority of his own views over theirs. At other times, he seems to disdain internal criticism of his competitors, and simply exhibits the way in which each of them commits the great sin of the Western intellectual tradition […]." In judging Derrida's style we should remember that demanding conventional academic coherence is against the genuine logic of deconstruction which argues that knowledge is not already clearly structured for us (Cooper, 1989: 481).

[69] "Deconstruction in the singular cannot be simply 'appropriated' by anyone or anything. Deconstruction are the movements of what I have called 'ex-appropriation.' Anyone who believes they have appropriated something like deconstruction in the singular is a priori mistaken, and something else is going on." (Derrida 1995a: 141).

We start our analysis with a discussion of what deconstruction aims to achieve. We demonstrate that deconstruction is concerned with a critique of a metaphysics of presence (section 4.2.1). To show how deconstruction approaches this critique, we illustrate its underlying 'method' (section 4.2.2). Because our own deconstructions frequently refer to Derrida's assertion that there is a constant dissemination of meaning, we discuss his *exemplary* deconstruction of the sign that discloses the instability of meaning (section 4.2.3). Since an application of deconstruction to strategic management moves us into the territory of the social sciences, we discuss the possibility of applying the overly philosophical ideas of deconstruction in this context (section 4.2.4). Because the goal of this study is to expose paradoxes, we elaborate how deconstructive thinking uncovers paradoxes and how it deals with these logical contradictions (section 4.2.5). We close by revisiting some arguments against deconstruction (section 4.2.6) to finally discuss whether Derrida should be called a postmodern thinker (section 4.2.7).

4.2.1 The Target – Critique of a Metaphysics of Presence

It is hard to find a suitable point of departure for analyzing Derrida's philosophy as he resists any classificatory schemes for his work. Yet there is need to start somewhere. Following Welsch (1996: 247), we view Derrida's writings primarily as an attempt to criticize the metaphysical embeddedness of Western thinking. This gives rise to the question: What is metaphysical thinking aimed at in the first place?

> "The main question of metaphysics is, according to Heidegger, that of the *origin of entities*: why is there something rather than nothing? Faced with this question, Western metaphysics answers with the Leibnizian principle of sufficient reason: every effect has a cause, this arises from another cause, and so on, until one arrives at the first cause, self-sufficient, full and cause of itself [...]" (Dupuy and Varela 1992: 1; emphasis added)

Metaphysics is the study of the most fundamental and final concepts and beliefs about the nature of reality – concepts such as being, causation, and time. The metaphysical question aims to discover the ultimate essence of something; this essence is an origin that comes logically first and is independent of what comes after.

It is this belief in a last and generally binding origin of things that Derrida's philosophical approach criticizes. Of course, to speak of 'things' and a general critique of metaphysics does not expose any specific arguments. Rather, we need to ask: (1) How does Derrida approach his critique of metaphysics? and (2) What metaphysical phenomena is he criticizing in

particular? The first question is methodological and asks for the way of thinking that is used by Derrida. We introduce this way of thinking as *deconstruction* (section 4.2.2). The second question aims to discuss arguments that result from an application of deconstructive logic. Derrida's major concern is a critique of the metaphysics of *presence* that represents the desire for immediate *access to objective and self-defining meaning*. The idea of a metaphysics of presence suggests that everything has to have a determined meaning by privileging that which *is* and forgetting to pay attention to the conditions of that appearance. Every identity (e.g., of an object or a word) is thought to exude a presence that is always there, a presence that is full of meaning and represents an undeconstructible origin. For Derrida (1977: 12), this metaphysics of presence refers to

> "[…] the historical determination of the meaning of being in general as presence, with all the subdeterminations which depend on this generic form and which organise within it their system and their historical sequence (presence of the thing to the sight as *eidos*, presence as substance/essence/existence [*ousia*], temporal presence as point [*stigme*] of the now or of the moment [*nun*], the self-presence of the cogito, consciousness, subjectivity, the co-presence of the other and of the self, intersubjectivity as the intentional phenomenon of the ego, and so forth)." (emphasis and annotations in the original)

Within our own analysis, the identified dominant logics attempt to establish and maintain a metaphysics of presence. The 'necessity of adaptation' refers to an objective environment that organizations have to adapt to. The 'primacy of thinking' asserts that there is something like a formulated strategy that is self-defining and from which implementation can be derived. Similarly, the 'fullness of strategic rules and resources' suggests that because rules and resources are supposed to be generalizable, they are 'full' of meaning (and therefore self-defining) and determine their own application.

Derrida's questioning of metaphysics contains a metaphysical character in itself. A critique of metaphysics from an out-of-metaphysical perspective would require terms, theories, and a way of thinking that are freed from all metaphysical thought. Derrida does not claim that he possess a theoretical framework allowing him to simply leave metaphysics behind. In fact, he argues that it is pointless to totally renounce metaphysics, if one wishes to question metaphysics (Derrida 1976: 425). His thinking operates from *within* metaphysics, at the margins of metaphysics to expose its inherent ambiguity by making explicit its principles (Derrida 2003a 28; Derrida 1986a: 37; Lucy 2004: 77). He does not deny that one can start at an origin, but emphasizes the impossibility to find a *final justification* for this origin (Derrida 2003a: 281).

4.2.2 Deconstruction as a Way of Thinking

'The Text' – It Is Not What You Think

A critique of a metaphysics of presence needs 'to happen' somewhere which means that deconstruction needs something to address. For Derrida this something is 'the text'. If we speak about deconstruction, we speak about deconstructing texts. But what does Derrida mean by 'the text'? Does deconstruction only target written texts and is thus literary theory rather than an approach applicable to a wider set of questions?

In the standard sense one can distinguish between a text (e.g., a book, a newspaper) that is created and real things (referents) in the world (e.g., an animal, a chair). Then, we can say that everything the world holds belongs either to the side of representation (text) or the side of presence (the real world). Derrida's understanding of text differs from this classical view. For him there are no non-textualized 'real' things that exist fully detached outside or beyond 'the text': in this sense there can be no outside-text (Derrida 2003a: 274). If there is no outside-text, there can be no representation of reality as representation assumes that there is something prior to textuality (presence):

> "I wanted to recall that the concept of text I propose is limited neither to the graphic, nor to the book, nor even to discourse, and even less to the semantic, representational, symbolic, ideal, or ideological sphere. What I call a 'text' implies all the structures called 'real', 'economic', 'historical', socio-institutional, in short: all possible referents. Another way of recalling once again that 'there is nothing outside the text'." (Derrida 1995a: 148)[70]

For Derrida, the referent is just another text. The claim that there is nothing outside 'the text' means that it is impossible to reach a state where a text refers not to another text but to a fixed referent. What texts refer to, what is 'outside' them, is nothing but another text. Textuality implies that reference is not to external reality but to other texts, to intertextuality. However, we need to consider

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[70] In a quite similar sense Derrida argues that "[n]o more than writing or trace, [the text] is not limited to the *paper* which you can cover with your graphism. It is precisely for strategic reasons [...] that I found it necessary to recast the concept of text by generalizing it almost within any limit that *is*. That's why there is nothing '*beyond the text*.' That's why South Africa and *apartheid* are, like you and me, part of this general text. [...] That's why deconstructive readings and writings are concerned not only with library books, with discourses, with conceptual and semantic contents. They are not simply analyses of discourse. [...] They are also active [...] interventions that transform contexts." (Derrida 1986b: 167-168, emphasis in the original, annotation added)

"[t]hat [there is nothing outside 'the text'] does not mean that all referents are suspended, denied, or enclosed in a book, as people have claimed, or have been naïve enough to believe and to have accused me of believing. But it does mean that every referent, all reality has the structure of a differential trace, and that one cannot refer to this 'real' except in an interpretative experience." (Derrida 1995a: 148, annotation added)

So, if we speak about deconstructing a text, we do not exclusively refer to written documents but also to categories of politics, ethics, history, and – not to forget – strategic management. Even if we were sitting in a strategy meeting rolling our eyes on the comments of others' suggestions, we would be using a sign, as our gesture could be treated as text. Text in this new sense may be best understood as the world as such – an interpretative experience. This still leaves the question of what 'the text' is made up of; or put differently: How does the world become textualized?

Since the linguistic turn in the social sciences and philosophy, advocated by writers like Wittgenstein and Chomsky, we are aware that our world is made up of language and that we can only know the world through language. Or, as Wittgenstein (1959: 149, emphasis in the original) puts it, although in a metaphysical sense: *The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.* Even radical constructivists like Maturana and Bunnell (2001: 37) recognize that the objects our world is made up of are not simply there but created through language. Derrida follows this view by arguing that any text, and with it also categories like truth or meaning, is *embedded in the structure of language* (Lilla 1999: 192). His own approach to language outlined in *Of Grammatology* is based upon the notion that from the moment there is meaning there are linguistic signs (Derrida 2003a). We only think in signs. All there is, in fact, are signs. There is no reasoning without recourse to language. Even the nature of cognition would not be what it is without language, since the objects of consciousness and the words that are used to indicate them form an inseparable weave (Bennington and Derrida 1994: 107, for a similar point see also Feyerabend 1988: 159). Everything we can know is text; this text is constructed of words (signs) in relationship.

Certainly, one could argue that since Derrida thinks of the world as a text that is shaped by language, he reduces the 'real mundane objects' in the world to language. Does Derrida collapse the distinction between words and things by indicating that things are words? Schalkwyk (1997: 388) notes that this is not the case, because Derrida only points to the fact that our grasp of things *shares the structure* of our grasp of language. Things are not reduced to mere words as critical realists like Fleetwood (2005: 212) have claimed recently: they continue to exist as things, but are textualized. This is not to deny the existence of referents, but to assert that

referents achieve meaning through language only: things are not 'things', but just another text. A 'real' cat, for instance, is not in itself 'outside the text' as we can attribute values and meanings to it that are open to interpretation. Any reference to the cat would still be another reference. Surely, the cat is also 'real' in a sense, but its 'reality' is, as Lucy (2004: 144) remarks, "not […] something that could exist outside of claims to know that it exists." Following this position, it is impossible to find an extra-textual position from where to find meaning. Things are part of 'the text' just as language is part of it; but that does not mean that both are the same. Text is an interweaving of the woof of language with what we call 'the world' (Schalkwyk 1997: 388). This imbrication of language and the world is the foundation for world-disclosure. After all, Derrida's understanding of text demands to rethink the effects of reference in general, not to suggest that there is no referent, but that every referent is textual.

Deconstructing Texts – The Logic of the Supplement

The remarks up to this point lead to the question: How shall we expose the metaphysical character of texts? Derrida's answer to this question is reflected by the notion of deconstruction. To understand deconstruction, we first need to realize that we are not facing a coherent theory with a set of principles, but a diverse way of thinking that is hard to grasp. According to Derrida, deconstruction is not an analysis, a method, an act or an operation.[71] As to the question of what deconstruction is, Derrida states, "I have no simple and formalizable response to this question. All my essays are attempts to have it out with this formidable question." (Derrida 1985: 4)[72] Deconstruction, as Weiskopf (2003b: 11) remarks with reference to Derrida (2000a), has no specific object: it can only be applied to something. If

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[71] "Deconstruction is not a method and cannot be transformed into one." (Derrida 1985: 2) However, "if we were to pretend for a moment that Derrida has a method […] his method would be deconstruction." (Wood 1980: 506) See also the remarks by Norris (2002: 1) and Derrida (1983: 42) himself.

[72] "All sentences of the type 'deconstruction is X' or 'deconstruction is not X' *a priori* miss the point, which is to say that they are at least false. As you know one of the principle things at stake in what is called in my texts 'deconstruction', is precisely the delimitation of ontology." (Derrida 1985: 4, emphasis in the original) "[D]econstruction is not a doctrine; it's not a method, nor is it a set of rules or tools; it cannot be separated from performatives, from signatures, from a given language. So, if you want to 'do deconstruction' – 'you know, the kind of thing Derrida does' – then you have to perform something new, in your own language, in your own singular situation, with your own signature, to invent the impossible and to break with the application, in the technical, neutral sense of the word." (Derrida 2000a: 22, 24)

we can say anything about deconstruction at all, then it is that deconstruction strongly affirms what is to come by helping us understand how *meaning*, which we tend to view as fixed and self-defining, constantly (re)emerges in new contexts. Many enemies of deconstruction criticize that since there is no formalized definition of what deconstruction is, Derrida offers an obscure concept and eventually is an obscurantist thinker. Derrida's response to these accusations is simple: "Deconstruction is first and foremost a suspicion directed against just that kind of thinking – 'what is…?' 'what is the essence of…?' and so on." (Derrida and Norris 1989: 73). Our idea to explain deconstruction 'in a nutshell' points to a contradiction; deconstruction itself is all about cracking nutshells to reveal the ambiguous nature of reality.

Taking a rather unconventional approach to 'define' deconstruction, we can look it up in a dictionary. The 1989 edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* gives the following definition:

> "Deconstruction [f. DE+CONSTRUCTION]: (a) the action of undoing the construction of a thing, (b) *Philos.* and *Lit. Theory.* A strategy of critical analysis associated with the French Philosopher Jacques Derrida (b.1930), directed towards exposing unquestioned metaphysical assumptions and internal contradictions in philosophical and literary language." (cited in Royle 2003: 24)

Although this definition is rather short, it stresses at least two important aspects. First, deconstruction is a *strategy of critical analysis* – although Derrida would refuse to speak of an analysis – that aims to uncover unquestioned assumptions of discourses. 'Strategy' is a good term to use here because a strategy is less determined than a method, if we understand strategy as a moderately emergent phenomenon. A thinker who has a method knows how to proceed, while the one who follows a strategy has to make judgments and thus takes more responsibility (Royle 2000: 4). Second, the definition emphasizes the role of internal contradictions. Within this study, these contradictions are considered as paradoxes. As we shall see, paradox is at the heart of deconstruction. Despite these advantages, a drawback of this definition is its focus on philosophy and literary theory. Because of Derrida's understanding of text, deconstruction is not limited to these discourses but affects all categories that we call 'real'.

Royle (2000: 11) gives a more advanced definition by arguing that deconstruction is

> "not what you think: the experience of the impossible: what remains to be thought: a logic of destabilization always already on the move in 'things themselves': what makes every identity at once itself and different from itself: a logic of spectrallity: a theoretical and practical parasitism or virology: what is

happening today in what is called society, politics, diplomacy, economics, historical reality, and so on: the opening of the future itself."

Royle addresses the broad character of deconstruction that is always already at work in 'things themselves'. This seems to be an important lesson because via deconstruction we do not make up, or invent, or create things in a new way. Deconstruction has always already been there. What remains to be done is to learn to think of things (e.g., strategy) as always being *in deconstruction*. Like the abovementioned OED definition, Royle places great emphasis on the role of the impossible, the contradictory that deconstruction is concerned with. He also gives reference to the destabilizing effects that come to the fore once we look at a text from a deconstructive perspective. If we wish to get closer to the meaning of this definition, we have to find a way to somehow give a descriptive account of what deconstruction may mean.

A good way to do this, without immediately turning deconstruction into a method, is to look for a pattern in Derrida's own deconstructions. According to Derrida, identifying the central conceptual oppositions of a text exposes its metaphysical character; one pole of the opposition is classically conceived as original, authentic, and superior, while the second is thought of as secondary or even 'parasitic'. Concepts are textualized in a way that one is always seen as 'pure' and *full of meaning*, whereas the other is just a derivative of the former defined in terms of a lack of presence.[73] To understand the necessity for deconstruction therefore means to recognize that

> "in a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a vis-à-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiological, logical, etc.) or has the upper hand." (Derrida 2002: 38-39)

And elsewhere Derrida states

> "[a]ll metaphysicians from Plato to Rousseau, Descartes to Husserl, have proceeded in this way, conceiving good before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation etc. And this is not just *one* metaphysical gesture among others, it is the metaphysical exigency, that which has been the most constant, most profound and most potent." (Derrida 1995a: 93, emphasis in the original)

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[73] Prominent examples from Derrida's own deconstructions include the oppositions *signified/signifier* (see also section 4.2.3), *presence/absence*, *speech/writing* (Derrida 2003a), and *to use/to mention* (Derrida 1995a). Almost all of Derrida's texts refer in some way (be it explicit or implicit) to oppositions.

The desire of the Western culture to view the essence or logos of a concept (e.g., the essence of 'being' or 'truth') in a way that something else appears as secondary is what Derrida (2003a: 10-12) calls logocentrism. A philosophy favoring logocentric thinking conceives an order of meaning as existing in itself, a metaphysical foundation. Logocentrism represents a *metaphysics of presence* as what is considered to be secondary is always conceived to be absent, whereas the origin is present in the sense that it is self-defining without reference to the other. The Cartesian cogito, for instance, appeals to presence as the 'I' is conceptualized as resisting radical doubt because it is present to itself in the act of thinking (Culler 1982: 94). This is the order traditional reason is built upon, the order of the logos. Consider the following example that is relevant to this study: The 'necessity of adaptation' conceives 'the environment' as originary and 'the organization' (defined as the absence of the environment) as secondary. 'The environment' does not only come before 'the organization' but is also privileged over it. However, we cannot define 'the environment' without any recourse to a notion of 'the organization'. There is no 'environment' on its own just regarding the essence of itself. 'The environment', therefore, can never be present to itself in the total absence of 'the organization'.[74]

Logocentrism is the primary target of deconstruction as a deconstructive reading identifies the logocentric assumptions of a text by tracking down the binaries and hierarchies it contains. An attack of logocentrism also means that every deconstruction is necessarily a deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence. Thus, deconstruction, which is itself a hybrid term made up of the opposition construction and destruction, is an attempt to *dismantle* the hierarchical oppositions that govern a text (Derrida 1986a: 87). Dismantling does not mean destroying the oppositions, but showing that by acknowledging their mutual dependence one can create something new. By disclosing the *supplementary logic* among the concepts, deconstruction demonstrates how a logocentric text always undercuts its own assumptions. Derrida (2003a: 250) argues that the supplement, which is the formerly suppressed concept, is something that gives rise to the concept that is apparently thought of as the 'origin' (see Figure 17). The concern is to show how the concept that logocentrism deemed to be a derivation of the 'origin' is necessary for the 'origin' to mean anything at all. There is no self-defining origin because the formerly excluded concept re-enters

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[74] In other words, there can be no self-presence because the present's presence necessarily involves the reference to the non-present (Wheeler 1999: 1006). "It could be shown that all names for reasoning, principle, or center […] have always described an invariant of presence." (Derrida 1976: 424, translation A.R.)

and acts as a constituting factor for the former (Girard 1992: 27). Both concepts interpenetrate and inhabit each other. This is where deconstruction starts: in being suspicious about concepts like 'origin', 'final reasons', and clear 'cause-and-effect relations' (Ortmann 2004b: 5). Within this study, we question the self-defining origins that are represented by 'the environment' (strategy context), 'strategy formulation' (strategy process), and 'strategic rules and resources' (strategy content).
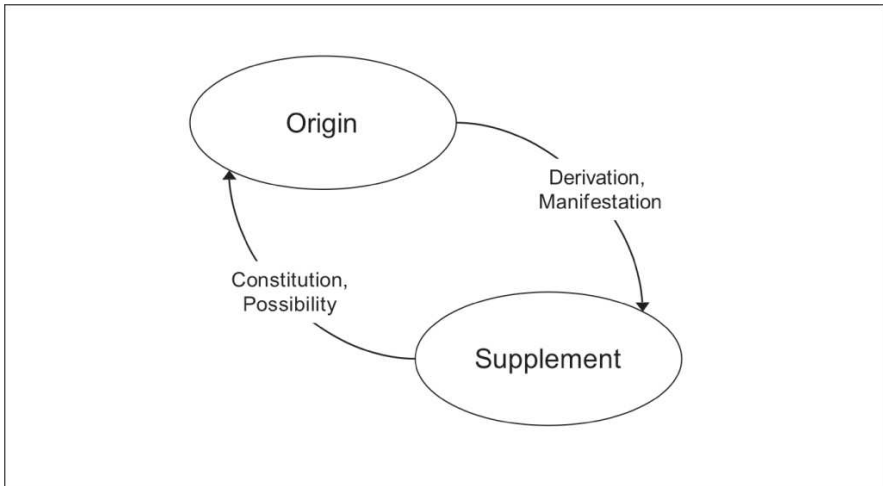
Fig. 17. Derrida's Supplementary Logic (adopted and modified from Dupuy and Varela 1992: 3)

For Derrida (2003a: 249-251), the supplement holds two meanings at once. On the one hand, the supplement is a surplus, a complement that *enriches* the original concept. The supplement supplements a lack (of meaning) of the 'original' concept – a lack (i.e. an emptiness) that cannot be avoided. This emptiness is a necessary consequence of the denial of a metaphysical origin that would be self-defining and thus full of meaning. On the other hand, the supplement can also *substitute* the origin; it can eventually 'take-the-place-of' the original and thus make up for something missing. The two characteristics of the supplement are needed for the concepts to interpenetrate and constitute their meaning in a mutually dependent process. Both meanings of the word indicate that the supplement is something exterior that is alien to the apparent origin. It is not known by the plenitude, but nonetheless necessary for its existence.

The logic of the supplement entails a disruption of what we think we identify with 'the origin' and 'the derivation'. If a supplement is both a surplus that enriches a plenitude and an extra that makes up for something

missing, the very nature of a supplement is *dangerous*. This is why Derrida (2003a: 141) calls the chapter in *Of Grammatology* that deals with supplementary logic *"… This dangerous supplement …"*. The supplement is dangerous because it fills a void of meaning of the 'original', a filling that implies a constant modification. We can never be done with the 'effects' of the supplementary logic because the supplement haunts (Royle 2003: 50). Take the example of strategic rules that we described as 'empty'. Empty rules represent a void of meaning that is filled in and through application. Application, of course, is the supplement to strategic rules; application fills strategic rules with meaning. Yet, this filling is always 'dangerous' in the sense that in the process of application strategic rules are modified; a modification that can be 'silent' (and thus not recognized by actors) or more obvious (see also section 6.3).

It should be clear from the discussion of the supplementary logic that the deconstruction of a hierarchical opposition is not the same as its simple inversion (Dupuy and Varela 1992: 3). An inversion would create another hierarchy which once again requires overturning. Derrida (1986a: 88) argues that a simple overturning (a replacement) does not move deconstruction beyond its original territory because one remains within the deconstructed system by establishing yet another opposition. It is only the supplementary logic – the thinking of the one within the other – that keeps the deconstructive process in motion and defies its relapse into a static binary structure. Derrida (1986a: 87-89) calls these two movements of deconstruction, the overturning and reversal of the opposition as well as the maintenance of the supplementary relation to displace the former system of thought, a 'double gesture'. In an oversimplistic way, we can summarize deconstruction as consisting of three phases:[75] (1) the identification of a binary opposition that governs a certain text, (2) the overturning of the hierarchical structure residing within the opposition, (3) the maintenance of the supplementary relation among both concepts.

Deconstruction is organized around a kind of inventionalism, the inescapable in-coming of the other into the constitution of any concept (Caputo 1997: 42). Formerly oppositional concepts turn out to be mutually dependent and constitute each others meaning in a constantly ongoing supplementary process. That is why deconstruction is all about moving from an either/or-thinking to a *n*either/*n*or-type of thinking.

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[75] Derrida never explicitly mentioned such a scheme. Yet, in the interview *'Grammatology and Semiology'* he mentions all three phases as being part of deconstructive thinking (Derrida 1986a: 52-82, see also the discussion by Lagemann and Gloy 1998: 55) as well as Culler's (1982: 154) remarks on schematically summarizing deconstruction.

To recapitulate our way of argumentation up to this point, we need to consider that far from excluding the world from language or reducing it entirely to language, Derrida advocates an imbrication of language and the world. The resulting weave is what he labels 'the text'. To deal with the metaphysical embeddedness of this text, Derrida discloses and deconstructs its hierarchically structured binary oppositions. Deconstruction demonstrates that the *meaning* of each end of the opposition is not self-defining but depends on its counterpart. The inclusion of meaning into the analysis raises particularly two questions: Why is there no stable meaning within 'the text'? Why can the origin not just be full of meaning? These questions require discussing how meaning is itself constituted and how language and the world interrelate to make a text meaningful. Derrida's answer to these questions is that *language is itself subject to deconstruction* and that because language and 'the text' are interwoven this deconstruction has serious consequences for the way we conceptualize the meaning of different ends of an opposition. In what follows, we discuss Derrida's deconstruction of the linguistic sign to argue against the metaphysical character of language in the epoch of the logos. This exemplary deconstruction offers a new understanding of the constitution of meaning that reaches beyond a metaphysics of presence.

4.2.3 'La Différance' – The Deconstruction of the Sign

Within the philosophy of language it is commonly accepted to think of language as a system of signs (e.g., words). By deconstructing Saussure's (1967) view of the sign, Derrida develops an approach to understand in a new way the nature of language and with it the constitution of meaning. The deconstruction of the sign is just one exemplary deconstruction we can refer to. However, because of the interrelated nature of language and the world and the resulting importance of language in the production of text, we need to discuss this particular deconstruction.

To understand the deconstruction of the sign, we first introduce some basic linguistic terminology. In a general sense, a sign is comprised of a signifier (the sound image of a word) and a signified (the mental concept that relates to that sound image). Both elements are indispensable to the constitution of a sign as a signifying unit that describes its referent existing in the outside world (see Figure 18). Whereas conventional wisdom emphasizes that each sign represents a referent 'in the real world', structuralism, as advocated by Saussure (1967), criticizes this view by arguing that signs have no direct connection to their referent but only unite a signifier and a signified.
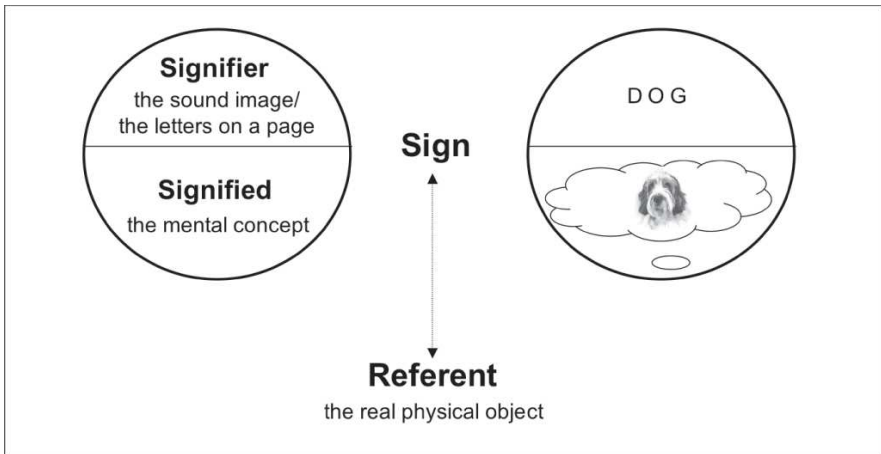
Fig. 18. Basic Linguistic Terminology

According to Saussure, the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary, which means that there is no naturally given necessity that the signifier 'DOG' automatically refers to a mental concept of a dog (i.e. the signified). The meaning of 'DOG' has nothing to do with the characteristics of a dog as such but is only sensible to people because they know that 'DOG' is different from other signifiers like 'CAT' or 'COW'. The identity of a sign is constituted negatively through *differences* to other signs. We have to be careful to interpret Saussure in the right way. Arbitrariness does *not* mean that the signifier-signified relationship is haphazard. Whenever someone uses the signifier 'DOG' it is not just a matter of chance as to what others might interpret it to mean since the meaning of the signified is fixed by historico-institutional agreements. It rather accounts for the fact that there is no *a priori* reason why 'DOG' should signify a four legged barking animal (Lucy 2004: 121).[76]

What Saussure's argument comes down to is the idea that the sounds that form words in language have no direct connection to the physical object that they designate. Even though Saussure thinks of the relationship between signifier and signified as arbitrary and thus *seems* to move beyond

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[76] It remains largely unclear whether Saussure believed in an arbitrary nature of the signified. This would leave open the possibility of thinking of different kinds of dogs (e.g., a poodle or German shepherd) when hearing the signifier 'DOG'. Burns (2000: 13), quoting Merquior (1988: 231-232), remarks that it is hard to believe in an arbitrariness of the signified when considering "that Saussure himself in the *Course in General Linguistics* stresses that the 'same signified' exists both for the French 'boeuf' and for the German 'ochs'."

the logocentric assumption that signs objectively represent their referents, Derrida (2003a) argues that Saussure still believes in a natural bond between signifier and signified. He bases his argumentation on Saussure's (1967: 28) claim that spoken language is more intimately related to our thoughts than written words. Following Saussure, speech is more natural than writing and thus enables access to 'present' and full meaning. Derrida argues that this assertion runs counter to Saussure's own fundamental principle of the arbitrariness of the sign. If signs are arbitrary eschewing any objective reference to reality, it cannot be claimed that a certain type of sign (the spoken) could be more natural than another (the written). This is why Derrida (1986a: 54) claims that the *concept of the sign* remains problematic in Saussure's analysis (see also Norris 1987: 87-94).

By referring to the *oppositional* nature of the signified/signifier relation, Derrida claims that in Saussure's scheme the signified is conceptualized as independent of the signifier while the signifier is treated as dependent. The meaning of the signified is self-defining and originary, whereas the meaning of the signifier can only be fixed with reference to the (already existing) signified. According to this logic, the signifier exists only to give access to the signified and thus submits to the concept of meaning that the signified inhabits (Culler 1982: 99). If it is true that no sign can signify on its own because meaning is a product of differences, as Saussure claims, then this conception of the sign as a clearly structured symmetrical unit that gives access to some already existing meaning runs counter to Saussure's own assumption of arbitrariness.

> "[In Saussure's concept of language] the signified can exist for itself […] [A]ctually, the signified has no need for a signifier to come into existence." (Derrida 2003a: 128, translation A.R.)

The signifier is not assigned any meaning constituting power as it is conceived as empty packing, whereas the signified contains the full meaning of the sign (Welsch 1996: 252). In the Saussurean perspective, the signifier directly yields its corresponding signified like a mirror yields an image (Eagleton 1997: 111). This is why Derrida (2003a: 38) speaks of a *transcendental signified*. Such a transcendental signified acts as an 'anchor' for a text to fix its meaning in an objective and thus determinable sense. According to Burns (2000: 14), the signified in Saussure's sense exists as a pure concept in a timeless world outside of language before it 'falls' into the words of any particular linguistic system. Saussure's concept of the sign affirms the idea of logocentrism by proposing a self-defining origin for meaning. This is where the metaphysics of presence becomes visible once again. Meaning in the Saussurean sign is *present* as it comes into be-

ing as a signifying unit by itself in its own right (Bennington and Derrida 1994: 33).

In Derrida's (2003a: 129, 1986a: 56, 1976: 425) view there is no transcendental signified. The distinction between signifier and signified is not fixed because the signified is nothing more than an effect of an endless chain of signifiers, or put differently: in Derrida's understanding every sign is a signifier whose signified is another signifier.[77] The Saussurean signified/signifier opposition is overturned.

> "From the moment that one questions the possibility of such a transcendental signified, and that one recognizes that every signified is also in the position of a signifier, the distinction between signified and signifier becomes problematic at its root." (Derrida 2002: 19, also Derrida 1986a: 56-57)

We can think of the following example to illustrate this point. If we wish to know the meaning (signified) of a word (signifier), we usually use a dictionary to look it up. However, all we find are yet more signifiers whose signifieds we need to look up again *ad infinitum*. The process is not only infinite but also circular since signifiers transform themselves into signifieds and *vice versa*. For example, the phrase 'four-legged barking animal' operates as the signified of 'DOG' but is itself composed of several signifiers with their own signifieds. The signified becomes the result of an endless chain of differences among signifiers. Or, to put it in a deconstructive terminology: the signifier acts as a supplement of the signified. The formerly original term (signified) turns out to be a product of its seemingly opposite (signifier). It is impossible to arrive at a final signified that is not already a signifier in itself (Sarup 1989: 35). Meaning has no final origin as no sign can ever be fully defined by itself. Instead the meaning of a sign is caught up in a play of differential relations with other signs. As soon as there is meaning, there is difference. The differences that create the 'spacing' between signifiers are what matters in the context of signification. In Derrida's view of language, signifiers do not reveal some sort of corresponding objective mental image that supply their meaning, nor do the referents in the external world to which they refer (Giddens 1987: 204). The traditional doctrine of metaphysical realism in which there are clear-cut word-world relationships that provide the notions of truth and reference to the 'real world' is consequently overcome.

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[77] Derrida (2003a: 129) states "The fact that the signifier […] has always been in the position of the signified needs to be reflected by the metaphysics of presence […] as its own death." (translation A.R.) Derrida does not assert the non-existence of the signified. Rather, the signified is a product of signifier-effects (see also the discussion by Lucy 2004: 144-145).

The dictionary example points to an interesting insight. Since meaning is defined differentially, relative to the meaning of other signs, the meaning of a sign is *dispersed* along the whole chain of signifiers (Derrida 1986a: 67). Meaning is, as Giddens (1979: 30) notes, "created only by the play of difference in the process of signification." A sign is constituted by the *traces*[78] of other signs it needed to exclude in order to be itself. The sign, therefore, bears these traces within itself. In contrast to the Saussurean perspective, the signifier-signified relation does not refer to the sign as a signifying unit but to traces and traces of traces. This assertion implies that meaning is never *fully* present in a sign because it depends on what the sign is *not* (the traces of the other signs). The meaning of a sign is constituted on the basis of the trace within it.[79] This trace ties the sign to the whole chain of non-present signifiers. To assume the presence of a sign would mean to establish an ideal (objective) meaning that antedates the constitution of traces. In this sense a metaphysics of presence would be a presence without difference (Derrida 2001: 29). It is impossible to get to a point where a signifier no longer refers to other signifiers but to an objective meaning. 'There is nothing outside the text', means that 'the text' is the weaving of differences and traces that constantly (re)emerge in new contexts (Derrida 1986a: 67).

Derrida's rejection of the Saussurean code model indicates that the iteration of a sign cannot be programmed or predicted. Surely, it is possible to iterate a sign as it can be used over and over again. However, it is impossible to use a sign twice in the *same* context. There is an infinite number of contexts making a repetition of exactly the identical context (in which the sign was used in the first place) unattainable (Bennington and Derrida 1994: 97). Signs constantly contain new meaning when used in a different context. This is because, the repetition of signs in a new context creates new differences that alter and *simultaneously* defer the presence of their

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[78] The term 'trace' may be misleading at this point. Derrida uses this term to avoid speaking of (absent) signifiers which would implicate him in a linguisticism. He perceived his work, however, as not primarily addressing linguistic issues (Bennington and Derrida 1994: 35).

[79] Derrida (1981b: 26) points out: "Whether in written or in spoken discourse, no element can function as a sign without relating to another element which is itself not simply present. This linkage means that each 'element' [sign] is constituted with reference to the trace of the other elements of the sequence or system it contains. This linkage, this weaving, is the text, which is produced only through the transformation of another text. Nothing, either in the elements or in the system, is anywhere simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces." (annotation added)

meaning.[80] Derrida (1999a) calls this combination of differing and deferring *différance*.[81] The iteration of a sign is never 'pure' but always different and forever new – driven by the creative force of différance (Derrida 1999b: 325). For Derrida, the possibility of repetition requires a mix of sameness and difference.

The neologism différance can be thought of as the antagonist of the transcendental signified that paralyzes the deferment of meaning and contributes to the establishment of a metaphysics of presence. The double meaning of the term, uniting the two verbs 'to differ' and 'to defer', points out that differences among signs are held not only in space but also in time: to differ is at the same time to defer (Derrida 1999a). Concerning the spatial dimension, différance represents the creation of differences ('to differ') among signs and thus helps to negatively define the sign's meaning. As stated above, this meaning is never present but *dispersed* along the chain of signifiers. Hence, différance also states that the meaning of a sign can never be present, original, or full, but is constantly postponed ('to defer'). Derrida (1986a: 67-70) sums this up as follows:

> "This chaining process means that each 'element' [sign] is constituted from the trace of other elements it carries in itself. […] *Differance* is the systematic play of differences, of traces of differences, of the spacing [the spatial dimension] by means of which elements are related to each other. […] The 'a' of différance, however, also implies that this spacing is a temporalization, a detour, a deferment, by means of which […] the relation to presence, a present reality of being is always deferred (différes)." (emphasis in the original, annotation added)

Différance shows that signs are not a homogenous unit bridging an origin (referent) and an end (meaning) as Saussure's semiology implies. The deferring and differing effects of différance move meaning to a future state

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[80] Now, we can understand why Derrida refuses to clearly define deconstruction. He states "[t]he word 'deconstruction', like all other words, acquires its value only from its inscriptions in a chain of possible substitutions [supplements], in what is to blithely called a 'context'. (Derrida 1985: 4, annotation added). Therefore, "[d]econstruction does not exist somewhere pure, proper, self-identical, outside of its inscriptions in conflictual and differentiated contexts; it 'is' only what it does and what is done with it, there where it takes place." (Derrida 1995a: 144). Deconstruction is always different from one context to another (Derrida and Norris 1989: 73).

[81] In French, the 'a' of différance remains silent when pronounced and can only be recognized in the spelling. Différance only exists in writing – an allusion to the speech/writing opposition. The noun 'différance' contains the verb 'différer' which has a twofold meaning in French: to differ and to defer. Différance is a polysemantic term which emphasizes that one has constructed something that continually breaks up in a chain of different substitutions (Rorty 1977: 677).