Structuralism and its Posts

Introduction to History

HSS343a

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Five Lectures Outline

- Structuralism
  - How it emerged; Basic ideas
  - Ferdinand de Saussure; Claude Levi-Strauss

- Post-Structuralism
  - Search for agency within structure; subject-position; meaning; power…
  - Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault…

- Post-Modernism
  - The three central claims of modernism; their critique

- Post-Colonialism
  - Autonomy and independence of the colonial subject

- Subaltern Studies
  - Combining post-structuralism and Antonio Gramsci
  - Drew on traditions of non-elite historiography

Idea of Structuralism

- Humanism
  - Effort of the preceeding few centuries was to centre the human as the focus of knowledge
  - The crowning of human agency
  - Effort in the 19th century to find patterns; law; structure in human agency

- Structuralism
  - The basic system/structure which undergrids everything humans do
  - Unlike divine law/constitution, such systems emerge from human action
  - Encompasses everything humans can do
  - Puts limits yet enables
  - Abstract; hidden in plain sight;

STRUCTURE IS PRIMARY, HUMAN AGENCY IS SECONDARY

Ferdinand de Saussure

- Course in General Linguistics
  - Who's the author!?
- General pattern in language: System
  - Two ways of looking at language: Diachronic <-> Synchronic
- Sign: Tells us about something other than itself
  - Basic constituent of language
- Composed of two parts
  - Signifier <-> Signified
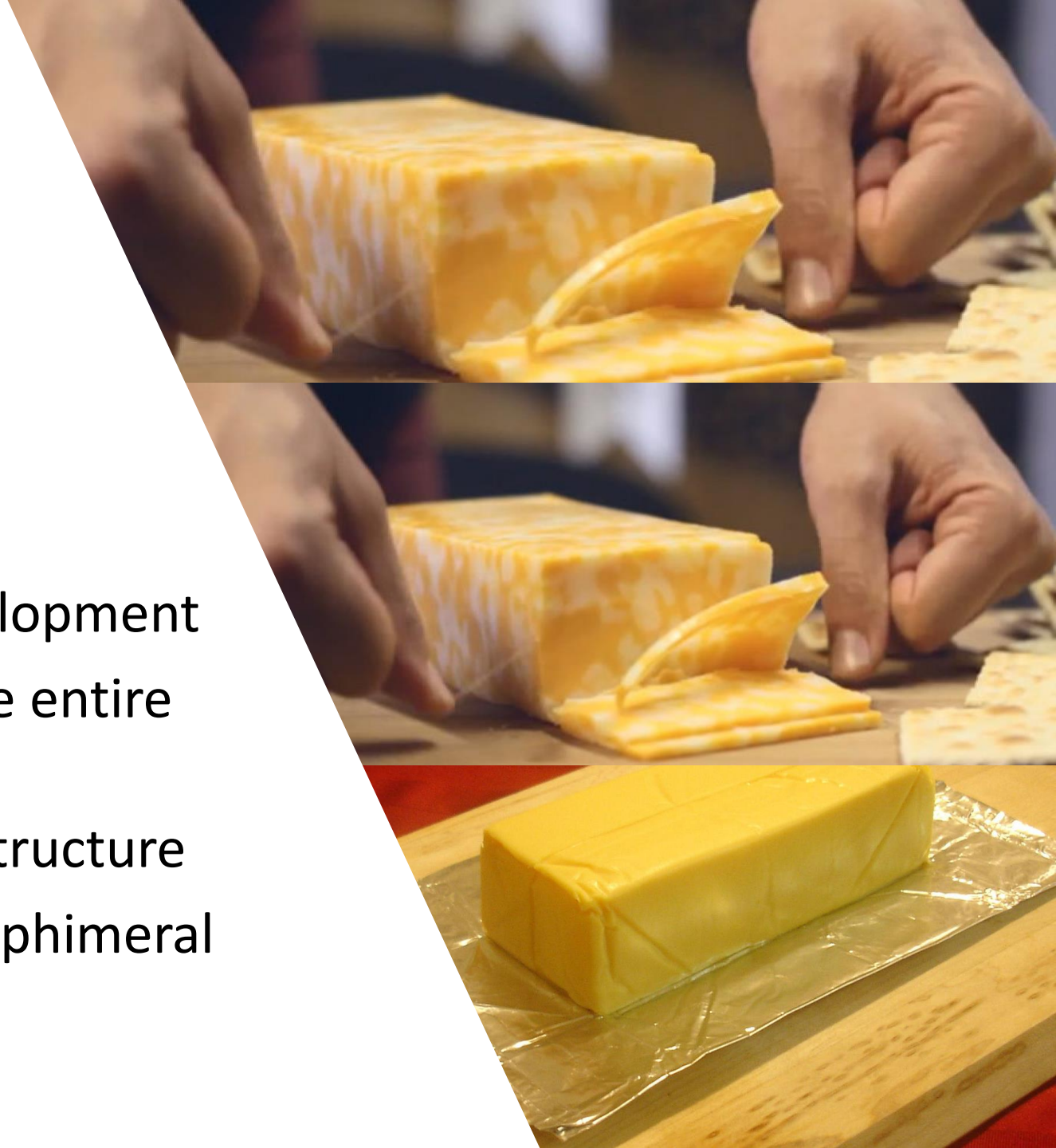 - Langue <-> Parole

ARBITRARY!

Saussure's System

LANGUAGE HAS TO BE STUDIED AS A SYSTEM

- The general patterns which make up language
- What are the constituent elements of language
- What are the relations between these elements
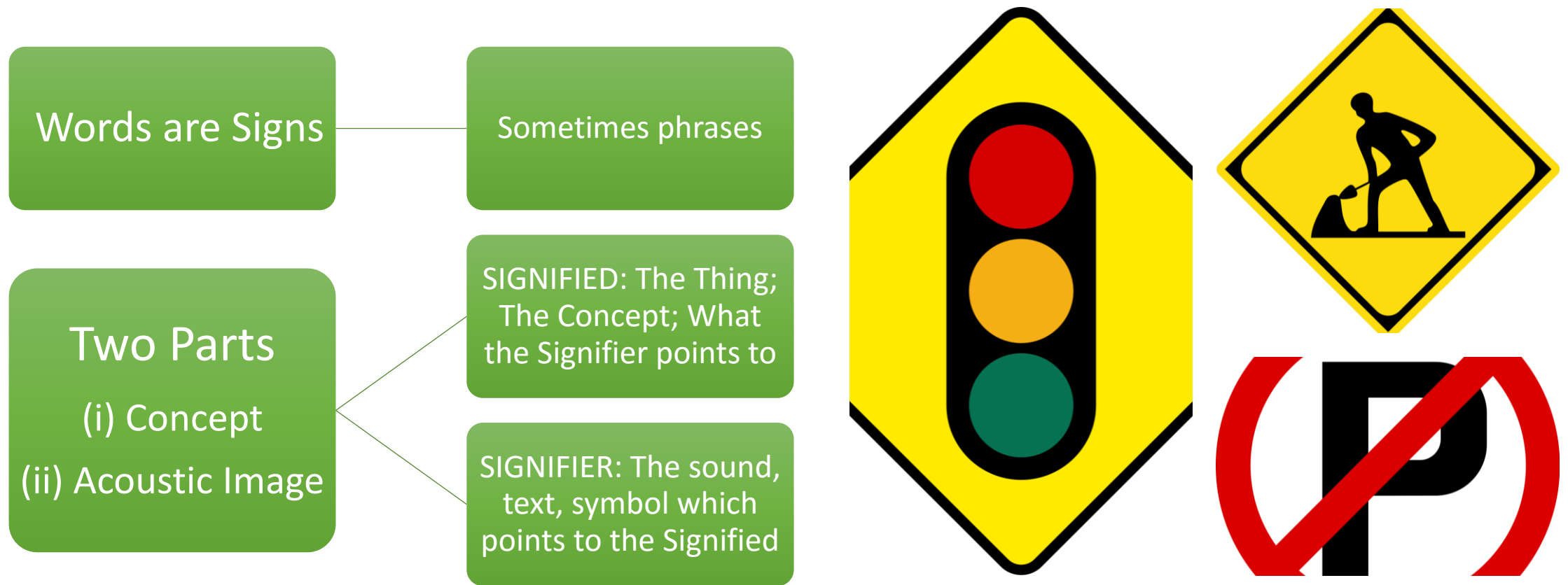- Study Language, *not* Languagues

Saussure: Synchronic Study of Language

- Not study language over time
- Slice of time
  - See its inner structure
- Helps understand language development
- One point of view to describe the entire system
- *Langue*: Abstract System; basic structure
- *Parole*: speech act, flexible and ephimeral

Saussure: The Sign

Words are Signs — Sometimes phrases

Two Parts
(i) Concept
(ii) Acoustic Image

SIGNIFIED: The Thing; The Concept; What the Signifier points to

SIGNIFIER: The sound, text, symbol which points to the Signified

Totally Arbitrary!

- There is no natural basis, or reason for the signifier and signified to be linked
  - Only Convention
- Impossible to change arbitrarily too
  - No one can order change in the link between signifier and signified
- Meaning is arbitrary; a function of convention
- Meaning based on *Difference* in Signs
  - Signs have to be distinct
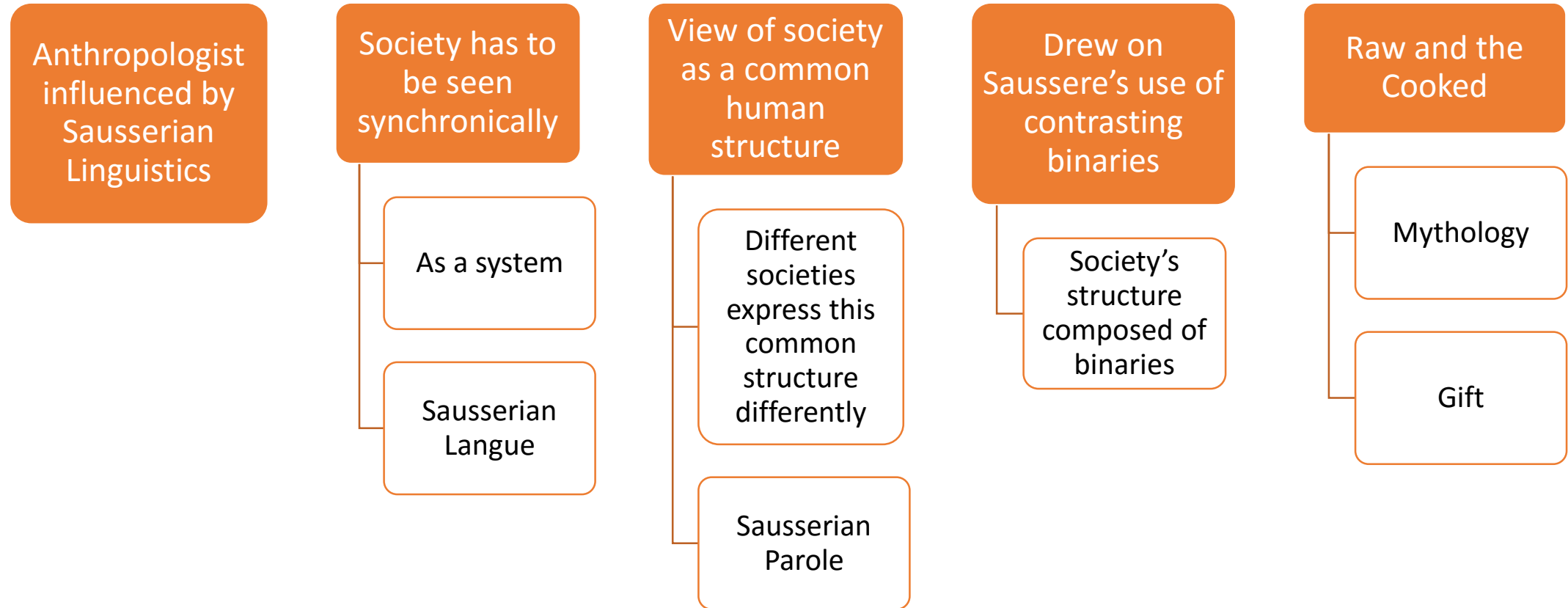
Saussure's Theory of Language

LANGUAGE IS A SYSTEM…

…governed by its own internal order whose interrelated elements derive value only from the simultaneous presence of the others.

…whose parts can and must be considered in their synchronic unity

Claude Levi-Strauss

Anthropologist influenced by Sausserian Linguistics

Society has to be seen synchronically
- As a system
- Sausserian Langue

View of society as a common human structure
- Different societies express this common structure differently
- Sausserian Parole

Drew on Saussere's use of contrasting binaries
- Society's structure composed of binaries

Raw and the Cooked
- Mythology
- Gift

Levi-Strauss: Society as Structure

- Like Saussure broke with existing scholarship in Anthropology which looked at society diachronically

- History of a people irrelevant to daily operation of their social structure

- Human society is the same in its basic structure
  - From the most primitive ones to the high industrial ones
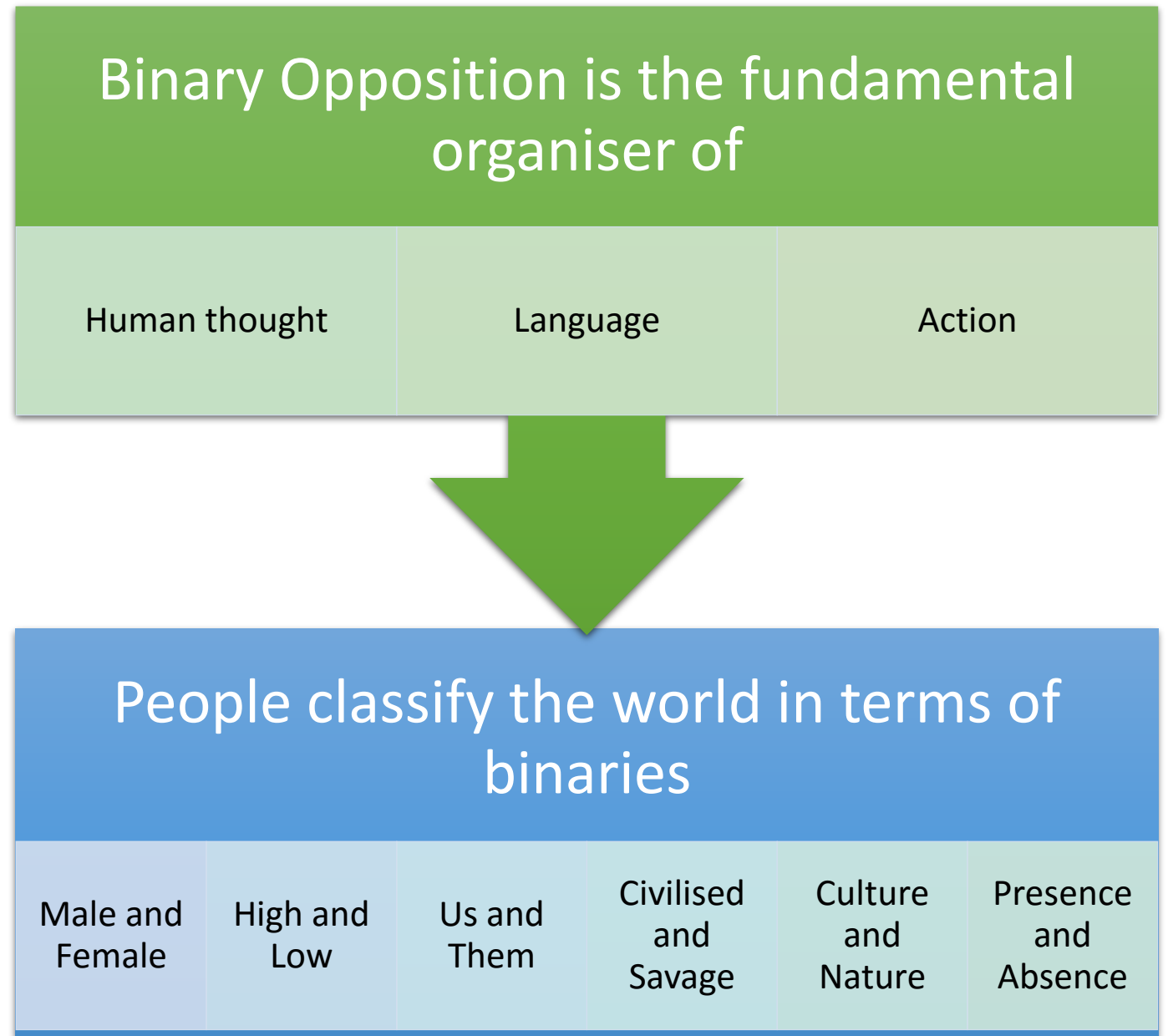 - Structure of human thought is same

- **To Study society is to study interactions of its constituent elements**

- Deep Grammar of Society

Levi-Strauss: Binaries

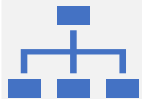| Binary Opposition is the fundamental organiser of		
Human thought	Language	Action

↓

People classify the world in terms of binaries					
Male and Female	High and Low	Us and Them	Civilised and Savage	Culture and Nature	Presence and Absence

Levi-Strauss: Kinship, Myth, Gift

Massive variation and dissimilarity in these all over the world

Possible to identify basic structure

Study as language: identify langue

Broken down into constituent elements

Relations between the constituent elements

Structural Anthropology

01
STUDY OF SOCIETY IS TO IDENTIFY STRUCTURES

02
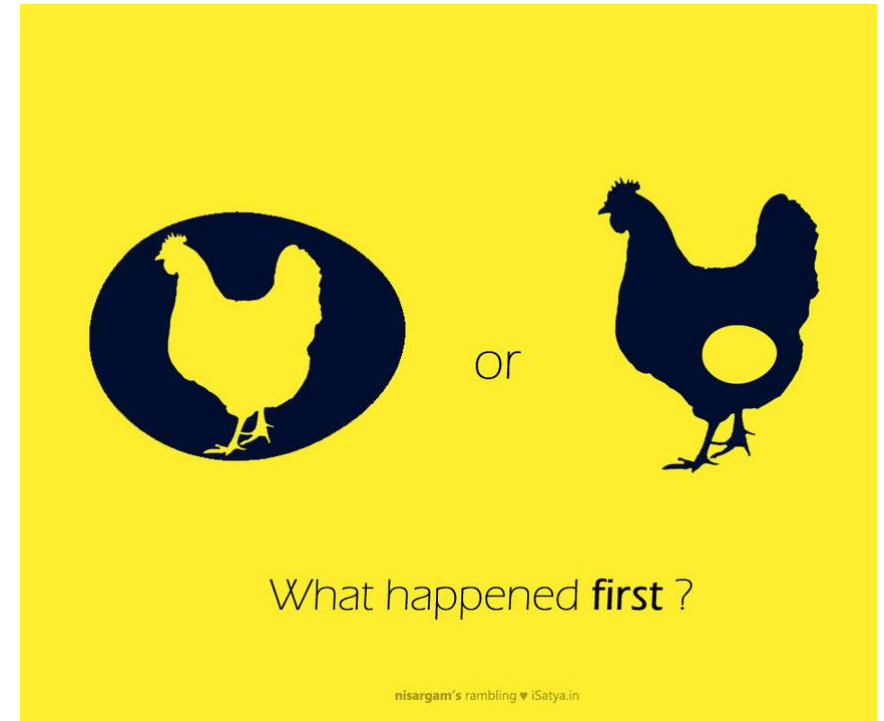Allows comparison

03
Allows us to identify change

04
Structures are Real
- Actions determined by them
- Actions are Ephemeral

Structure and Agency

- One of the abiding debates in philosophy and social science theory

- Expresses itself in various forms
  - Nature v/s Nurture
    - Criminal Responsibility; Moral Hazard; Age or Experience…
  - Base and Superstructure
    - Economy and Law; Social Relations and Literature…
  - State v/s Citizen
    - National Security or Fundamental Rights; Military or Schools…

- Rise of Structuralism tilted the scale against Agency

- After Saussure, Levi-Strauss (but also Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, etc) it was difficult to deny the primacy of structure

or

What happened **first** ?

nisargam's rambling ♥ iSatya.in

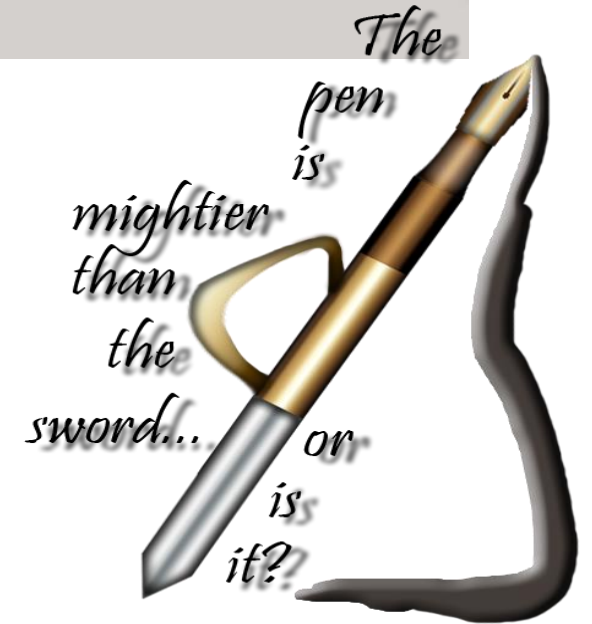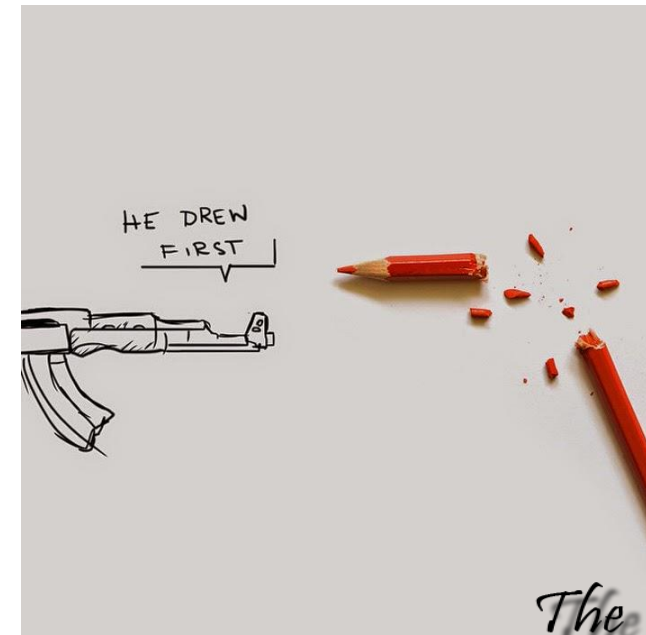- A bit like the chicken and egg paradox

Structuralism Recap

- Structure determines position of element
- There can be no reality outside of structure
  - Agency = Appearance / Parole; Structure = Reality / Langue
  - Structure Defines Existence
- Basic unit of Structure: The Sign
  - Composed of Signifier <-> Signified
- Structure composed of binary relations
  - Langue<->Parole; Signifier<->Signified; Text<->Speech; Presence<->Absence; Male<->Female; Self<->Other; Culture<->Nature; etc
- Thought itself is Structured in Binary categories
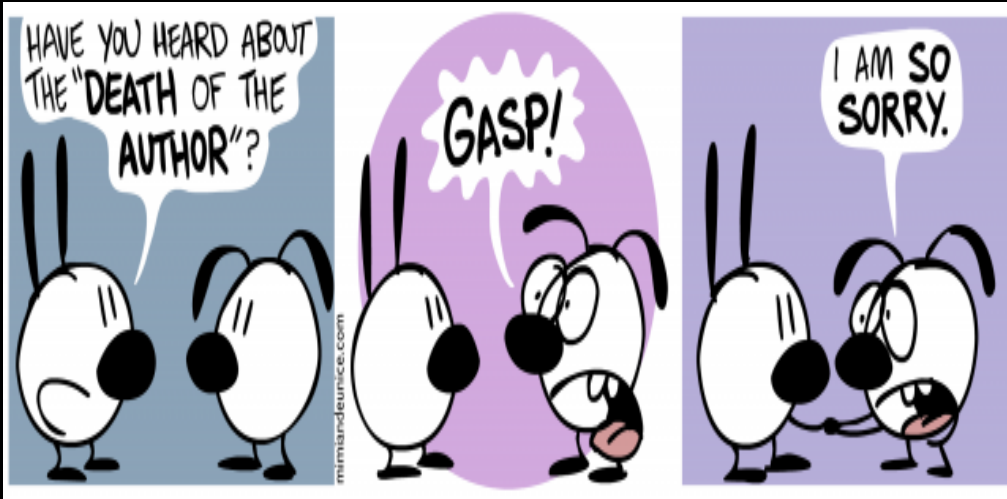 - Can't think of one without reference to the other

DEEP GRAMMAR OF SOCIETY

Linguistic Turn

- Language is Structure :: Language Structures Knowledge
  - We touch reality through language
  - World is constituted by language; nothing exists outside language
- Words embody meanings
  - But the relation between the speech act (signifier) and thing (signified) is ARBITRARY; Decided by Convention / Habit / Authority
  - Meaning is Destabilised: WHO DECIDES?
- No *Author*ity on Meaning
  - Text do not have innate meaning; Cannot be Deciphered, only Disentangled of their many meanings, which in turn have been given by convention.
- Death of the Author
- Birth of the Reader: Gives meaning

Death of the Author

- Author<->Reader Binary
  - Hierarchy reversed; or killed
- If all voices have same authority, how do we decide on meaning?
  - There are commonly accepted meanings
- Inscribing meaning is an act of Power!
  - Power of God; of the Dominant (part of the binary): Reason / Science / Law…
  - Accepted meaning is act of power, not reason or truth-test
- There is no Truth; only truths
- All Reality is Subjective: Created by the Subject (the Reader)
- Knowledge is gained through Language; which is a System of Signs; whose Meanings are Arbitrary; Thus:

KNOWLEDGE<->POWER GRID

Discourse and Narrative

DISCOURSE

- If the world is structured like a language and can only be known through language, then…
- The world can be read as a TEXT: A Discourse
  - Self-contained, meaning giving, internally coherent
- Boundary that defines what can be said (or read)
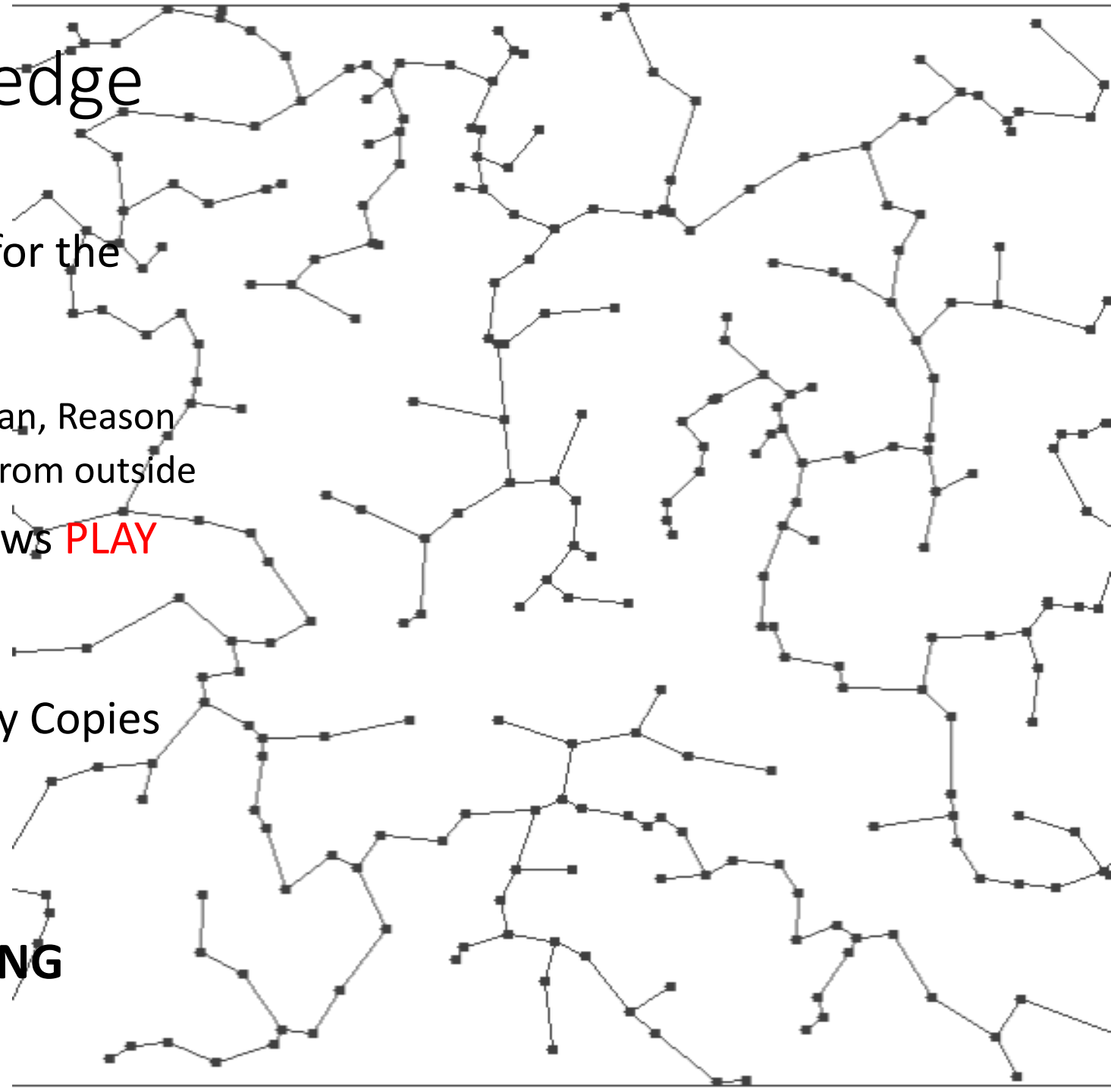 - Boundary defined by both knowledge and power at once

NARRATIVE

- Coherent story constructed by the *Author*
- Meta-Narrative: grand story (e.g. spread of civilization, growth of science, history of nation)

Decentring Knowledge

- Structuralism assumed an anchor for the Structure; a CENTRE which
  - Stabilises the structure
  - Fixed, anchors the relations : God, Man, Reason
  - Centre is external; an alien inserted from outside

- Once structure is decentred, it allows PLAY
  - Signifier and Signified
  - Meanings

- There is no Original (Signified), only Copies (Signifiers)
  - World is Simulacra

- Meanings is constructed into Text

  DECONSTRUCT MEANING

Post-Modernism

- Questioning the claims of the Modern

- What defines Modern? Belief in
  - Human Agency: Humanism
  - Primacy of Reason
  - Inevitability of Progress

- Post-Modernism critiques all three claims

- Political position
  - Unlike post-strucuturalism which is an intellectual position
  - Focussed on critiquing the big structures of power and domination
  - A "Romantic" reaction to the excesses of industrial society

Will to Power

Enlightenment Rationality

- Reason is universal
  - Rationality has to be contextual
- Foundation of knowledge
  - Other plausible methods to know reality not based on universal reason
- Can explain all that exists
  - Reason flattens all uniqueness and particularity
  - Incapable of explaining everything
- Age of Reason was actually the Age of Power
  - Rationality is actually the ideas of a particular set of people at a particular historical moment
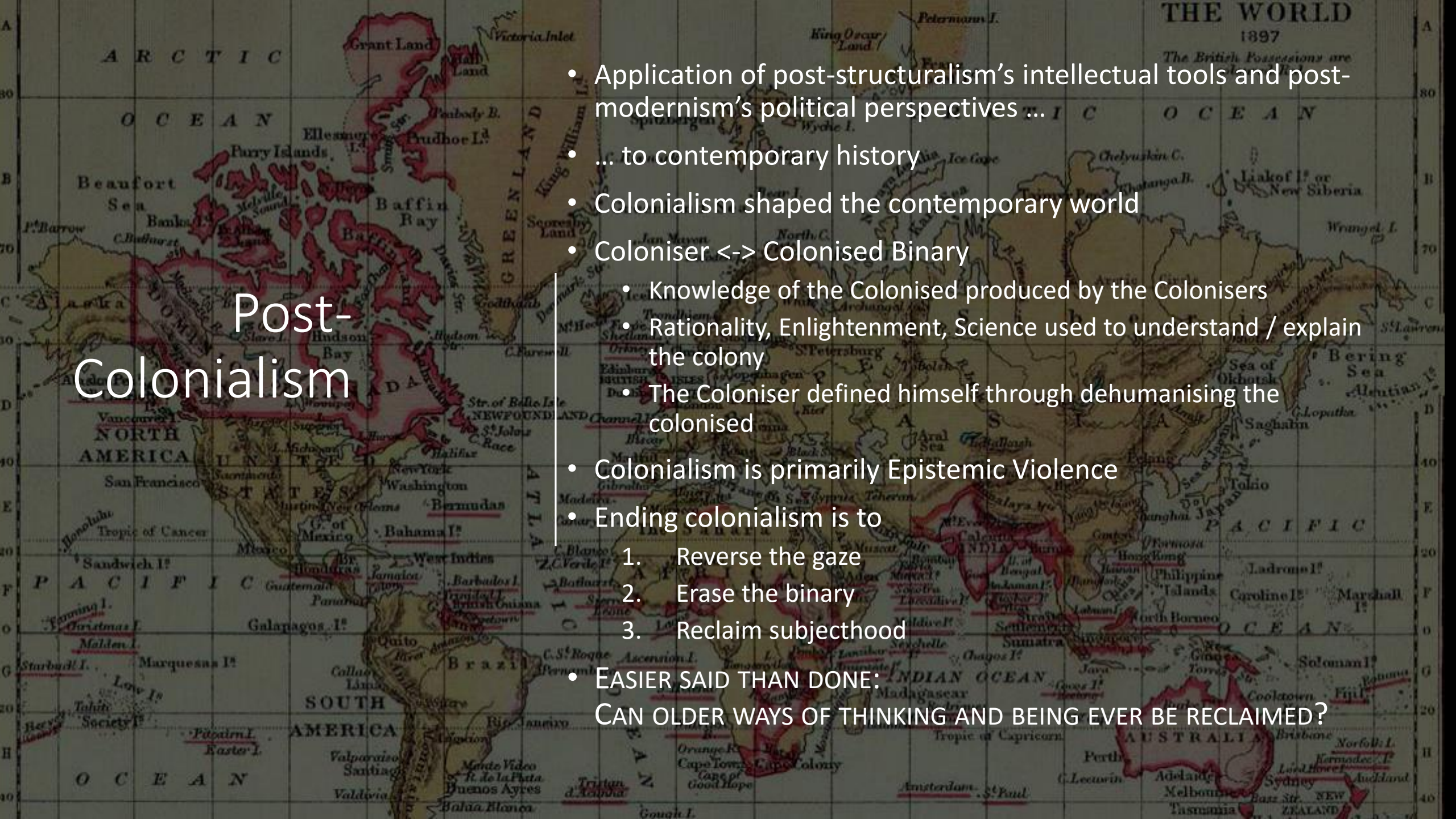
Implications for History

- Story of the Past – History – is constructed through the knowledge-power grid
- Narrative of the Past is built through the GAZE of the Author
- Modernity imagines itself as a Meta-Structure, a Meta-Narrative
- PANOPTICON
- Gaze of Modernity looks back in time and organises the past according to the demands of Reason
  - Imposed by the powerful: external, arbitrary
- Epistemic Violence
  - Pre-figures physical violence
- Discipline
  - As noun, as verb
- Historian should deconstruct the meta-narrative of History

Post-Colonialism

- Application of post-structuralism's intellectual tools and post-modernism's political perspectives …
- … to contemporary history
- Colonialism shaped the contemporary world
- Coloniser <-> Colonised Binary
  - Knowledge of the Colonised produced by the Colonisers
  - Rationality, Enlightenment, Science used to understand / explain the colony
  - The Coloniser defined himself through dehumanising the colonised
- Colonialism is primarily Epistemic Violence
- Ending colonialism is to
  1. Reverse the gaze
  2. Erase the binary
  3. Reclaim subjecthood
- EASIER SAID THAN DONE:
  CAN OLDER WAYS OF THINKING AND BEING EVER BE RECLAIMED?

Frantz Fanon and the Coconut

- Psychiatrist who became theorist of colonialism
- *Black Skin, White Masks* and *Wretched of the Earth*
- Colonialism destroys the colonised by dehumanising them
- Colonise not just their body but their mind
  - Blacks made to think of White as normal
  - Mental violence of colonialism creates servile population
- Anti-colonial violence was cathartic, it helped break the shackles on the minds of the colonised
- Political independence was of no use unless mental emancipation was achieved
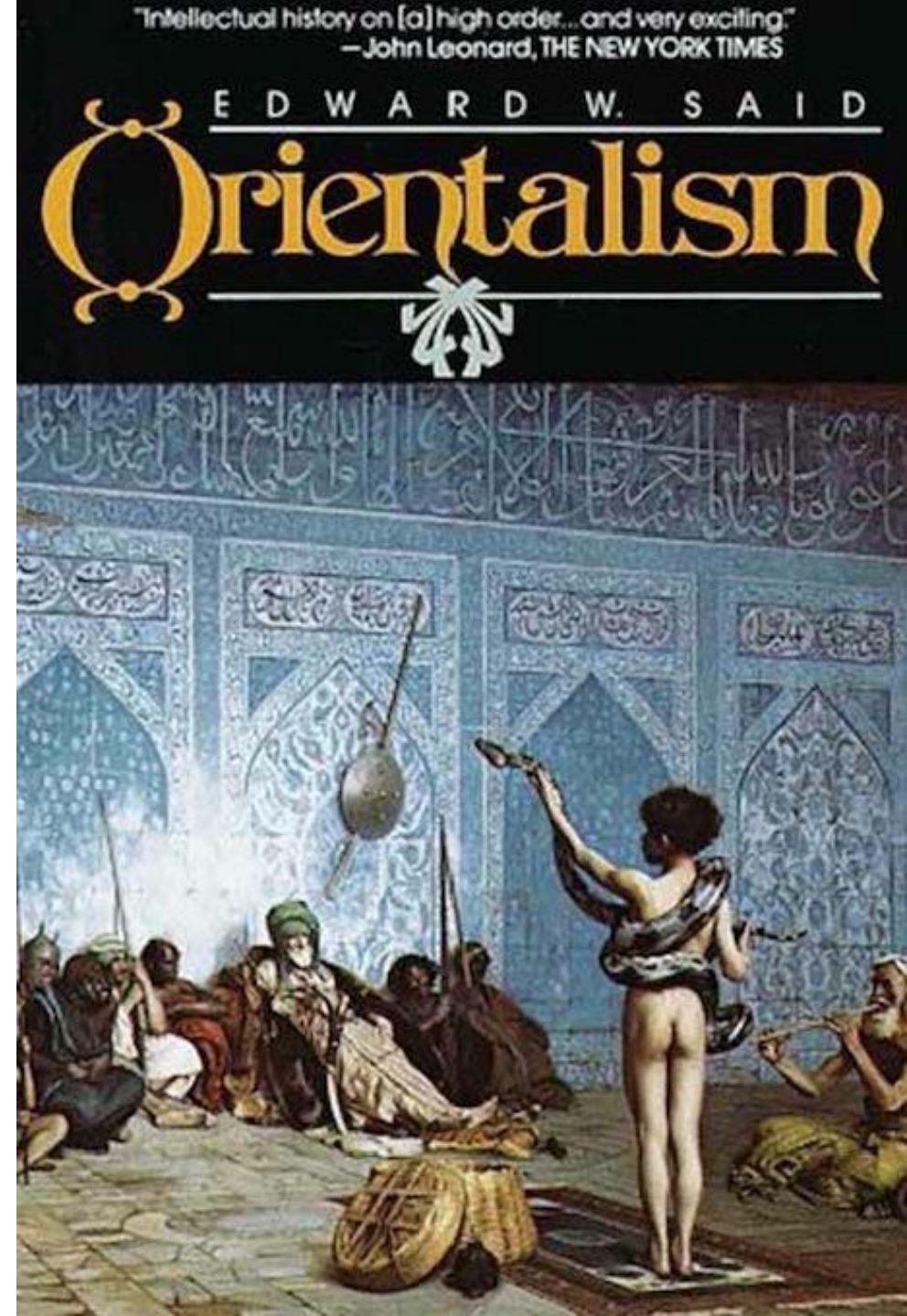
Edward Said: Orientalism

The West	The East
Civilised	Savage, Barbaric, Cruel
Rational	Irrational, Emotional, Stubborn
Progressive	Backward, Traditional, Reactionary
Scientific	Superstitious, Gullible, Deranged
Superior	Inferior, Feminine, Juvenile

- The West and the East
  - Not geographical terms; rather cultural ones
  - Essentialising categories which lumped discreet cultures, polities and histories into one generic Other
  - East as OTHER v/s the West as SELF
- The Orient had to be produced through knowledge which provided the producer of this knowledge the ability to control and engineer its product
- The West represented the Orient as the lower end of a series of binaries which defined both
- It is a narrative which creates the discursive field of colonialism
- Actual colonial subjugation follows the construction of the Orient

Edward Said

- The Orient can only be known through Western categories of thought
  - But never fully because it remains inexplicable
- These categories of thought create the colonial subject who is
  - Disciplined into submission
  - Sees the world through alien categories
- Orientalism normalises the European Gaze
  - Erases non-European histories
  - Delegitimises non-European ways of being
  - Claims all this destruction is progress and civilisation
  - The Oriental now sees his own history as a pale copy of the West

"Intellectual history on [a] high order...and very exciting."
—John Leonard, THE NEW YORK TIMES

EDWARD W. SAID

Orientalism

Post-Colonial Condition

- Political independence is not decolonisation
  - It is not chronologically after end of colonial rule, rather it is the attempt by the colonised to reclaim their own historical agency, their subjecthood
- How can the colonised recover their autonomy when their world has been recreated by colonialism
- It is only by breaking the knowledge-power grid normalised by colonialism that the colonised will be free
- Resistance to Colonialism
  - Attempt to recover the authentic post (after) colonialism
  - Break out of colonialism's knowledge-power grid
  - Overcome the hierarchies of the colonial binaries: intersectional positions
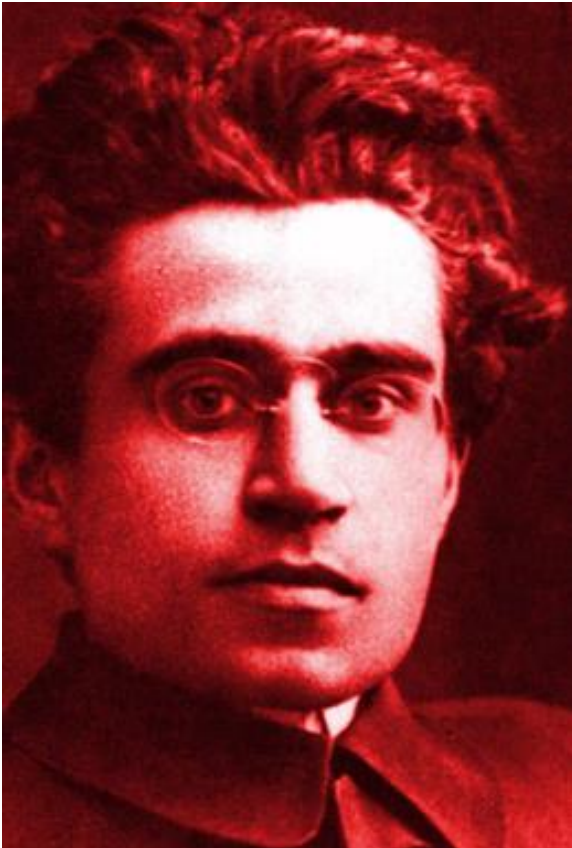 - Construct a new self: Hybridity

Subaltern Studies

- A new approach to history research and writing which emphasised

  HISTORY FROM BELOW

- Drew on the ideas of Antonio Gramsci and post-structuralism; sub-set of post-colonialism

- Started as a collective effort of a group of historians and other social scientists, in the early 1980s

- Radical scholars dissatisfied with existing Marxist historiography

- Claimed that all history till now has been elite history
  - Perspective of the literate, who had social capital to claim authenticity for their record of events
  - Thus it built hegemony; irrespective of any differences

- We need history which looks at the past from the eyes of the subaltern

- Restores Agency of the masses as autonomous actors of history

Antonio Gramsci and Hegemony

- Italian Marxist who analysed why workers do not oppose capitalism
- Because of Hegemony
    - Ways of thinking are such that these lead to bourgeois world view
    - Rebellion against present order will re-create the same order again
- Hegemony is created by intellectuals
    - Intelligentia of the ruling class(es)
    - Organic intellectuals of the subalterns
- Organic intellectuals build counter-hegemony
    - Values, ideologies, culture which counter ruling class hegemony
- Elites appropriate some ideas of the subalterns, thus preserve their rule
- Class struggle is both war of position and war of manoeuvre
    - Former only when the latter is won

Subaltern Studies: Definition of Elite

- "The historiography of Indian nationalism has been dominated by elitism – colonialist and bourgeois-nationalist... Both these varieties share the prejudice that the making of the Indian nation and the development of its consciousness – nationalism – were exclusively elite achievements. In the colonialist histories these are credited to British rulers; in the nationalist writings to Indian elite personalities, institutions, activities and ideas".

- Claims to speak on behalf of the people, appropriates people's ideas, mobilisations, etc into an elite narrative

- Claim history moved, things changed, progress achieved because:

  ELITES ACTED

- Even Marxists speak **for** the peasants, workers, oppressed

- We need to hear the subaltern in *her own voice*

Subaltern's History

- "What is left out [of elite history] is the *politics of the people*"

- "This was an *autonomous domain*, for it neither originated rom elite politics nor did its existence depend on the latter. It was traditional only so far as its roots could be traced to pre-colonial times, but … it was as modern as elite politics, distinguished only by its greater depth in time as well as in structure"

- Subaltern Mobilisation
  - Horizontal, based on traditional ties of kinship, territoriality, solidarity
  - Spontaneous and violent: inexplicable to the elites

- Subaltern Ideology
  - Drew on traditional ideas drawn from religion and traditional ways of being
  - Based on memories of resistance to oppression

Subaltern Studies: Historical Method

- How can a historian retrieve the voice, the gaze of the subaltern?
    - All documents and testimonies are from elites
    - All dominant narratives from elites
    - All material remains pre-dominantly from elites
- Against the Grain
    - Reading historical documents assuming that they enscribe elite bias
    - Deconstruct the binaries which structure elite records
    - Retrieve the voice of the subaltern encoded within elite narrative
    - … and find coherence within it
- Discover the structure of elite knowledge-power grid
    - Since that proved difficult, if not impossible
    - Write the history of how elite knowledge-power grid was fractured
    - The Fragment

Subaltern Studies: Contribution

- New historical methods were enunciated and put into practice

- New archives

- Many new ways of analysing old, well-known, events

- Brought structuralism and post-structuralism into the study of Indian history

- A Global contribution