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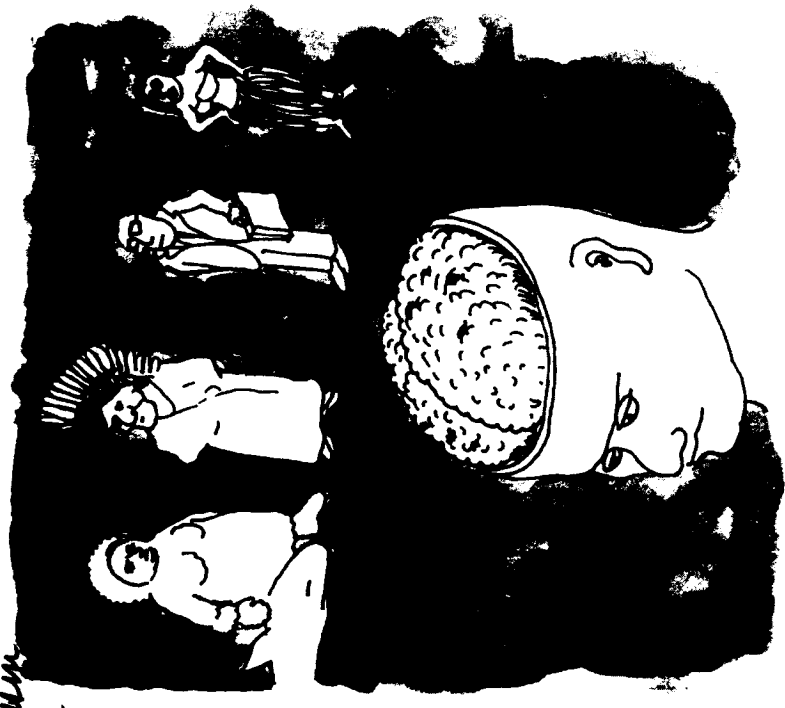
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*File name: Structuralism
Saussure*



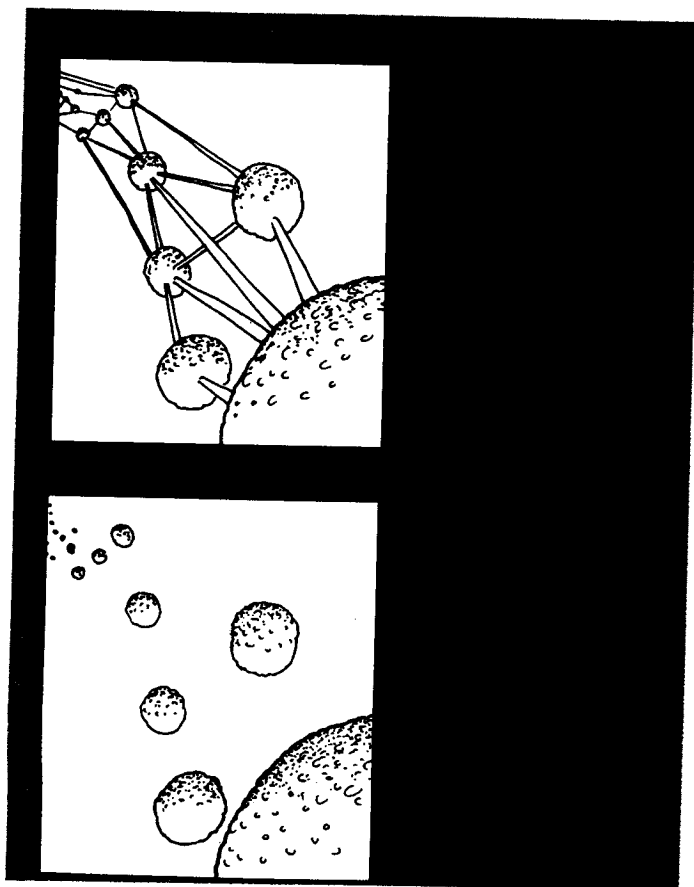
STRUCTURALISM AND POSTSTRUCTURALISM FOR BEGINNERS™

What is Structuralism?

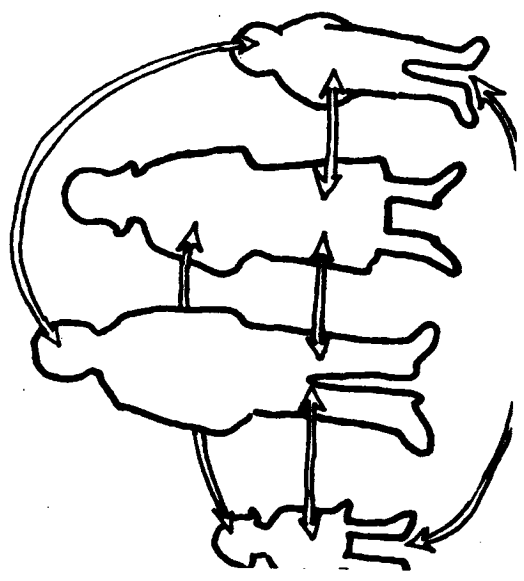


Post-Structuralism

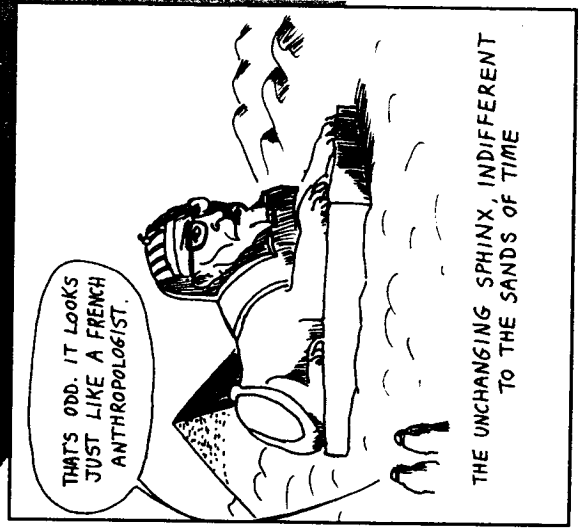
its less dramatic versions, structuralism is just a method of studying language, society, and the works of artists and novelists. But in its most exuberant form, it is a philosophy, a Weltanschauung, an overall worldview that provides an **ORGANIC** as opposed to an **ATOMISTIC** account of reality and knowledge.



According to the most radical version of structuralist organicism, reality is composed not of "THINGS," but of **RELATIONSHIPS.**



Because structuralism claims to discover permanent structures behind or beneath things, its analyses tend to be **SYNCHRONIC** (ahistorical) rather than **DIACHRONIC** (historical). Its most extreme practitioners deny the significance of history, or are nostalgic for primitive cultures that are oblivious to the existence of change, cultures that are



Because structuralism is concerned with a universal, unchanging order of things (what one of its members,

Jacques Lacan, called the "Symbolic Order"), it is in many respects opposed to the "existentialism" of Jean-Paul Sartre that preceded it on the intellectual scene in Europe, or to any other form of humanism that emphasizes the individual.

I SAY, EXISTENCE PRECEDES ESSENCE

AND I SAY THERE IS ONLY ESSENCE



THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE SUBJECT

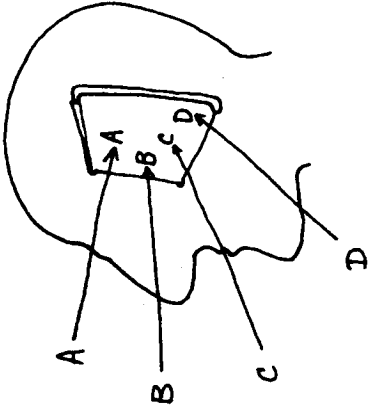
Because of these features, structuralism can claim as its ancestors the classical Continental rationalist philosophers of the seventeenth century rather than the British empiricists who are the creators of the Anglo-American intellectual environment.

In structuralism, there is a "disappearance of the subject," as she is spawned by, and absorbed back into, the general structure.



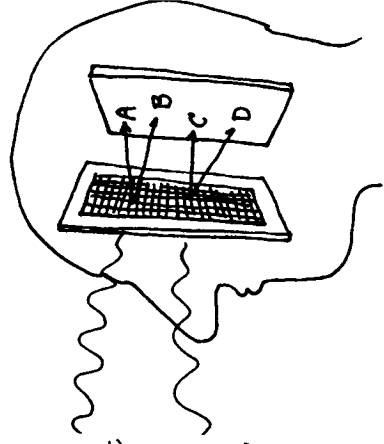
LOCKE BERKELEY HUME

The empiricists (John Locke, George Berkeley, David Hume) believed that knowledge of the world was **IMMEDIATE**. The mind is a blank slate at birth, and reality impresses itself upon that slate in the form of the data of the five senses. These sense-data are "the given." They are the building blocks of our knowledge of the world. (Sense-data are the "atoms" of the empiricists' atomism.)

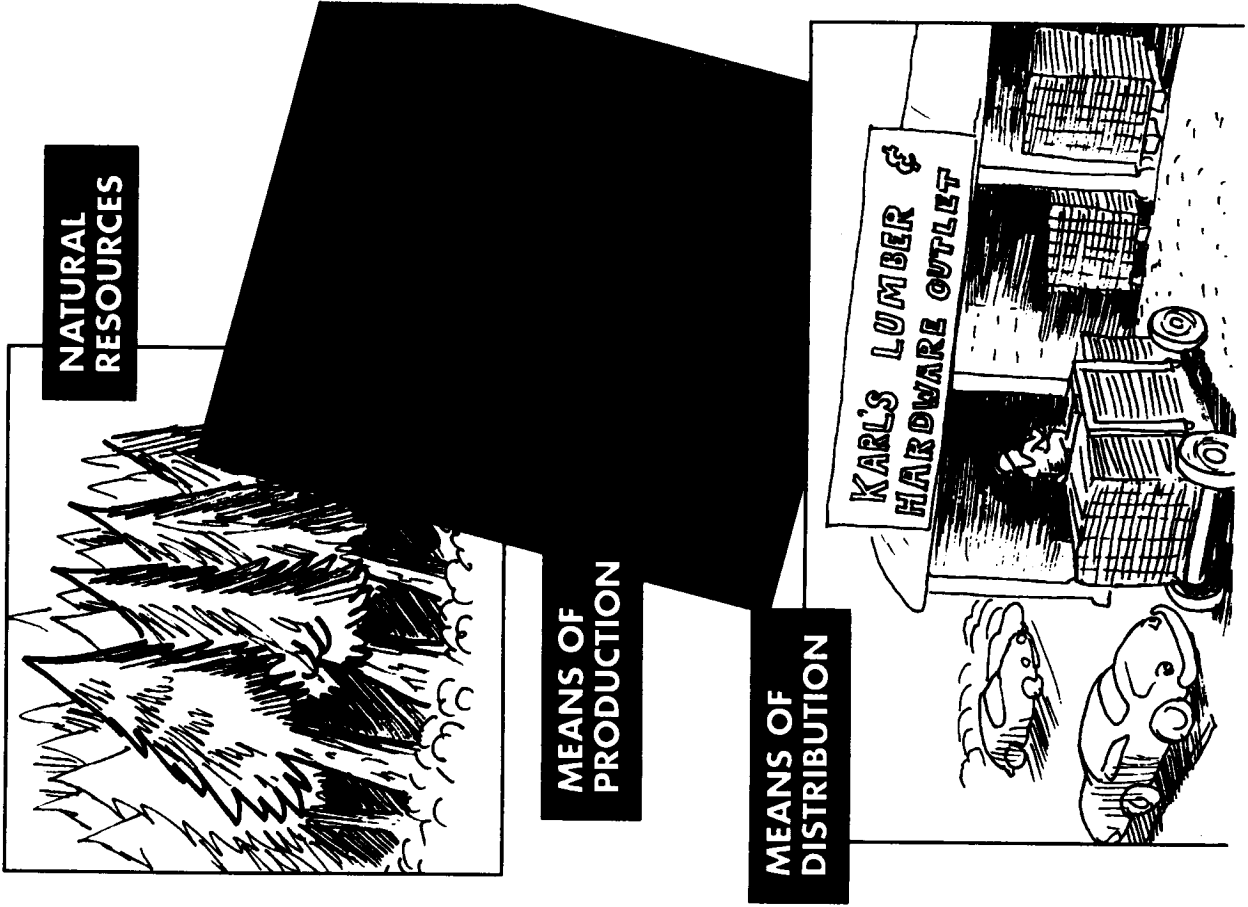


DESCARTES SPINOZA LEIBNIZ

On the contrary, the rationalists (René Descartes, Baruch Spinoza, Gottfried Leibniz, Immanuel Kant), taking a cue from Plato, claimed that knowledge of the world is **MEDIATE**. It is mediated by innate ideas or innate structures (ideas or categories that are present at birth.) By attending to these innate components, we can deduce the universal structure of reality, a structure that will contradict the mere appearances provided by the senses and show itself to be a **UNIVERSAL**, unchanging truth, one best articulated in



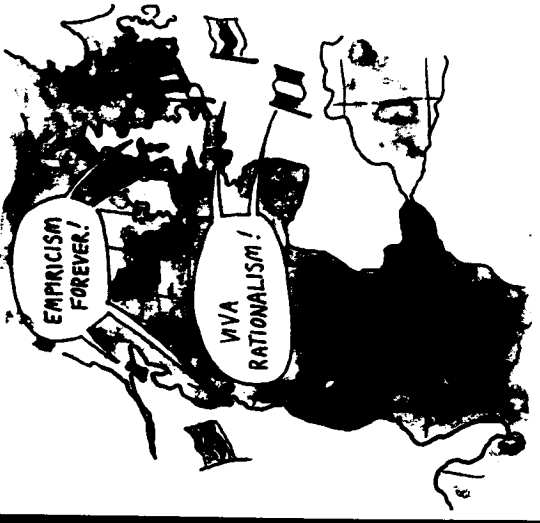
There is, according to Marx, AN UNDERLYING STRUCTURE THAT DETERMINES SOCIAL REALITY, AND THAT MUST BE GRASPED IF SOCIAL REALITY IS TO BE UNDERSTOOD. For him, this underlying structure was an economic one. Its foundation is:

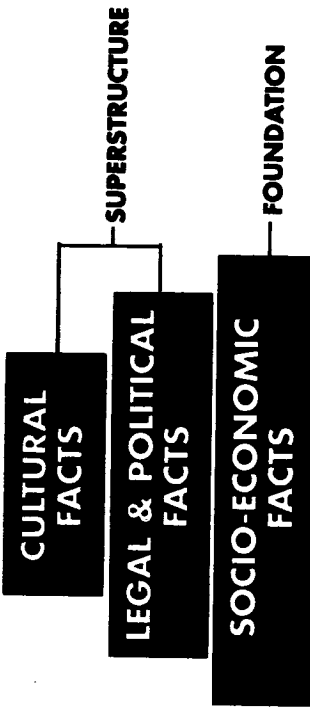


Two modern examples of such Continental thinkers (and ones who have had a direct impact on structuralism) are KARL MARX (1818-1886) and SIGMUND FREUD (1856-1939). Both of these men thought of themselves as scientists, hence as "empiricists" in some sense, but they were clearly much more influenced by the rationalist philosophers than by the empiricist philosophers.

SOCIAL REALITY IS NOT CAUSED BY THE PROJECTS OF CONSCIOUSNESS, AND THE TRUTH ABOUT SOCIAL REALITY IS NOT GRASPED BY IMMEDIATE CONSCIOUSNESS

According to Marx.





This underlying structure is tantamount to the "sum total" of all the RELATIONS OF PRODUCTION. Furthermore, everything else in society must be understood as being built upon that foundation. This "super-structure" is a "reflex" or a "sublimate" of that underlying structure.

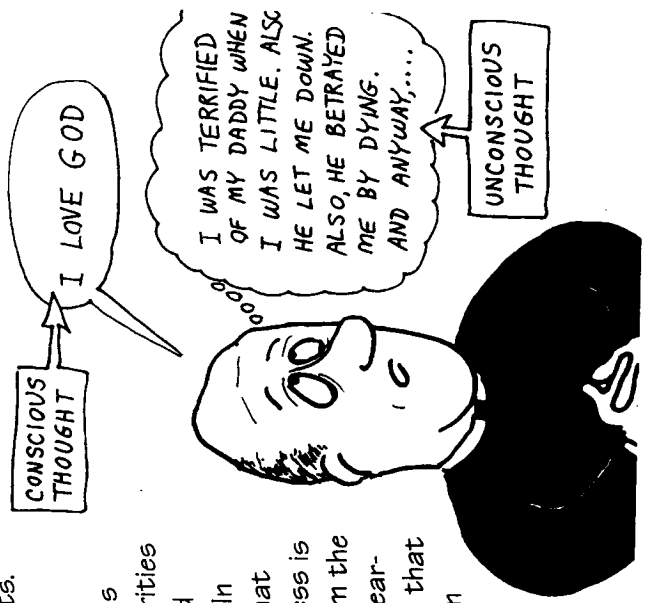
It is essentially an ideological reflection of the forces at work in the socio-economic foundation. For example, a POLITICAL CONSTITUTION is just a legalizing of the privileges of the social class that owns the economic foundation of the society.



The police are just heavily armed hired thugs who enforce the "rights" of the owning class. So-called morality is also the ideological defense of these advantages. The same with most art, literature, poetry, religious preaching, and what passes for science.

Like structuralism, Marxism is a form of organicism and is anti-individualistic. Nevertheless, despite being almost a form of structuralism, ultimately Marxism is not, because of its obsession with HISTORY. Structuralism is a SYNCHRONIC science, hence it is ahistorical. Nevertheless, Marxism deeply influenced structuralism, and a famous French Marxist, Louis Althusser, tried to synthesize his Marxism with structuralist arguments.

SIGMUND FREUD's psychoanalysis also has some important similarities with structuralism, and strongly influenced it. In psychoanalysis, too, what appears in consciousness is often very different from the truth which those "appearances" mask — a truth that can only be derived from the study of the STRUCTURAL ORGANIZATION OF THE UNCONSCIOUS

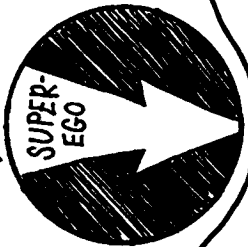




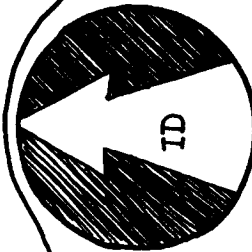
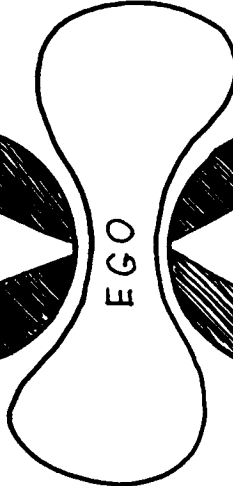
This underlying structure of which the conscious mind is unaware produces a tension between natural animal forces with the forces of civilization (i.e., basic sexual and aggressive instincts aligned against the interests of society that try to repress those instincts).

According to psychoanalytic theory there are three agencies at work in this dynamic: THE ID (an irrational, violent rapacious force demanding immediate gratification of its need for total pleasure), THE SUPEREGO (an irrational counterforce organized to control the demands of the id through the use of guilt), and THE EGO (composed of a rational, socially oriented conscious mind, and an unconscious CENSORING DEVICE that keeps much of the information about the battle between the id and the superego out of consciousness).

power from above



squeezed in the middle



power from below

The main function of the ego is that of compromise between id and superego, through delaying tactics ("There's a time and a place for everything"), or through displacement and sublimation.

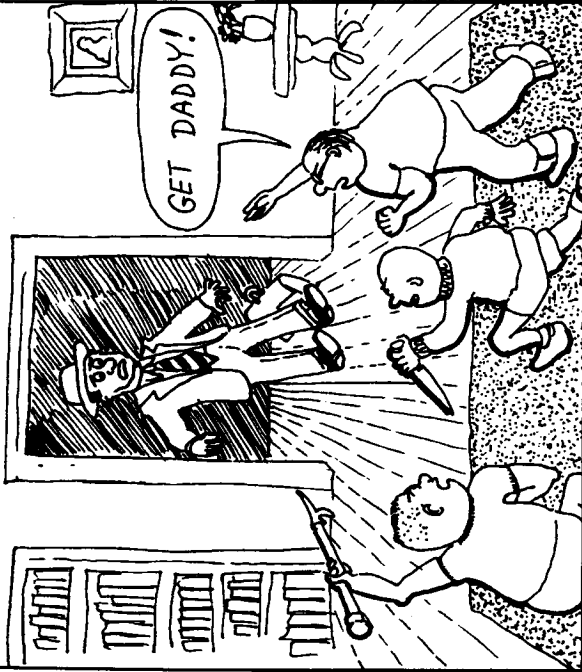
NO, YOU CAN'T GO NEXT DOOR AND MAIM HIM BLEED, BUT YOU MAY WATCH TV...OR GO TO MEDICAL SCHOOL IF THE SITUATION GETS DRASTIC ENOUGH.



Despite this "structural" analysis of the mind, ultimately traditional psychoanalysis is incompatible with structuralism because, like Marxism, it is DIACHRONIC. It is oriented toward history. For Freud, these structures can only be understood by tracing them back historically, to the infancy or childhood of the individual ("ONTOGENY"), or to the infancy or childhood of the human race ("PHYLOGENY"), where, according to Freud, the whole mess (that is, human culture and the human mind) began with the PRIMORDIAL PATRICIDE—an act of father murder and father cannibalism.



Freud believes that structurally ONTOGENY
RECAPITULATES PHYLOGENY.

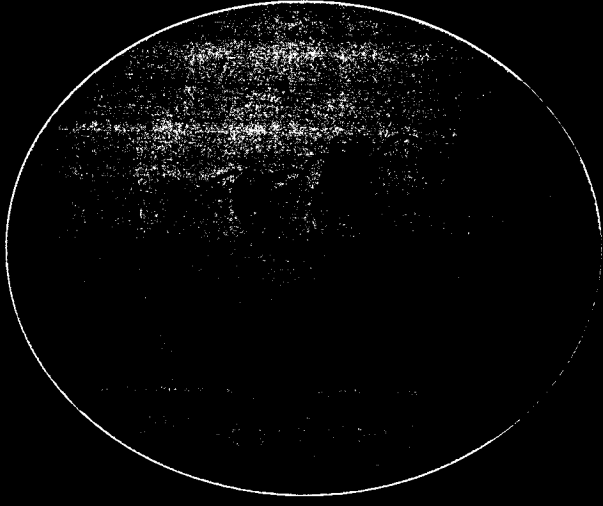


Furthermore, what both Marx and Freud lack is the mark that all structuralists and post-structuralists have in common despite the many, many differences among them, namely, a lexicon that is, a technical vocabulary that derives from the Swiss linguist,

FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE

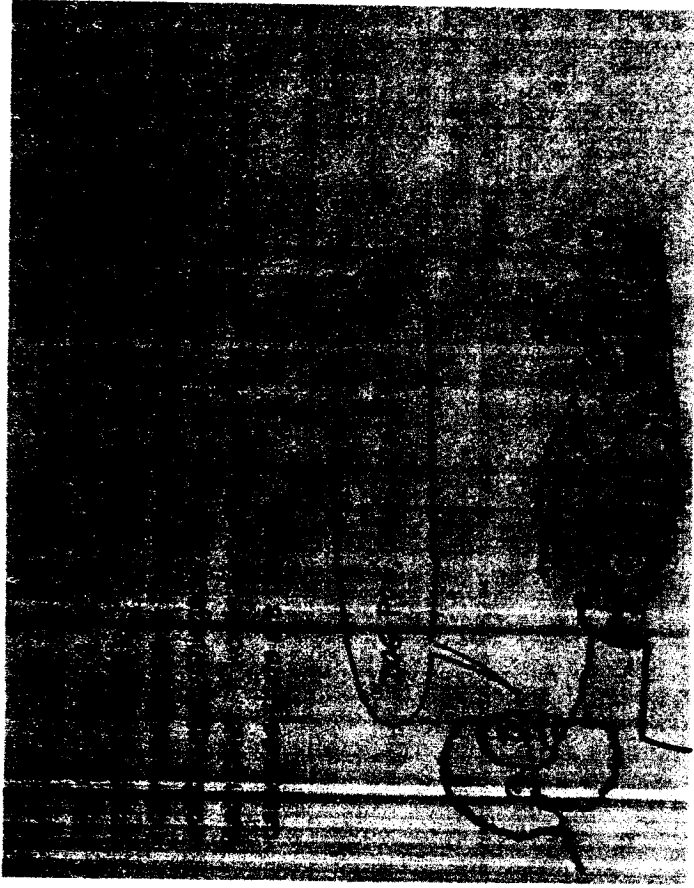
(1857-1913),

(the pronunciation is somewhere between
"Sa sue er" and "So see er"),

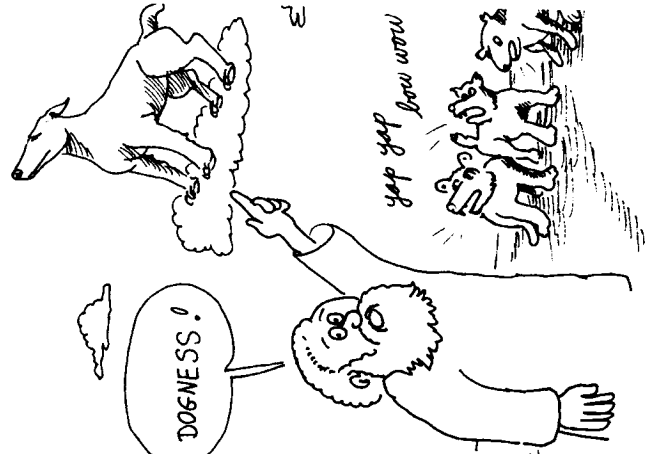


who influenced every aspect of the movement, even though the term "structuralism" postdates Saussure by fifty years. It is to his work that we must now turn.

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Rather, according to Plato, words name CONCEPTS, IDEAS, which themselves are abstractions, designating ESSENCES, namely, that which a number of individuals have in common by virtue of which they are identifiable. (There can be many different kinds of triangles — acute, right, isosceles, — but the word "TRIANGLE" denotes what all triangles have in common, namely, three sides and three angles; that is, it designates the triangle's TRIANGULARITY. Similarly, the word "DOG" must denote what all dogs have in common, namely, DOGNESS.)





These essences, by the way, are not merely abstractions for Plato. They are real—in fact, more real than are the many physical manifestations of them that exist on earth, which are nothing but mere copies of the real thing, which exists in a Platonic heaven of ideas as an eternal, unchanging truth.

WE CALL THEM DOGS BECAUSE THEY ARE DOGS



Furthermore, for Plato, there is some natural connection between words and concepts. Just as the word "writing" is like the idea of writing, so is the word "dog" somehow like the idea of a dog.

Well, what about Saussure? How much of this does he agree with?

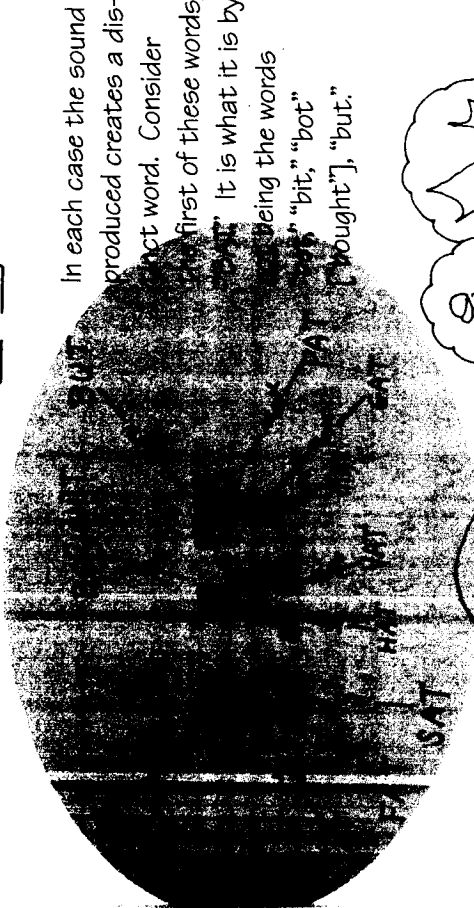
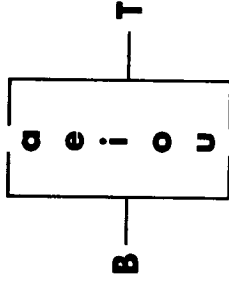
NOT A HECK OF A LOT!

He does agree with one important point, however. Words name ideas, not things. There are similarities between Saussure and Plato. What defines a word for Saussure is not its relation to some eternal essence; rather, what defines it is the relation in which it stands to other words in the system. Furthermore, these relations are

IN LANGUAGE THERE ARE ONLY DIFFERENCES WITHOUT POSITIVE TERMS.



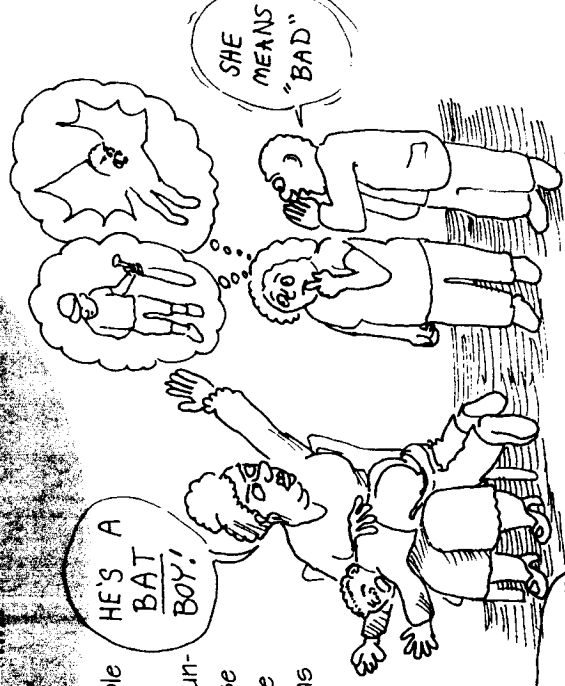
Take the consonants "B" and "T." Place between them all the possible vowels in English.



In each case the sound produced creates a distinct word. Consider first of these words, "bat." It is what it is by being the words "bit," "bot" ["bought"], "but."

Sometimes people with foreign accents are misunderstood because they do not make these distinctions clear enough.

HE'S A BAT BOY!



THEIR MOST PRECISE CHARACTERISTIC IS BEING WHAT THE OTHERS ARE NOT.



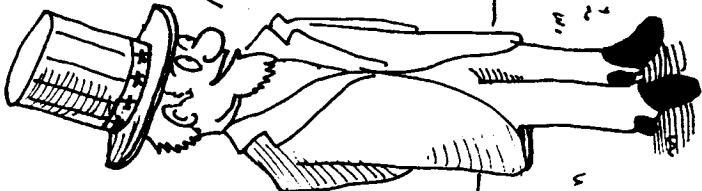
And what's true of SOUNDS is true of IDEAS.

Therefore

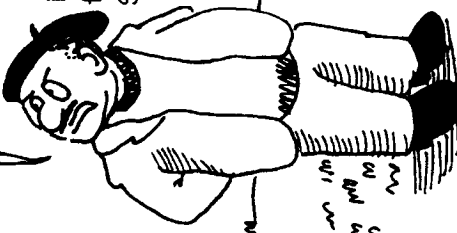
(AND THIS IS RADICAL),

different languages produce different concepts. The French speaker not only speaks differently from the American, but THINKS differently. (Jonathan Culler, a Saussure scholar, has come up with an excellent example. In English, we have two words: "river" and "stream." In French there are also two words, "fleuve" and "rivière." Now it looks as if "river" and rivière should be identical but "fleuve" turns out to mean "river," even though our word "river" obviously evolved from the French "rivière." But in fact it is even more complicated than this. In English, "rivers" are bigger bodies of flowing water; streams by comparison are smaller. But in French, "fleuves" flow into the sea, and "rivières" flow into "fleuves." So, STRICTLY SPEAKING, there is no word in English that means the same as the French words "fleuve" and "rivière.")

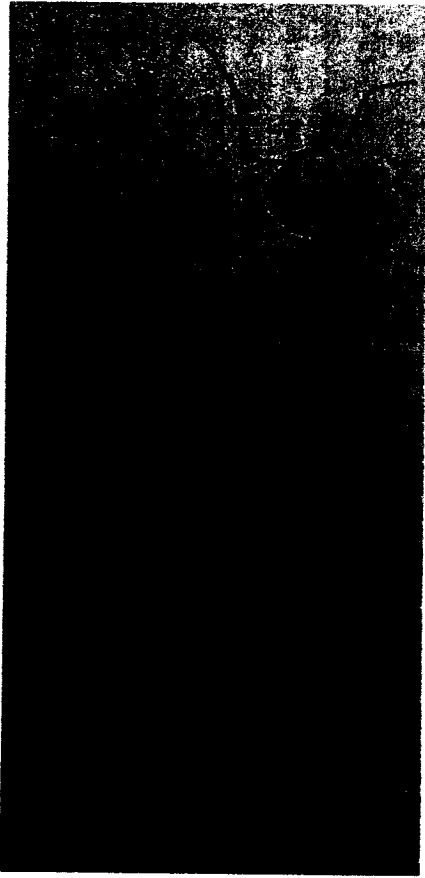
SHALL WE GO TO THE RIVER?



EH? WHAT? I DON'T UNDERSTAND A WORD YOU'RE SAYING!



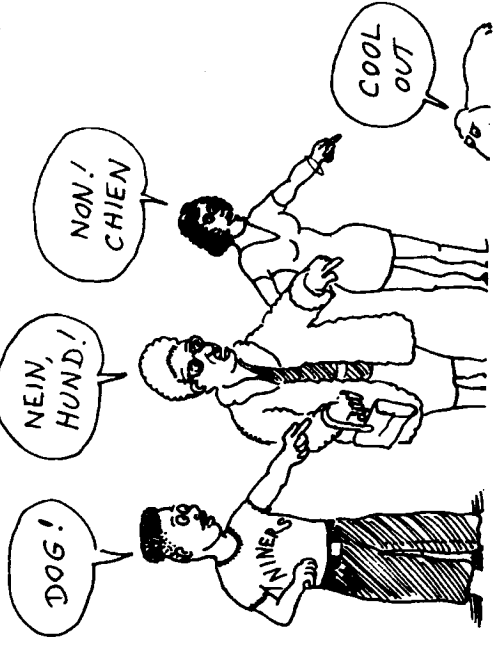
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According to Saussure, language is made up of SIGNS. A sign is the combination of a SIGNIFIER (a "sound" or a "sound-image," like the noise "KAT") and a SIGNIFIED (an idea, a concept, for example, "any of several members of the family Felidae, but particularly the domesticated carnivore Felis domestica").



The first principle of Saussure's linguistics is THE ARBITRARINESS of THE SIGN. This means several things. First, there is no natural connection between the signifier and the signified. (Plato was wrong about that.) There are only conventional relations between words and meanings. There is nothing in nature nor in logic that requires that English speakers use the word "dog" for dogs.

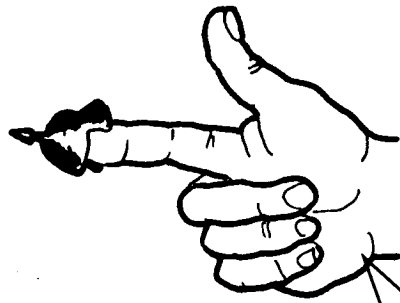


There are partial exceptions. Words like "writing desk" are not purely arbitrary, even though both "writing" and "desk" are arbitrary. There is a kind of logical connection between the two words that link them. (Sausure called these terms "motivated.") Still, we shouldn't be too far misled by the "logic" of these "motivated" terms.

FOR EXAMPLE, THE GERMANS CALL A THIMBLE A "FINGERHUT" (FINGER-HAT).

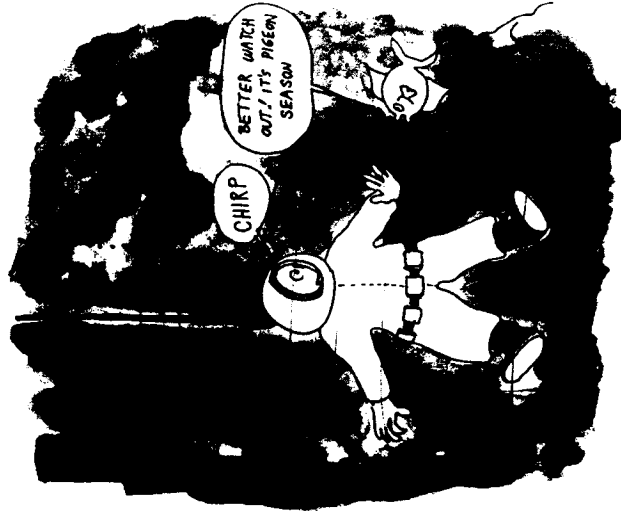
"Fingerhut" may be motivated, but "thimble" is not.

Also, so-called ONOMATOPOEIA are partially "motivated." These are words that are supposed to imitate sounds in nature, such as the English word "chirp." But in French a chirp is a "pépier" (like "peepee") and a "Zirp" in German. "Clap" in French is "claque," and in German "Knall." These are all onomatopoeitic, but do they really "imitate nature?" Dogs say "bow-wow" in America, "bau-bau" in Italy, and "ouâ-ouâ" in France.



PLATO SEEMS TO HAVE HELD THE STRANGE VIEW THAT ALL WORDS WERE SOMEHOW ONOMATOPOEITIC. THEY IMITATED REALITY.

Furthermore, for Saussure the conventions that tie a signifier to the signified are also arbitrary. That means that they, too, are determined not by facts in "reality" but by other facts in the linguistic system, as we saw with the "river/rivière" example. (The English word "pigeon" comes from the Latin word "pipio," a "chirp." The English word "dove" comes from the Gothic word "dubo," meaning "diver."



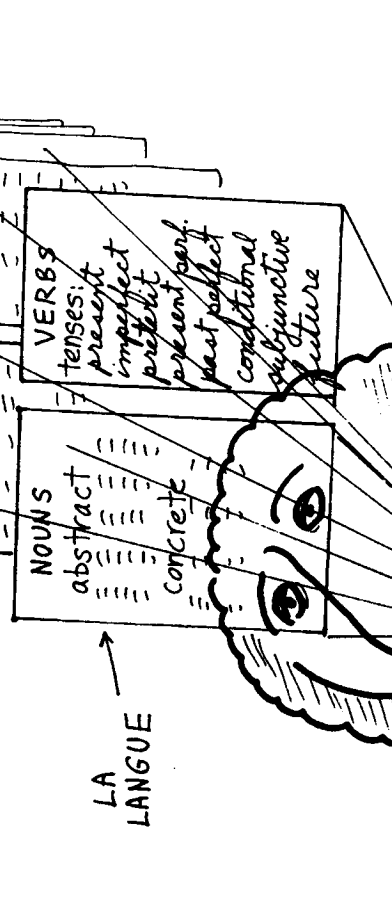
But not all chirpers and divers are members of the family of birds known scientifically as "Columbidae," and anyway, I always thought that doves "cooed," not chirped.) What all this means is that there are no essences, "no fixed universal concepts." (Plato was wrong about that too.)

WRONG TWICE IN TWO PAGES?



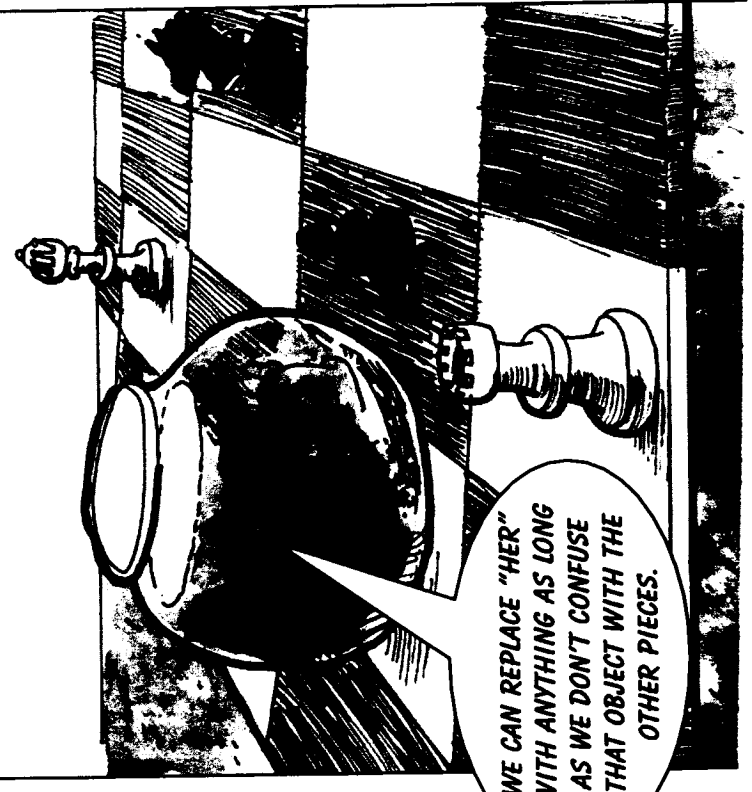
In this comparison between language and chess we see the beginnings of a STRUCTURAL analysis rather than a CAUSAL analysis of the type used in the natural sciences. Neither a linguistic component nor a piece in chess is explained by showing what caused them, but by locating them within the structure of a system.

The distinction between "la langue" and "parole" is related to another Saussurean dichotomy that has already been mentioned — that between a SYNCHRONIC and a DIACHRONIC study of language. The latter is the study of the evolution of language, of history's impact on linguistic events. The former is the study of all the relations among the different parts of a linguistic system at any given moment in time, without reference to the past. For Saussure, the major task of linguistic analysis is synchronic. The diachronic (historical) features are not the most important considerations for him.



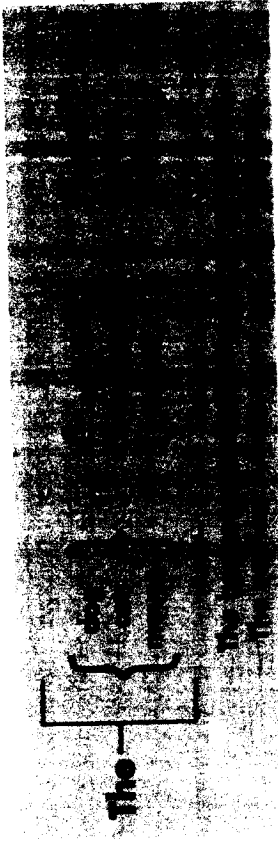
Again, the explanation of any linguistic phenomenon will be the activity of revealing an underlying system of conventions governing negative relationships of difference, as in the locating of the particular phenomenon within that system at any par-

Another important distinction in Saussurian linguistics is that between LA LANGUE (language) and PARÔLE (speech). "La langue" is the whole linguistic system. It is a social structure into which the individual is born. "Parôle" is composed of the actual speech acts that the speaker enunciates. It is the individual aspect of language rather than the social. "Parôle" must be analyzed in terms of "langue." Saussure compares "parole" with an individual move in a chess game. It can only be understood in terms of the underlying system of rules which is chess. Yet at the primary level the rules govern only differences. The pawn is not the queen, the queen is not the bishop, the bishop is not...etc. Furthermore, the queen is not defined by "her" material construction (ivory, wood, plastic) nor by her shape.



WE CAN REPLACE "HER" WITH ANYTHING AS LONG AS WE DON'T CONFUSE THAT OBJECT WITH THE OTHER PIECES.

Another Saussurean distinction that will appear again in later structuralist writers is that between ASSOCIATIVE RELATIONS (today called PARADIGMS) and SYNTAGMS. Paradigmatic analysis is "vertical." It studies the rules of substitution within a particular grammatical category. Syntagmatic analysis is "horizontal." It studies temporal relations of contiguity.



Saussure's STRUCTURALISM can be seen most clearly in his claim that the whole of language as he wishes to study it can be displayed as a system of syntagmatic and paradigmatic negative relations of difference.

Ferdinand de Saussure's science of linguistics is a radical departure from the past, because it entails a whole new picture of the human mind. The mind is not, as the empiricists believed, a receptacle for sense-data from which it constructs a picture of the world piece by piece. Nor is the mind merely a system of innate ideas that are activated by sense-data, as the rationalists thought. Rather, the mind is a system of operations that generate structures of similarity and differentiation in terms of such rules as those of syntagmatic and paradigmatic relationships. It is because of these operations that MEANING is possible—that one thing can signify another.

Saussure's science is also radical because of the way it seems to overthrow realism (the view that there is a real world out there that can be known by the human mind) and to replace it with a linguistic relativism (what we can know is the system of concepts generated by the arbitrary structures of language).

And finally, it is radical in the way it seems to demote human individuality and freedom in the social world. Language cannot be interfered with by individuals.

THE INDIVIDUAL DOES NOT HAVE THE POWER TO CHANGE A SIGN IN ANY WAY ONCE IT HAS BECOME ESTABLISHED IN THE LINGUISTIC COMMUNITY



In fact, when Saussure turns once again to the comparison between language and chess, he says that the analogy would be completely correct only if we could imagine an "unconscious or unintelligent player."

In the Introduction to the Course in General Linguistics Saussure calls for the development of a new science of SEMIOLOGY, the study of signs, of which linguistics would be a part, but social institutions themselves would be treated as systems of signs.