

Post-structuralist challenges to the fixed order of capitalism: a case study of two images in *Mythologies* by Roland Barthes and *Deluxe* by Dana Thomas

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Abstract. Post-structuralism is a philosophical movement that emerged in France in the 1960s. It critiques structuralism's pursuit of fixed frameworks and emphasizes the fluidity of meaning as well as the co-constitution of power and knowledge. In simple terms, it rejects the notion of a "single truth" and seeks, through deconstruction, to expose concealed social prejudices and monetary power relations. Situated within a specific historical context, this paper argues that post-structuralism calls into question the ideological superiority of capitalism, which aspires to view the world as a fixed and stable order. Representative examples include Roland Barthes's *Mythologies*, which dismantles colonial myths through the image of a "Black soldier saluting the French flag," and Dana Thomas's *Deluxe*, which clears away the illusion of material worship through the image of "a paper box bearing a luxury logo that contains French fries." Drawing on *Dao De Jing* by Laozi, Marxist philosophy, and communist thought, this paper advocates the construction of social order around benevolence that transcends utilitarian calculation. Such an approach offers a possible path for the freedom explored by post-structuralists, enabling a shift from criticizing an ideologically static order to recognizing and accommodating that order.

Keywords: post-structuralism, non-utilitarianism, capitalist myth

1. Introduction

Post-structuralism is a political and intellectual movement that emerged in France in the 1960s as a transformation of structuralism. Its intellectual origins lie in Nietzsche's anti-rational philosophy, Heidegger's phenomenology, and European left-wing theory, while its immediate historical impetus can be traced to the protest movements jointly initiated by the French left-wing civil rights movement in 1968 against capitalism and the bureaucratic elites acting as its agents. These movements were suppressed in the same year by the right-wing government of Charles de Gaulle. Unable to contain their revolutionary fervor, radical scholars redirected their energies toward a profound dismantling of academic thought. Fully aware that capitalism at the time was deeply entrenched and difficult to overturn, they nevertheless sought to undermine and disintegrate the advanced foundations upon which it depended—from language and belief systems to networks of power and money.

Accordingly, post-structuralism challenges the ideological claim to superiority that seeks to view the world as a fixed order. In a specific historical context, this order refers in particular to an arrangement that places capitalism and hegemonic politics serving capital at its core. Language does not merely reflect such a fixed order; post-structuralism also employs language to question and dismantle it—for example, the money-worship inherent in commodity fetishism and the colonial rule that serves capital accumulation. This paper selects two prominent representatives of such deconstructive efforts—*Mythologies* by Roland Barthes and *Deluxe* by Dana Thomas—and analyzes how Barthes and Thomas each, in their own ways, dismantle ideological myth-symbols created by the bourgeoisie.

Their acts of demystification are grounded in opposition to the authority of capital, stemming from an ethical commitment to the equality of life and compassion for the poor and the vulnerable. This ethical appeal resonates with, and finds support in, the perspectives articulated in the Chinese ethical classic *Dao De Jing*, and thus possesses profound rational validity. Yet the question remains: where does one go after deconstruction? Neither Barthes nor Thomas provides an explicit answer in their works. Drawing on Marxist philosophy and communist thought, the author endorses an order that places non-utilitarian benevolence at its core as a possible answer to the freedom sought by post-structuralism, thereby transforming skepticism toward ideology into a form of affirmation and support.

2. Mythologies and Deluxe: deconstructing colonialism and money worship under capitalist control

Roland Barthes (1915–1980) was a French post-structuralist literary theorist. *Mythologies* (1957) is a collection of his essays that dismantle bourgeois myths, or ideologies, one by one [1]. Barthes's concept of "myth" is deeply influenced by the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, who argued that "the linguistic sign unites not a name and a thing, but a concept and a sound-image." The concept is the signified, while the sound or image is the signifier [2]. Accordingly, in *Mythologies*, Barthes defines myth as "a mode of signification" [3]. Its signifier consists of linguistic signs, while its signified is "traces of ideology." As Barthes notes, "myth hides nothing; its function is to distort" [1]. What myth does is to render meanings fixed and naturalized, so that they are no longer questioned [4]. Through his analysis of the image of a "Black soldier saluting the French flag," Barthes dismantles an imperialist colonial myth.



Figure 1. Cover image of a French illustrated magazine (1955)

From Barthes's perspective of myth as signification, in Figure 1, the signifier is a Black child wearing a black cap, dressed in a light green stand-collar shirt and a dark green military jacket with a turned-down collar, raising his still-immature hand to salute either the French national flag or some authoritative French colonial figure (though neither appears explicitly in the frame). His facial expression is solemn and unsmiling; his eyes, though naïve, reveal a firm obedience to command. The signified—the ideological message being conveyed—is that (under capital's control) "France is a great empire; all her sons, without any racial discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag; and for those who denounce so-called colonialism, there is no better answer than the zeal shown by this Black soldier in serving the so-called oppressors" [3]. Contrary to this myth, from 1954 to 1962 Algeria witnessed an independence and liberation movement in which Black populations resisted imperialist oppression. The apparent "enthusiasm" for service was a deliberate fabrication by a regime that supported French colonial exploitation for profit, designed to conceal the reality that colonialism was being actively resisted at the time. This photograph is therefore a carefully woven lie, "presented through the signifier" [1]. Instead of text, it employs photography, and in line with the adage "the camera never lies," this technique makes the ideological message appear almost unquestionably real [4]—as if it were merely a moment captured on an ordinary morning in Africa by a passing photographer. It guides viewers away from questioning its authenticity, feigning innocence, and thereby absolves capitalism of guilt for building a monetary empire through military violence upon the blood and poverty of underdeveloped nations.

"Private ownership is the foundation of capitalist society, endowing capitalism with unlimited profit-seeking and frenzied expansion" [5]. In pursuit of greater profits, capitalist powers in Europe and North America have employed violent land dispossession, the seizure of means of production, and the establishment of local proxy elites, forcing populations in underdeveloped regions into labor and incorporating them into systems of commercial exploitation for capital accumulation. At the end of "Wine and Milk," Barthes writes: "The myth of wine can help us to understand the ambiguity of our daily life. For wine is indeed a pleasant and agreeable substance, but it is equally true that its production is profoundly marked by the characteristics of French capitalism, whether this is the capitalism of small home producers or that of the powerful Algerian colonial settlers. These settlers force landless Muslims to grow crops they do not need, while what they lack is bread. Thus, some seemingly delightful myths are far from innocent. The alienation we are describing here is evident, for wine is not truly a source of joy unless we deliberately forget that it is also the product of land dispossession" [1]. Following Barthes's deconstruction, the seemingly natural façade reveals its true form: France's engagement with Algeria from 1830 to 1962—a span of 132 years—was fundamentally aggressive and built upon unequal political and economic relations. This resulted in severe population decline in Algeria, widespread land expropriation, the plundering of wealth from mines and banks, racial discrimination against Algerians, and prohibitions on the use of their own written language. Far from supporting or embracing French colonialism, Black populations opposed and resented it.

If Barthes exposes capitalist oppression through its political manifestations—namely, the unjust colonial domination of Africa by French capitalist power—Dana Thomas approaches a similar critique from another angle: the extreme worship of money in everyday economic life, embodied in luxury goods.

Dana Thomas (1964–) is a senior writer for the Paris bureau of *Newsweek*. Her book *Deluxe: How Luxury Lost Its Luster* (2007) documents her extensive investigations into luxury brands and every link in their supply chains, revealing the true nature of today's luxury industry. It has been described as "a book that exposes the dark inner workings of luxury" and offers a new perspective on the glittering yet fragile bubble of the luxury sector [6]. This perspective is vividly encapsulated by the book's cover image: "French fries placed in a paper box printed with luxury brand logos."

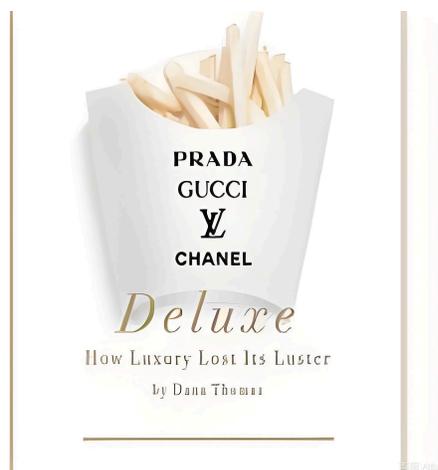


Figure 2. French fries in a paper box bearing luxury brand logos

Figure 2 depicts an ordinary white food paper bag, but instead of the logos of McDonald's or KFC, it bears the deep black emblems of luxury brands such as PRADA, GUCCI, LV, and CHANEL. Luxury perfumes often cost thousands, and handbags tens of thousands. For example, a certain floral perfume is priced at 2,000 yuan for 100 milliliters, while a leather hard-case bag with a capacity of two liters sells for 30,000 yuan. Yet inside the paper bag printed with these labels are inexpensive French fries—food that can stave off hunger but offers little nutritional value. Unlike *Mythologies*, which deconstructs colonial propaganda photographs through textual analysis, this image first delivers a direct visual statement: luxury goods sell not merely products, but symbols of monetary power.

Building on this, Thomas reveals how capital conglomerates, in pursuit of exorbitant profits, exploit consumer vanity and celebrity endorsements to construct a money-worship myth around luxury goods. As she writes, "These flagship stores flaunt wealth and creativity on a grand scale; they are of little practical use in everyday life, yet they evoke dreams of traditional refined luxury and convey today's pursuit of opulence. At their core, all of this is illusory" [7]. "They style celebrities, and in return, the celebrities tell reporters on the red carpet which brand provided their gowns and handbags" [8]. Celebrities, standing under the spotlight as primary objects of public aesthetic admiration, naturally lead audiences to equate beauty with luxury, as the idea that "they are beautiful because they are adorned in luxury goods" takes hold. In contrast to the billions spent on marketing, product quality has declined markedly. "To meet expected profit targets, luxury groups resort to sleight-of-hand tactics, such as using inferior materials... Meanwhile, most luxury companies have raised prices severalfold, and many falsely claim that their products are manufactured in high-wage Western Europe" [8]. On the one hand, consumers are encouraged to participate in money worship by purchasing handbags priced at 20,000 yuan; on the other, the financial oligarchs who produce these luxury goods themselves practice money worship by maximizing profits. All of this is laid bare by Thomas's critique.

3. The ethical roots of questioning capitalist authority: pursuing truth and goodness, compassion for the poor

Barthes's deconstruction of colonialism and Thomas's demystification of luxury both target the profit-driven nature of capitalism, which can be seen as an inevitable outcome of unrestrained human desire unconstrained by ethical norms. Orders centered on private interest and money are built upon the soft exploitation of the poor and the disregard for the equality of life—manifested on one hand in colonial enslavement policies and on the

other in money worship that exacerbates the wealth gap—"without luxury, there would be no extreme poverty" [8].

One historical backdrop for Barthes and the French post-structuralist movement is the 1968 mass protests in France, known as "May '68." The immediate trigger was the occupation of the Paris headquarters of the American Express Company by six left-wing French students to protest U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, resulting in their arrest by the police. Typical slogans of the movement included "The consumer society is unacceptable; the alienating society is unacceptable" and "People are not free until they have bid farewell to the last capitalist and bureaucrat." The alienating consumer society oppressed ordinary people domestically and exploited colonies abroad. Colonialism served the primitive accumulation needs of capital, using military and economic oppression to extract wealth from the weak. In *The Interpretation and Decryption of Myths* (1957), Barthes wrote that upon seeing the photograph of the "Black soldier saluting French colonialists," "for the interpreter of myths, the entire process appears as if the photograph naturally triggers the concept, as if the signifier establishes the signified (form establishes meaning). At the moment the imperial character of France becomes naturalized, myth begins to exist: myth is an excessively legitimized mode of discourse." He further notes, "If I interpret the Black soldier's salute as evidence of colonialism's absence, I can discern the myth even more clearly by considering the obvious motives behind it" [1]. One year later, in August 1958, in Guinea—another French colony and contemporary of Algeria—Sékou Touré, a peasant-born leader, told Charles de Gaulle, from a family of French industrial bourgeoisie: "I would rather enjoy freedom in poverty than be enslaved for wealth," opposing the colonial system maintained by the so-called "French Community." In September, Guinea voted by national referendum to reject the new French constitution, becoming the first independent French African state. Four years later, the National Liberation Front of Algeria achieved victory, and Algeria gained independence. These events, which occurred after 1957, historically validated Barthes's deconstruction.

Beyond this photograph, Barthes also critiques the racist caricature in *Bichon in the Black World*: "The marvel of Bichon's effect lies in showing the Black world through the eyes of white children:... Blacks were depicted as lacking substantial, independent life; they became bizarre, parasitic figures, vaguely terrifying, entertaining whites; Africans were mere puppets with a hint of danger" [1]. Barthes exposes this denigration of African life, a bourgeois myth that presumes a detached superiority incapable of empathetic imagination: "Voltaire today would never write Bichon's adventures as the Paris Competition Gazette did; instead, he might imagine a Black Bichon (or a North Korean) battling Western puppets with napalm" [1]. This reflects Barthes's respect for the lives of African, Asian, and Latin American peoples, supporting the right of militarily and economically weak populations to resist colonial oppression while maintaining dignity and equality.

Similarly, Thomas addresses the harm that an alienating consumer society, symbolized by luxury goods, inflicts on human life. To please the wealthy and maximize profits, capital groups deliberately cultivate the perception of luxury goods as symbols of wealth and status, while the laborers in luxury factories and the impoverished, aesthetically unqualified masses continue to struggle. In Chapter 7, "Sweatshops and the Labor Crisis," Thomas writes: "Most manufacturers have moved production to China. 'Chinese workers work seven days a week, many hours a day, live in factories, and earn very low wages per hour'" [8]. "According to the International Federation of Free Trade Unions, workers at a company called International Knitwear in Bangladesh who demanded better working conditions were fired and whipped" [8]. Moreover, luxury goods drive other unethical and illegal practices: "Luxury items are among the most counterfeited today, and the profits from these fakes often fund drug trafficking, human smuggling, terrorism, and other illegal activities" [8]. Thomas's revelations demonstrate her respect for laborers' dignity, compassion for the weak, and rejection of factory owners' morally corrupt greed driven by money worship.

Although Thomas does not explicitly align herself with post-structuralism, her critique of capitalist authority and social order bears a distinctly post-structuralist hue, challenging the stability of capital-dominated ideology. "Postmodernism, represented by post-structuralism, abolishes the binaries established by modernity—center and periphery, subject and object—effectively dismantling the knowledge dimension of the center, which had served as the theoretical basis for capitalism, imperialism, and hegemony. Post-structuralism itself is an ethical demand: while deconstructing central authority, it implicitly advocates an ethical core—acknowledging difference, respecting others, taking responsibility for the weak, and constructing a minimal postmodern ethical community" [9]. The deconstruction of capital authority by Barthes and Thomas, which exposes the growing wealth gap, resonates with the Chinese ethical classic *Dao De Jing*, written approximately 2,700 years ago. Laozi similarly opposes establishing authority based on fame or material gain: "When the people recognize beauty as beauty, there arises ugliness; when they recognize good as good, there arises evil" [10]. "Abandon the sage, reject wisdom, and the people benefit a hundredfold; abandon benevolence and reject righteousness, and the people return to filiality and compassion; abandon cleverness and reject profit, and thieves and robbers will disappear" [10]. This also entails the dismantling of authority based on fame and material wealth. Laozi's critique of authority grounded in vanity and profit does not conflict with his pursuit of genuine benevolence. The authority he recognizes is that of the "sage," comparable to water, but its definition does not rest on wealth or coercive power: "Water stays below and benefits all things without competing... Because it does not compete, there is no fault" [10]; "The sage has no fixed mind, taking the people's mind as his own" [10].

4. Post-structuralism and the advocacy of a non-utilitarian order of benevolence

In *The Right-Wing Myth*, Barthes cites Marx: "...those representing the (petty) bourgeoisie have a spirit and consciousness confined within the limits defined by their class" [1], and Gorky's observation that the (petty) "bourgeoisie love themselves more than anything else" [1]. He concludes: the (petty) "bourgeoisie cannot imagine the existence of the other" [1].

Thomas similarly critiques today's luxury goods, observing that they are effectively the products of corporate tycoons who, through cunning acquisition, take over and transform enterprises originally founded by aging creators or incompetent heirs. They embody "thoroughgoing capitalism, with a precise and singular goal: to devise every possible means to extract greater profits" [8]. Behind these products lie the continued oppression of laborers and other socially disadvantaged groups without assets. The existence of luxury goods presents society with a serious ethical question: a \$50,000 luxury garment may provide its wealthy owner with transient aesthetic pleasure, a momentary sense of vanity, or an elegant way to launder money, yet that same sum could secure the livelihoods of impoverished families or improve their living conditions—for example, by distributing surplus value as wages, allowing ten families living in poor shacks to live without material worry for six months. Yet under capitalist guidance, high-net-worth individuals generally prioritize self-interest over altruism. As one observation notes: "While ordinary people admire the extravagance of billionaires' luxury cars and watches, thinking it represents success earned through hard work, they are unaware that this is only the tip of the iceberg. Wealth is shifted through art, charitable contributions are used to minimize taxes, trusts manage inheritance, and offshore companies hide assets. The money of the ultra-rich appreciates within these rules and tools, while ordinary people's money gradually loses value amid inflation and anxiety—this is the harsh reality of entrenched class stratification" [11].

However, after deconstructing the authority of capitalism and building immunity to its ideological influence, Barthes and Thomas do not offer alternative structures. Is it enough merely to live without being deceived? Does societal development not require some guiding framework? While low-income groups may become "immune" to capital's influence, do the creators of capitalist myths also develop a form of immunity to the suffering of ordinary people? "Although immunity is necessary to protect our lives, when it exceeds a certain threshold and spirals out of control, it forces life into a kind of cage, where we not only lose freedom but also the meaning of existence. This externally-oriented openness is called 'communality'" [12]. The "threshold" before entering this cage refers to the point at which "an individual's pleasure threshold has been infinitely raised by money and luxurious living, dulling their sensory sensitivity" [13]. Those possessing immense wealth yet remaining anxious and desperate to accumulate more become indifferent to the small but certain joys of everyday life, such as a simple meal or minor acts of care—reflecting a kind of moral or life-sensory disability. This threshold occurs once basic needs are satisfied or when living standards surpass the average; rather than providing feedback or support to weaker members of society, the pursuit of self-interest exacerbates the deprivation of those in economic hardship, effectively imprisoning them.

The 2008 financial crisis provides vivid examples. *The New York Times* followed 50 U.S. families who lost their homes. Among them was Janet, a 45-year-old bank employee in Ohio. After the bank collapsed due to the subprime mortgage crisis, she became unemployed, fell behind on her mortgage, and was evicted. Janet and her two children moved into a motel. Despite sending 200 job applications, she secured only three interviews, as employers avoided hiring the homeless. In March 2010, she found work at a fast-food restaurant, earning \$1,360 per month for eight-hour shifts, yet still could not afford housing and continued living in her car. In winter 2011, exhaustion from night shifts led to a car accident, destroying her vehicle, leaving her and her children homeless. The last time reporters saw her at a relief station in Columbus, she appeared 20 years older, with graying hair, vacant eyes, and two emaciated children. In 2013, Janet died of hypothermia in the corner of an abandoned factory [14]. A similar case, reported by *The Los Angeles Times*, is that of Marcus, 30, an Iraq War veteran who, after leaving the Marines, worked at an Amazon warehouse. Despite his diligence and savings for education, a traffic accident while cycling to work fractured his leg. Doctors advised three months of rest, but the company's policy caused him to lose his job after missing two weeks. Insurance denied his disability claim. Like Janet, he lost employment, income, and housing, entering a vicious cycle of homelessness. Reporters last saw him in summer 2021, sitting in a tent made of cardboard in a squalid urban underpass, speaking incoherently: "I don't remember why I am here, only that I used to have a home. Everyone here uses drugs; without them, you cannot survive." In 2022, Marcus died of a drug overdose while being transported in an ambulance. These cases illustrate that government support for the poor is often no ally to corporate interests [15].

Marx, in *Capital*, observed: "The replacement of the bourgeois old society, which is characterized by classes and class antagonisms, will be a union in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all" [16, 17]. A communist society, he argued, is "a form of social organization based on the principle of the comprehensive and free development of every individual" [18, 19]. In *The German Ideology*, Marx further summarized: "The development of each individual depends upon the development of all others with whom they are directly or indirectly connected" [5, 20]. These insights, combined with practical examples from contemporary social initiatives, suggest that protecting individual freedoms while constructing collective welfare is achievable. For instance, in early 2014, a precision poverty alleviation team was dispatched to Village A. They lived, ate, and worked alongside villagers, building detailed profiles for each impoverished household to identify paths out of poverty. A decade earlier, Villager B lived in the most dilapidated house in the village, with severe drafts in winter making life extremely difficult. Thanks to targeted

policies and guidance from the team, he learned beekeeping. Today, he owns a house in the county seat and drives a Jeep; beekeeping provided him with a stable income [21]. Similarly, to care for a pair of elderly, isolated villagers during a rainy night, Village Secretary C and her husband braved the storm. "You hold me, I'll hold onto you," one recalled, as the town doctor D and colleagues, executing emergency medical rescue, were trapped by floodwaters. After ensuring the safety of co-workers, the doctor could not follow immediately. From rigorously implementing early warning plans and conducting door-to-door checks, to timely evacuations, rescuing trapped individuals, repairing roads and power lines, and distributing relief supplies, their presence was constant wherever danger arose [22]. Doctor D was later recognized as a Communist Party member. Since 1980, in an era dominated by peace and development, when basic needs are met and living standards surpass the average, if individuals prioritize not the oppressive pursuit of wealth and power over others but the cultivation of benevolence that benefits the majority—including themselves—then a social structure emerges imbued with hope. Post-structuralism typically targets authority or capital as the center for deconstruction, advocating for individuals to contest established structures to protect personal dignity and autonomy. However, if selfless, utilitarian-free benevolence becomes the central guiding principle, the typical conflict of high versus low, center versus margin, is transformed into a coherent logic: contradictions dissolve, and individuals coexist harmoniously. In this framework, others' excellence no longer highlights one's own deficiencies; instead, it motivates service and the rectification of shortcomings, promoting mutual improvement and a better life for all.

5. Conclusion

This paper examined Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* and Dana Thomas' *Deluxe*, aiming to comparatively analyze how each author deconstructs two myths of bourgeois ideology—colonialism and materialism—through concrete phenomena in everyday life. The analysis demonstrates that post-structuralist theory indeed questions the ideological assumption that the world can be understood as a fixed capitalist order, while simultaneously employing language to deconstruct this hierarchy centered on capital authority. Both Barthes' and Thomas' critiques are grounded in ethical appeals for freedom, equality, and empathy toward the impoverished and marginalized. Therefore, an ideological order that places non-utilitarian benevolence at its core may offer a possible pathway for the freedom sought by post-structuralists, transforming suspicion toward entrenched systems into an orientation of support.

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