

## Re-visiting postmodernism

Dr. Kartikeya Misra

Dept. of Political Science, University of Allahabad, Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, India

### Abstract

Is postmodernity an idea, a cultural experience, a social condition, or perhaps a combination of all three? Since the 1980's it has engendered a huge, sometimes angry, sometimes anxious, debate in many disciplines from geography to theology and from philosophy to political science. This was picked up in the 1990s by more applied disciplines, asking what postmodern practice might mean in management, social work, teaching or law.

**Keywords:** postmodernism, disciplines, cultural, social work, postmodernity

### Introduction

The related controversy over postmodernism within the realms of art, architecture, literary and film criticism has raged. Buildings such as Venturi's National Gallery extension in London, novels such as *The Satanic Verses* or *The English Patient*, movies such as *Blade Runner* or *Pulp Fiction* each have been a focus at some point.

A highly significant series of western ideas starts with Providence which is transposed to Progress and shifts from there into Nihilism. Providence refers to God's care for the world after its creation, overseeing the process of history so that it moves forward in a line towards a specific goal. However, the emphasis on history's forward movement was easily combined with the conviction that things were generally improving especially under the impact of early Enlightenment thought. The wresting of reason from medievalism and tradition prompted many to believe that further and more rapid advance was within human powers to achieve<sup>[1]</sup>. Ironically, Christian commentators themselves often encouraged this view. But by emphasizing the role of reason and downplaying divine intervention. the seeds were sown for a secular variant of Providence, the idea of Progress. The certainty of our senses supplanted certainty in God's laws and paved the way for the rise of modern scientific world views<sup>[2]</sup>.

At the height of Victorian confidence, European colonialism and North American frontier settlement, belief in progress reigned supreme. It appeared to be vindicated by events. Despite what followed- the Great War and the Depression- hopes were not entirely dampened. The Chicago World Fair of 1933 celebrated 'A Century of Progress', and in the same year Hitler came to power promising progress through, National Socialism, with its motor cars and medical plans. Faith in Progress flickered following the Second world war, only to be revived artificially by massive scientific and technological development and an unprecedented consumer boom. The concept of modernity came into its own at this time, as a means of encapsulating these changes<sup>[3]</sup>.

The 1960s presented both political and cultural challenges of immense importance: tradition and taste were up for grabs.

The expressive revolution was unleashed. New social movements sprang up. Cynicism was fuelled by Vietnam and then by Watergate. The years 1789-1989 thus became the symbolic two centuries span of modernity, expressed politically as the quest for a nationalized world- from the French Revolution to the fall of bureaucratic state socialism.

With the grandiose dreams of westernization tarnished, and the rise of oppositional voices such as Sunni Islam, the idea of universal knowledge or culture was queried with greater intensity than ever. Political legitimation and citizen worker motivation seemed at low ebb. Intellectuals squabbled over whether this was crisis as catastrophe or as opportunity and sought for new terms to describe the emerging situation. Postmodernity is one such term.

As used here, the postmodern refers above all to the exhaustion - but not necessarily to the demise- of modernity.

Postmodernism, refers here to cultural and intellectual phenomena, to the production, consumption and distribution of symbolic goods. Intellectually, one example is the forsaking of foundationalism, the view that science is built on a firm base of observable facts, in the philosophy of science. The collapse of hierarchies of knowledge, taste and opinion; and the interest in the local rather than the universal. If science is soft, its authority is dethroned<sup>[4]</sup>.

In order to understand the main currents of postmodern thought it helps to step back and interrogate those thinkers who anticipated postmodernity. Undoubtedly the single most significant figure is Friedrich Nietzsche. He announced in 1888 that 'nihilism stands at the door'.

One of the most basic themes of postmodern debate revolves around reality, or lack of reality, or multiplicity of relatives. Rationality, whether in art, philosophy or in science, is attacked by nihilism. So-called systems of reason, asserts Nietzsche are actually system of persuasion.

Nietzsche's slogan 'the death of God' means that we can no longer be sure of anything. Morality is a lie, truth is fiction. Prospero's words in *The Tempest*, 'All that is solid melts into air'.

A second character in the prehistory of postmodernity is

Martin Heidegger. Most famous for his 1927 book. 'Being and Time' Heidegger was concerned above all with the nature of thought in existing human beings. From his reading of Brentano, Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard he concluded that attending to concrete and relevant historical problems showed the way forward for philosophy<sup>[5]</sup>.

Heidegger shares Nietzsche's interest in 'philosophy of difference', difference is just a product of the will to power.

Today, humanism finds itself in crisis precisely because it replaces God with humanity at the centre of the universe, say Heidegger. Humans take themselves to be the measure of all things rather. One the contrary, technology expresses the controlling, dominating approach that comes from putting humans at the centre of things.

For Heidegger, the way forward is to come to terms with our condition; neither metaphysics nor humanism nor technology will do as a basis for life.

Georg Simmel (1858-1918). Now widely recognized not merely as a founding father of sociology, but also as the sole postmodern thinkers' among them, Simmel straddles the worlds of sociology and cultural analysis. This tragedy, or crisis of culture, was for him the widening gap between the objective culture, seen in technology for instance, and the increasingly alienated individual frustrated in the quest for genuine individuality.

He regarded contemporary movements such as socialism in politics or impressionism in art as the response to a felt need for a final object in life, above everything relative, above the fragmentary character of human existence<sup>[6]</sup>.

For Simmel, the social experiences of modernity were especially strongly felt in the growing urban metropolis and in the alienation of a mature money economy. He sees the sphere of circulation, exchange, and consumption as relatively autonomous, a law to itself.

For Simmel himself, art was a means of overcoming the contradictions of modernity, and he believed that in times of confusion and uncertainty a more general shift towards the aesthetic would occur.

The term postmodern came into popular usage above all after Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* appeared. Once established, however, other mainly French- authors were also associated with this tendency. During the 1980s, and despite the fact that several of these discarded, denied or distanced themselves from the term, the postmodern came to be linked with their names. Most prominent within this debate are Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and of course Lyotard himself. Gilles Deleuze, Gianni Vattimo and Richard Rorty, cannot be ignored. simplifying to the extreme, says Lyotard, I define postmodern as 'incredulity towards metanarratives'. The main metanarrative in question follows the Enlightenment line that science legitimates itself as the bearer of emancipation Modern knowledge justifies itself in relation to grand narratives such as wealth creation or workers' revolution.

Who needs metanarratives when management will do? It for Lyotard the atomization of the social means we are each bound up in our local language games, for Jacques Derrida it is a question of tests. Like Lyotard, however, Derrida raises crucial queries concerning what he calls the western philosophical tradition. Cultural life involves texts we

produce, says Derrida, intersecting with other texts that influence ours in ways we cannot ever unravel. The task of deconstruction, a strategy gleaned from Derrida's reading of Heidegger, is to raise persistent questions about our own texts and those of others, to deny that any text is settled or stable<sup>[7]</sup>.

Riding on what are in many ways parallel tracks, Michel Foucault's work touches on themes similar to Derrida's. But while Derrida focuses on the literary and the philosophical, Foucault refers more to the human sciences.

In Foucault's scheme, two main epistemes- as he calls them may be discerned in western thought. Neo- Classical thought, dating from the seventeenth century, had no special place for human beings. But the modern episteme, on the other hand, characterizing the nineteenth century onwards, actually constitutes 'man' as both object and subject- 'Natural' gives way to the 'normal'. The modern episteme was crumbling, but that its object- 'Man'- was dead.

If Foucault offers few clues about what might lie beyond, his compatriot Jean Baudrillard offers even less, Indeed, he advises us to forget Foucault. What he does offer, shifts the spotlight once more, this time to the media of modern communication. Whereas earlier eras depended either on face-to-face symbolic exchanges or in the modern period, print, the contemporary world is dominated by images from the electronic mass media. Immediate communication takes place over vast distances unimaginable to dwellers in traditional societies, and takes the form of montage- piecing together for effect- which distinguishes it from print. In the process, our understanding of reality is radically revised<sup>[8]</sup>. Now, says Baudrillard, our situation is one of 'hyperreality'. We are left only with 'simulacra'.

The postmodern may refer to the exhaustion of modernity but does this invite obituaries or merely a call to make room for a fresh appraisal of modernity? Is logocentrism dead or dormant? Would we fall into the trap of modern linear logic if we imagined that the path from Providence to Progress and from thence to Nihilism is a one-way street with no return? However we respond to these questions, they will not fully be faced by focusing merely on either supposed social changes alone or cultural shifts alone. the social sciences, though they began by trying to isolate factors implicit in social change, on the model of the natural sciences, increasingly take their cues from cultural analysis. This does not mean abandoning the quest for systematic investigation Rather, it spells the filling out of such investigation by its integration with cultural analysis<sup>[9]</sup>. Postmodernism and postmodernity must each be viewed in terms of the other.

## References

1. Bebbington, David. *Patterns in History* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press. 1979, 43ff.
2. This view is expounded by Karl Lowith in *Meaning in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press). 1949.
3. Giddens, Anthony, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press,). 1990, 48.
4. Bauman, Zygmunt. *Modernity, Ambivalence* (Cambridge : Polity Press). 1988.
5. See C. Stephen Evants, *Passionate Reason: Making Sense of Kierkegaard's Philosophical Fragments* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press). 1992.

6. Bauman, Zygmunt. *Intimations of Postmodernity* (London and Boston : Routledge). 1992, 31.
7. Norris, Christopher, 'Deconstruction, Postmodernism and Philosophy' in David Wood (ed.), *Derrida: A Critical Reader* (Oxford, UK, and Cambridge, M.A.: Blackwell). 1992, 167-92.
8. Baudrillard, Jean. *Forget Foucault* (New York: Semiotext (e)). 1987.
9. See Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* (Oxford : Blackwell). 1997.