

POSTMODERNISM: THEORY AND POLITICS TODAY

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Postmodernism and poststructuralism have proved themselves to be no fads in critical theorizing; they have come to stay; they offer new ways to theorize and study contemporary societies.

Any informed discussion on contemporary theory and cultural politics will take upon itself the duty of educating the stakeholders on “the history of rationality and modernity in the global political debate, and thus about the recent influence of postmodernism on that debate” (Lucy, i).

Empirical and conceptual applications of postmodernism in understanding and analyzing the cultural reality as well as its limitations in fully comprehending that reality form part of the rationale of this study which in practice is a reassessment of what postmodernism means in our own time. And this reassessment rests almost singularly on the assumption that postmodernism in the last analysis is a theory that is inherently and vigorously political.

POSTMODERNISM: MEANING, DEFINITIONS

The question of postmodernity is first of all a question of expressions of thought: in art, literature, philosophy, politics. (Lyotard, 412).

What exactly should we understand by the term now? It offers no easy definitions and no singular perspectives. Andreas Huyssen in her essay, “Mapping the Postmodern”, makes this ambiguity clear:

I will not attempt here to define what postmodernism is. The term 'postmodernism' itself should guard us against such an approach as it positions the phenomenon as relational. Modernism as that from which

postmodernism is breaking away remains inscribed into the very word with which we describe our distance from modernism. Thus keep in mind postmodernism's relational nature..(10).

What were the connotations of the term postmodernism in the 1960s? Roughly since the mid- 1950s literature and the arts witnessed a rebellion of a new generation of artists such as Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, Kerouac, Ginsberg and the Beats, Burroughs and Barthelme against the dominance of abstract expressionism, serial music and classical literary modernism. The rebellion of the artists was soon joined by critics such as Susan Sontag, Leslie Fiedler and Ihab Hassan who all vigorously, though in very different ways and to a different degree, argued for the postmodern. (Hyussen 17).

By the 1960s artists and critics alike shared a sense of a fundamentally new situation. The assumed postmodern rupture with the past was felt as a loss: art and literature's claims to truth and human value seemed exhausted, the belief in the constitutive power of the modern imagination just another delusion (17). And the decades that followed saw different articulations of the postmodern thought in different directions, and by the end of the century, postmodernism as a term as well as a philosophy and a political theory solidified to represent the essential core of the period.

The term postmodernism has thus come to designate

- i) A very definite current of philosophy, and
- ii) A theoretical approach to politics.

All the same, it also designates in common parlance a definite turn and approach to art, literature, and culture. But the fact is that no meaningful conception of postmodernism will be possible if its philosophical and political imports are ignored. Thus, the theory and the politics of postmodernism demand serious reconsideration in our times.

A Critique of Positivism

Postmodernism as a social theory is effective as a critique of positivism, says Ben Agger (106). Positivism suggests that one can perceive the world without making assumptions about the nature of the phenomena under investigation. The central positivist tenet is that it is possible to reflect the world without presuppositions, without intruding philosophical and theoretical assumptions into one's understanding.

The positivist notion that knowledge can simply reflect the world leads to the uncritical identification of reality and rationality; one experiences the world as rational and necessary, thus deflating attempts to change it.

Hence, it is imperative to develop a mode of consciousness and cognition that breaks the identity of reality and rationality viewing social facts not as inevitable constraints on human freedom, but as pieces of history that can be changed. (109).

One could argue that this kind of critique of positivism is built into the postmodernist fiction, specially in Garcia Marquez. His magical realism, essentially speaking, is the ability to view the world in terms of its potential for being changed in the future, a hard-won ability in a world that promotes positivist habits of mind acquiescing to the status-quo (110).

Postmodernism, like poststructuralism, fundamentally rejects any such presuppositionless representation, arguing explicitly that such representation is both politically undesirable and philosophically impossible (Agger 106).

Postmodernism- Critique of Modernity

Modernity, or the 'modern project', has been criticized on more than one ground. The conservative criticism of modernity has been based on an emphasis upon the power of tradition, the ambiguity of progress, and the destructive tendencies that result from the autonomy of the individual.

Marx, Freud and Nietzsche poured out a stream of criticism of the optimistic faith in reason and liberty- a critique of ideology in Marx, a critique of reason and autonomy in Freud, and a critique of morality in Nietzsche: what we believe to be rational explanations of free and moral behavior and attitudes are exposed as rationalizations, as unconscious distortions of reality, and as illusions. The image of the free and rational individual has been shattered. We are left with a murky sea of hidden needs and desires. Enlightenment and knowledge are merely an external varnish, and belief in them may be a dangerous illusion. This gloomy Freudian view of the discontent of modernity matches Nietzsche's critique: when we talk about truth, the will to life lies below the surface! All statements filter out something and leave something else lying in the shade. They reveal something by simultaneously covering up other aspects of the phenomena. Hence, truth and untruth walk hand in hand, and beneath it all lie the life forces and the will to power. The rationality that is

praised in scientific activity and in political life is actually hidden power. Values, both theological and humanistic, are thus exposed as illusions. There is no longer anything to believe in. All false hope is gone. Only through art and sublime actions can we break free from the iron cage of rationality. Poetic speech is the only thing that remains of philosophy.

This is the absolute criticism of modernity. The pure ideals of progress in enlightenment, government, and the exploitation of nature are rejected as decay and stupidity, as a suppression of the life forces and as a foolish undermining of natural conditions. In the period between the two World Wars, this total criticism was also expressed by the political Left, such as the Marxist-inspired Frankfurt school, including Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse. They no longer believed in the revolutionary subject (the proletariat) who will lead us into the good society. They no longer believed, without reservation in the ethos of enlightenment, for it seemed ambiguous, but they still believed in the enduring value of criticism and in the liberating potential of aesthetics. It is this radical self criticism within modern society that has later been carried on by the postmodernists, such as Foucault and Derrida.

Postmodernism Today

The idea that postmodernism as a theory has waned is popular today. But the ideological character of postmodernism both as a philosophical standpoint and as a set of political objectives and strategies has not lost its sheen. It in fact informs many of the theoretical thinking even today.

The development within a broadly postmodernist theoretical framework of a trend advocating a critique of certain postmodern tenets from the standpoint of anti-imperialism is in fact the driving force of contemporary cultural politics. As of now, it appears to be a force that has to be reckoned with for some time to come.

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