

Modernity and Postmodernity. Some Reflections

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Abstract

We tend to think that our understanding of the world around us is complete if we are looking at and listening to what is happening. As a matter of fact, many cultural, intellectual and ideological forces filter and shape it. This world that we have lived in for some time now is one in which words are punished to have no definite meaning but discourses are so powerful, where truth is doomed to lose any universal character but everyone is entitled to their own opinion regardless of their domain of expertise or simply experience (or lack thereof), where people can choose their religion but terrorist attacks or simply violent conflicts in the name of faith are on the news oftentimes. In such a world, at any level, authority is whoever happens to be in power with almost everyone deriding authority figures.

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The author of the present brief piece of writing (meant to be postmodern of the lucid and ludic kind) will be dragging in all sorts of smart observations and interpretations along the way just to make it end up by being a little bit original, which is obviously impossible to achieve these days.

Actually, the term 'postmodernity' has come to wear down people nowadays. 'Wear' probably being an understatement, 'nauseate' seems more appropriate. When the term appeared back in the '70s many jaws fell and bounced off the floor several times as, for their owners, it was utterly inconceivable that anything could follow 'modernity', always associated with the idea of 'new' and 'now', and, if there were to be a period of anything following modernity, it would have to be called something other than 'modernity'. So it was called 'postmodernity', a name as good as any other, even the more so as it includes modernity as just another valid source of ideas.

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In real fact, postmodernity refuses to kill anything completely pledging its allegiance to a series of rules of thumb: "Look at the bigger picture. Zoom out. Don't focus in on two or three things to the exclusion of others. Keep everything in context. Pick your own fashions. Don't let someone else tell you what you should be or feel like. 'Tsall good.'"

Nevertheless, it seems weird and disorienting that, in our postmodern frame of mind, there is no truth, ideas do not matter, world issues are not the issue and no one takes almost anything seriously anymore. These would bother a modern, because a modern has to decide whether this or that is true because the modern believes in OR more than AND, whereas postmoderns believe in AND more than OR, or even better, in AND/OR.

Our culture has undergone a basic shift, one that might be considered healthy unless word for it. Furthermore, we make individual choices on the assumption that not everyone is going to agree, and that not everyone should be required to agree. We somehow traded our monoculturalism for the right to discuss things. Instead of being required to agree about everything, we are politely and politically correctly required to agree to disagree. Discussing things stimulates our tendency to 'deconstruct' the things we evaluate. Which brings us to deconstruction viewed as the bridge between modernism and postmodernism. The former, reductionist, tending to take things to pieces and then take one of the pieces in isolation and glorify it; the latter, holistic, trying to show all the pieces at once, and how they relate to each other. The former showing the final, great, shining product (a building, for example, as postmodernity began in architecture); the latter, letting visible the working (the ducts in the same example) and saying it is alright to be in the open, and it is alright for different things to look different. sometimes proves not to be so. We used to evaluate everything and everyone based on reputation or position, with the basic underlying assumption that we all had to agree whether something (or someone) was good or bad. It resulted in our feeling free to evaluate things and people based on what we think is good or bad rather than feel pressured to take someone's (famous)

Arrogant modernity focused on the hammer of reason and truth as the authority¹, pounding every nail (dysfunctional cultural/political/educational institutions), attacking every problem and by so doing creating other problems; postmodernity focused on the

carpenter, allowing him to choose whether or not to use hammers, granting him some amount of free will and creativity, even though sometimes the carpenter has no clue about what s/he is doing.

After many decades since postmodernity made its breaking-through appearance, with its ardent need to decenter/demolish the old and make large, comfortable (though not always), tolerant (though not really) otherness/difference-accepting room for itself, strangely enough, postmodernity seems to push us in the opposite direction.

In this line of thought, something that Professor Valentine Cunningham said a rather long while ago when discussing the legitimization of truth on the territory of literature and literary criticism stayed with me from a larger perspective:

[o]nce discredited the idea of statements having a truth-value, or of the validity of truth leading to discussion on reality, imagination, fiction, etc., we obviously stumble... Once discredited the idea of the writer's duty to render truth the best he can, we come to an inevitable deadlock. Consequently, I think it is dangerous to mock at the idea that truth is a goal, be it in literature or criticism. Fortunately, most people guide their lives by other precepts and values than these... sceptics... (Cunningham in Anghelescu-Irimia, 1999: 120)

Many people, however, even running the risk of being scoffed at, aspire to truth and greatness, which is not wrong if both concepts are properly defined. True greatness, postmoderns claim, is measured by how much freedom you give to others, not by how much you can coerce others to do what you want. God is not a modernist. He does not view us as nails. God expects us to behave like carpenters. Indeed, he gave us a carpenter as an example. So maybe God is postmodern. He has his own ideas of what rules, and what does not, and he does not expect everyone to agree with him, although he probably likes it when people agree with him. God gives people the freedom to go to the devil if they so choose.

A price to pay for all the generous ideas and principles of postmodern ideology, on the other hand, is that a growing number, especially among the emerging generations, believe that reason and truth are inherently political and subversive. This is mainly why they are often so cynical: advised by voices in contemporary culture, including too many academics willing to make themselves visible as up-dated scholars, to

consider claims to truth as being clever disguises for the pernicious *will to power* (which too often are exactly that), they conclude that rather than dominating others with our version of reality, we should accept all beliefs as equally valid. Openness without the restraint of reason, and tolerance without moral appraisal seem, unfortunately, to be the new postmodern mandates. For too many, the postmodern outlook seems more absorbed rather than thought out. A vast majority came to believe and many of us even teach (in good will, of course) that truth is relative. But only few know why we think that way. Still fewer have any clue about how our beliefs practically relate to our own lives, that often they are hopelessly contradictory or that we often live inconsistently with them. In general, we tend to be ideologically confused rather than deeply committed to our convictions. So, while we hear the rhetoric of openness to everything and tolerance for everyone, it is rare to find someone who really understands what this means and even lives up to it. It has become the socially appropriate attitude to display. Thus, postmodern ideologues have been successful in transforming ideology into *popular zeitgeist*.

Paradoxically and ironically (if it were not sad), in an age of anti-dogmatism, this radical subjectivity leads to the dangerously arrogant inference that no one can ever be wrong about what they believe. As people living in a socially and morally fragmented age, free from the constraints of rationality, we are confronted with the danger of not knowing truth from self-delusion anymore. The tyranny of truth has been replaced with self-empowering stories typically functioning at the expense of truth: *authority as the truth rather than truth as the authority*.

Postmodernity is a moment of *cynical reason* in which subjects no longer believe the official line delivered by society's authorizing institutions; it is now taken for granted that governments routinely dissemble and that advertisers and entertainers perpetrate shams. But this disbelief does not bring with it a freeing from or resistance to ideology. Instead subjects respond according to the fetishistic logic of disavowal: "I know what I'm doing is meaningless, but I do it nonetheless."

Unlike its predecessor, there is something else that the postmodern can and has: make fun of themselves and humour. It is liberating to be who you really are not who you should be or the others want you to be; to be playful, mocking, nostalgic, sentimental, retro, casual, etc. It is entertaining and if postmodernity is not about entertainment it is about nothing at all.

Modernity meant being serious, which is not bad if you are not serious all the time about everything and anything. The moderns tried really hard to get rid of conventions and even though they did it. All they really did was make the conventions invisible, at least to themselves, building the cult of seriousness and objectivity to which the postmoderns answer with the cult of subjectivity, more honestly called 'cultural relativism'. It is the notion that everything is as good as everything else, because goodness is only a matter of opinion.

Beyond its disturbing, confusing, maddening characteristics, postmodernity may appear as a blessing since it offers with praiseworthy magnanimity a smorgasbord, the only question left being what you are hungry for. It asks all the questions without forcing anyone to come up with the answers. Somehow hypocritically, it claims that it is not the task of the philosopher, writer or scholar to act as the Big Other who tells us about the world, but rather to challenge our own ideological presuppositions. All of the three categories above, plus many others, depending on their life experience and domain of expertise and action, are called to criticize rather than try to find answers, which seems pretty comfortable after all if it were not, if misused and abused, deadly.

Any society needs people who are willing to be partisan on behalf of their chosen culture while remaining sufficiently non-partisan to keep in touch with the rest of the world. It is no fun to create a new culture and then cut it off from the rest of humanity. One good thing is that, in this respect, things have improved greatly, and the bridges across the gaps have got sturdier. Now people can send their memes across wider chasms without getting crucified on one end of the bridge or the other. It mirrors a postmodern sort of movement, with lots of diversity and a certain amount of turmoil, about as good as any movement gets nowadays. After all, we have agreed to agree. Except when we do not.

Yes, modernity fought against and also created a lot of dysfunction, no dispute about that. The interesting thing is that postmodernity is propagating the dysfunction because it actually finds its meaning in it. For one thing, we should not fail to notice how one cannot rebel by being dysfunctional any more. It is no longer interesting, we have done that already.

Postmodernity really is a result of modernity.

'Tsall good. Except when it's not.

Note

1. The Enlightenment praised the idea of progress believing that the application of universal reason to every human problem could help humanity move steadily toward the fully rational society in which there would be freedom, prosperity and happiness for all. Modernity exalted technological achievement and mastery over the natural order, planting the seeds of its own undoing (appalling wars, genocides, poverty, exploitation and injustice, pollution, threats of nuclear annihilation and other horrors of the twentieth century). Postmodernity claims that autonomous reason and technological proliferation have brought the modern age to the brink of disaster. Every time somebody claims to be in possession of *the* truth, it ends up repressing people. Consequently, postmodernists believe that what is wrong with modern ideologies is one part of humanity imposing its ideas and values and control over other parts, one nation imposing on another, or one group in society imposing its values on other groups.

Reference

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