

Postmodern Contradictions and Subversive Appropriations

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This paper proposes to examine the problems in presenting postmodernity as a radically deviant ontological term for the current times, and shows how its assumptions can be traced very much in Western philosophy and theory prior to it, as it can also be shown to be in reaction to the changing faces of socio-politico-economic orders of recent times. Postmodernism is thus a construct aimed at repositioning some of the transcendentalist, essentialist and hierarchist assumptions of Western philosophy and providing for a theory which reacts more appropriately to the changing definitional roles of knowledge and culture in the face of transformations in social, political and economic domains. Either way, postulations on the postmodern are thus necessarily political, and a justification of postmodernism as the way to describe contemporary conditions of cultural production and consumption must lie in an exposition of its politics. The objective of this paper is twofold. On the one hand, it seeks to examine the politics accompanying the academia's bid at auto-historicization, at creating a new *episteme* for itself. On the other, it seeks to probe how, in spite of the possible global and imperialist implications of this academic construction of postmodernity, its foregrounding of marginality and plurality can be and has been subversively appropriated for political enablement. The hypothesis of this study is thus that postmodernism, rather than being a seamless global term encompassing quite organically current trends in thought and culture, is a bundle of contradictions, which reveal, in their connections to dominant Western philosophy and changing class configurations, an interested construction, the only justification of which can be in its radicalized resistant appropriation as a possibility for political enablement.

This paper will thus explore the vicissitudes of the term 'postmodern': its 'origins', its manifestations, its principal features as evident in its manifestations as also in theorizations on it, the contradictions and inconsistencies it presents, its relations with and reactions to philosophy prior to it and theoretical developments contemporary to it, the processes behind its construction as a descriptive term for social and ideological processes *per se*, and the political implications it entails, leading to the intended conclusions as to the academic construction of postmodernity and its possible *raison d'être* lying in its subversive extrapolation into political enablement.

As far as the origins of the term is concerned, 'postmodernism' seems to have been used as early as the 1870s by the British artist John Watkins Chapman to describe the then new post-Impressionist art which, in his opinion, went further than the French Impressionist painters like Claude Monet or Auguste Renoir in capturing the fleeting appearance of nature. One comes across a second use of the term in 1917, when the German writer Rudolph Pannwitz spoke of nihilistic amoral 'postmodern men' who had broken away from old established values of European civilization. The term was first used for literature when Federico de Onís coined the word '*postmodernismo*' in his *Antología de la poesía española e hispanoamericana (1882-1932)*, published in Madrid in 1934, and Dudley Fitts picked it up in his *Anthology of Contemporary Latin-American Poetry* in 1942, to indicate a reaction to the modern latent within modernism itself. In his abridgement of British historian Arnold Toynbee's first six volumes of *A Study of History* (1947), D. C. Somervell suggested that Toynbee's focus on history could be called 'post-Modern'. Toynbee took the term up, and in subsequent volumes of his work he put forward the notion of a 'post-Modern age', starting from 1875, following the Middle Ages (1075-1475) and the Modern Age (1475-1875). In 1957, the American cultural historian Bernard Rosenberg named as 'postmodern' contemporary social and cultural changes, which included the rise of technological domination and the development of a mass culture of universal 'sameness'. Soon, the term was used to describe a rather lamentable falling off from the great modernist movement by Irving Howe in 1959 ('Mass Society and Postmodern Fiction', *Partisan Review*, vol. 26, no. 3, Summer 1959, rept. in Howe, *Decline of the New*, New York, 1970, pp. 190-207.) and by Harry Levin in 1960 ('What was Modernism?', *Massachusetts Review*, vol. 1, no. 4, August

1960, rept. in Levin, *Refractions*, New York, 1966, pp. 271-95).¹ It was finally in the 1960s, under the likes of Leslie Fiedler and Ihab Hassan, that a more favourable reviewing of the postmodern condition led to further postulations in the 70s and 80s by theoreticians like Habermas, Lyotard, Baudrillard and Jameson.

Moving on next to trace the chief features of what is termed as postmodern, one gets led into three major points. The first concerns an incredulity towards art as an authentic representational medium, the second is an incredulity towards global grand narratives of emancipation and speculation, and the third is about an incredulity towards the hierarchically perpetrated differences between the high and the low, the central and the marginal, the classic and the popular.

The first could have been very much due to the invention of photography, which took up from painting the task to reproduce reality, while art took a leap in a necessarily non-realistic direction, having lost both its claim to truthful representation and aesthetic aura.² This led artists towards the beginning of the twentieth century to Cubism in France, the Dutch De Stijl group, the Weimar Bauhaus, Italian Futurism, Russian Constructivism, etc. Constructivism (1914-20), abandoned easel painting in favour of kinetic art and technical design applied to typography, architecture and industrial production, and led to Dadaism and Surrealism in the 1910s to 30s, where the very medium of representation was problematized. The Dadaist Marcel Duchamp's sensational exhibitions of readymade non-art objects like a bottle-rack (1914) and a porcelain urinal (1917) as art displaced the very idea of artistic originality and laid the foundations of later movements like Expressionism in the 1940s, and Minimalism, Conceptual art, and Andy Warhol's Pop-art in the 1960s. The last two of these movements showed how just about anything could be labelled 'art' if the consumerist aura of an ultimate commodity was appended to it. This is image consumerism, whereby the reproduced takes the place of reality and replaces it as hyper-reality, as what Baudrillard calls the 'simulacrum'³, where in four increasing stages of estrangement, the representation ceases to have any relation whatsoever with the original. A similar problematization of representation can be noticed in literature from early predecessors of postmodernism like Joyce and Beckett to current practitioners like Barth, Barthelme, Pynchon and Eco.⁴

While the first incredulity is noticed mainly in art and literature,

the second is most evident in theory and architecture. The shocking experiences of the two world wars made the first world doubt one of its fundamental metanarratives—that of linear progress. Similarly, the Stalinistic turn in the Soviet bloc made one suspicious of global emancipatory agendas. The result was immediate in philosophy, which rechristened itself as ‘theory’ in the wake of changes in its basic assumptions. Epistemologically, the empirico-rational model gave way to a discontinuist model, borrowed to a great extent from Nietzsche⁵, whereby there is neither a certain origin, nor a definite telos, nor even a synchronic continuity in terms of traditional binders like causality and reason. Ontologically, this results, in a blending of Nietzsche and Heidegger, in a questioning of homogenizing categories like the self or subjective identity, totality, reality, history, and meaning, and corollarily in a privileging of surface over depth, of space over the determinism of time. At an ethical level, this means a doing away with a faith in *a priories* and setting in its place the question of legitimation or, in a combination of the Nietzschean ‘will to power’ and Wittgensteinian ‘language games’, to probe how knowledges get legitimated as functions of power. This branches in contemporary theory in two opposite directions—that of a resistant radicalization of this legitimation problematic and that of a nihilistically relativistic ‘anything goes’. The incredulity towards emancipatory metanarratives takes a related turn in architecture. Modernist architecture of the likes of Le Corbusier was rooted in a belief in progress and aimed at building ‘living machines’ providing, in conformity to the dream of class liberation, functional homes for everybody. The emancipatory metanarrative having ceased to appeal, postmodernist architecture turns to either ornamentation and the retro mode of eclectically recalling earlier styles⁶, or kitsch and a celebration of popular forms.⁷ One should note how Jameson’s theorization of this intertextual referencing in terms of ‘parody’ and ‘pastiche’⁸ can be made applicable to art and literature too.

The third incredulity, that towards the privileged position of high art and central sociocultural categories vis-à-vis the popular and the marginal, is raised at the ethical level within the second incredulity itself. While the academic inclusion of popular culture may be dated back at least to Adorno⁹ and struggles to foreground marginal cultures even further back, it is under the rubric of postmodernism that this gains a theoretical consensus. While on

the one hand, the resultant relativism does lead to an academic legitimization of often reactionary popular notions and the promotion of general apoliticism; on the other, it also makes room for resistant notions and marginal practices. No doubt, Laura Kipnis calls feminism the 'political conscience of postmodernism'¹⁰, Bell Hooks shows how some assumptions of postmodernism have been especially helpful for struggles of black people,¹¹ and Linda Hutcheon shows how the political potential of postmodernism lies in the very duplicity that it presents in terms of the reactionary and radical sides to its pluralistic relativism.¹²

While I have tried to outline some of the features of postmodernism in the preceding pages, one should note that it may not be that easy to pin down the term, as definitional debates on the nature of the postmodern have been on for quite some time. This leads us to the next point concerning the contradictions the term 'postmodern' entails. While for Habermas¹³, it is too early to abandon the enlightenment project of modernity for a postmodern condition, for the likes of Lyotard, Baudrillard and Hassan, one has passed on to a state of postmodernity. Among the latter, Lyotard believes that postmodernism 'is undoubtedly a part of the modern'¹⁴, while for the other two, it stands radically at divergence with the modern. Among these two, Hassan gives a binary table of differences between the modern and the postmodern, and terms 'indetermanence' (a portmanteau word comprising 'indeterminacy' and 'immanence') as the latter's basic characteristic¹⁵, but for Baudrillard, the change can be understood in no binary terms but in a fourfold development of the 'simulacrum', whereby representations become 'hyperreal'¹⁶. In analysing the contextual basis for postmodernism, Jameson argues that it is the 'cultural logic of late capitalism'¹⁷, while for Callinicos, advanced capitalism or post-industrialism itself seems to have not yet happened¹⁸, leading to an impossibility of postmodernism being the 'cultural logic' of the same. Talking about the political implications of postmodernism, Feyerabend says that political activism has become a thing of the past with postmodernism being marked by the extreme relativism of 'anything goes'¹⁹, but for Linda Hutcheon, the postmodern condition is particularly conducive for a political foregrounding of the marginalized.²⁰ What all this points towards is that far from being a seamless descriptive category of the current conditions of cultural production, postmodernism refers to a state of affairs which is fraught with several contradictions.

The contradictions that underlie postmodernism are not merely definitional. One can decode several glaring aporias in its theoretical postulations too. While it talks about a non-teleological approach, postmodernism often constructs itself as a telos, a development over modernism and the final stage of human culture. This is most evident in Fukuyama, when he says that capitalism and postmodernism having established their global supremacy, one has reached the veritable telos, the 'end of history'.²¹ Similarly, while postmodernism talks about pluralities as opposed to binarism, it itself indulges in binaries like surface/depth, space/time, mass/high, and of course modern/postmodern, so much so that Ihab Hassan gives an elaborate binary table of the differences between modernism and postmodernism.²² At another level, one can notice how while talking about foregrounding local narratives, postmodernism constructs itself as a global phenomenon—much like a grand narrative it is apparently incredulous of—and in the face of constant globalization the local gets included in the postmodern pantheon only when it follows a global idiom. Thus a work of folk art or black music can be canonized only when it becomes a commodity in the global market; a piece of African or Indian literature gains status only when it is written in or strategically translated into English. An even greater problem arises with postmodern positions regarding identity politics. The postmodern denunciation of subjectivity and its foregrounding of minority cultures are mutually contradictory, showing that some of the postmodern energy is devoted to showcasing the marginalized rather than giving it a voice. There are some more concrete procedural contradictions within postmodern thought like its reliance, as in Lyotard²³, on pre-subjective notions like the sublime, its invocation of pre-industrial forms of cultural production while engaging post-industrial technological tools for the same, etc. These contradictions suitably problematize the apparently non-problematic term 'postmodern' and make this paper probe into the construct that postmodernism is.

In this quagmire of mutually conflicting attempts to define the postmodern, and mutual contradictions within the definitions themselves, a raging suspicion arises as to whether postmodernity is a 'real' description of a state of affairs or an academically fabricated 'condition' aimed at legitimating the existence of humanities and the social sciences in the face of changing socio-economic and political orders, especially through a construction

of contemporary cultural modes as radically different from the modern ones. Much in the direction of what David Simpson proposes,²⁴ one can argue the possibility that postmodernism has its genesis in the rather restricted sphere of academics and its articulation can only be found in the legitimation-seeking changing face of cultural pedagogy. When Lyotard says that the modernist *grand récit* of science having faced a certain 'incredulity', knowledge can gain legitimacy in the postmodern age only through the narrative mode of language games and 'paralogy',²⁵ he could not have been nearer the nature of theoretical postulations that comprise postmodernity. Faced with rapidly changing class formations whereby democratization of knowledge demands the popular to be considered at par with the erstwhile high art, rapidly changing gender and race relations which make it impossible for the erstwhile marginalized to be simply excluded, and rapidly changing levels of everyday scientific and technological application resulting in changing patterns of institutional funding, humanities and the social sciences can legitimize their existence only through a paralogical narrative—that of the postmodern, which gives them new theoretical tools and perspectives, rendering them relevant in the face of redundancy. One can thus show how the jargon of postmodernism has its roots in this academic strategy at survival, this need of the 'liberal arts' to retain for themselves a stranglehold in the knowledge industry that they seem to be fast losing out on. This construction of the postmodern condition can be studied in relation to three layers of influences and correspondences—a vertical one concerning the influence of Western philosophy on postmodern thought, a lateral one probing correspondences between poststructuralism and postmodernism, and a closed-circuit reading of the processes of auto-historicization.

A genealogy of the construction of postmodern thought shows that most of its fundamental features have had occurrences in philosophy prior to it and the postmodernist constructs about the same draw heavily from these predecessors. The first feature of postmodernism mentioned in this paper, that of its incredulity towards the certainty of representation in language, has been the prime concern of the poststructuralists and drawing straight from the question Wittgenstein²⁶ raises, the likes of Barthes, Derrida and Blanchot problematize language and representation much in the way practitioners of postmodern art do. The second feature of postmodernism that this paper mentions—its incredulity towards

emancipatory metanarratives—can also be seen to be constructed on the basis of similar assumptions in other bodies of thought at the epistemological, ontological, as well as ethical level. The non-teleological, discontinuist epistemology of postmodernism is just an extrapolation of the Nietzschean method of genealogy, which does away with homogenizing notions of causality, determinism and teleology,²⁷ and proposes studying the *Herkunft* or descent and *Entstehung* or emergence of phenomena rather than the *Ursprung* or origin.²⁸ The questioning of subjectivity at the ontological level shows a blending of Nietzschean thought with Heidegger's notions of the relations of the being with the Being in the hermeneutic context of the *Dasein*²⁹, and Levinas's concept of foregrounding the other over the self-subject.³⁰ The placing of the 'will to power' and a questioning of legitimation at the ethical level also shows postmodern thought to be inextricably connected with not only Nietzsche but also developments in Marxist thought since Lenin, through Bakhtin, Gramsci, Althusser, Foucault, the Frankfurt School Critical Theory and developments in literary criticism like cultural materialism and new historicism, whereby the economic determinism of traditional Marxism has been constantly supplemented by the introduction of a multiplicitous generative hypothesis of power and the inclusion of other struggles within the broad agenda of political activism. As far as the third feature of postmodernism, that concerning its incredulity towards differences between high and popular art, is concerned, one can show how foregrounding of the popular has taken place in the academia right from the Romantic age. What all this points towards is the fact that in spite of not being radically at departure with it, this age seeks to construct itself as different from the modern, and this bid to write itself, this bid at auto-historicization betrays certain political considerations underlying postmodernity.

It is this political side of postmodernism that I will now take up in terms of the anxieties that postmodern thought presents. On the one hand, it can be shown, much in the way Jameson does,³¹ how postmodernism is the cultural logic of late capitalism, with the constraints of multinational capital and the demands of globalization setting in the postmodern trends of eclecticism, nostalgia mode, self-referentiality, cultural relativism, and what looks like a possible promotion of political apathy from a strictly activist perspective. It is this kind of an association of postmodernism with advanced capitalism and post-industrialism

that one notices in the works of the likes of Paolo Portoghesi and Margaret Rose too and a presentation of its rather reactionary political agenda is what marks some theorizations by the likes of Alex Callinicos and Christopher Norris.³²

While the links of postmodern thought to the interests of the emergent ruling class can definitely not be ignored, what can be shown on the other hand, much in the way Linda Hutcheon or Catherine Belsey feel that the postmodern teems with political potential, is how the space thus created can be subversively appropriated for resistant movements of the marginalized, as is amply demonstrated by the growing voices of women, blacks, gays, environmentalists, and so on and so forth. One can refer in this context to works by the likes of Laura Kipnis, Linda Nicholson, and Jane Flax for whom postmodernism is related to feminism, and Cornel West, Bell Hooks and Mas'ud Zavarzadeh for whom the postmodern condition can be subversively used towards liberation of marginalized communities.³³

This leads to the political enablement thesis, and the conclusion of this paper lies in presenting postmodernism not as the Promised Land of the marginalized, but rather as a domain constructed very much to cater to the interests of the ruling class, which however, because of its own contradictions, can be subversively appropriated towards political enablement. In fact, it is only in this subversivity and political appropriability that the rationality of such a contradictory movement like postmodernism lies.

NOTES

1. For brief histories of the terms 'postmodern' and 'postmodernism', see Richard Appignanesi, et al., *Introducing Postmodernism*, Icon Books, Cambridge, 1999, pp. 3-4; Glenn Ward, *Postmodernism*, Hodder and Stoughton, London & Chicago, 1997, pp. 6-7; and Ihab Hassan, 'Toward a Concept of Post-modernism' (from *The Postmodern Turn*, Ohio State Univ. Press, 1987, pp. 84-96), in Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon, eds., *A Postmodern Reader*, State Univ. of New York Press, Albany, 1993, pp. 274-5.
2. See Walter Benjamin, from 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, Journal of the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research, New York, 1936, tr. Harry Zohn, in Hannah Arendt, ed., *Illuminations*, Collins/Fontana, London, 1973;