

Chapter 39

Postmodernism

Key Words:

postmodern, progress, reason, metanarrative, antifoundationalism, idea of progress, universal rationality, value-neutrality, structuralism, poststructuralism, unified self, presence, origin, unity, transcendence of norms, fractured self, discourse,

In this chapter we shall examine the major characteristic features of postmodernism. We shall first of all examine the concepts of the human self advocated by the proponents of postmodernism and then try to understand the different approaches adopted by some of the postmodern thinkers. Stuart Sim observes in *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*:

In a general sense, postmodernism is to be regarded as a rejection of many, if not most, of the cultural certainties on which life in the West has been structured over the last couple of centuries. It has called into question our commitment to cultural 'progress' (that economies must continue to grow, the quality of life to keep improving indefinitely, etc.), as well as the political systems that have underpinned this belief. [p.vii]

We may observe that, it is easier to give an account of what postmodernism is not, rather than positively articulating what it is. It is not just a philosophical school or system but refers to various developments that happened in culture in general and particularly in the realms of literature, film, architecture, art etc. To highlight its negative features, it is characterized by scepticism, antifoundationalism and a dislike of authority. It radically questions the Enlightenment project and its associated notions of progress and emancipation based on reason. In this sense, it can be conceived as a reaction to modernism. Postmodernism raises its voice against the liberal humanist ideology that had dominated culture since the eighteenth century.

General Features of Postmodernism

As mentioned above, the term postmodernism refers primarily to a variety of responses towards life, culture and values and therefore, it is easy to conceive it as a reaction against and rejection of some long established assumptions, particularly those which became prominent with the advent of modernity. It questions the enlightenment concept of progress and affirms a disbelief in the purity of knowledge. It proposes to

examine the goals and aspirations of modernity and is visibly anti-authoritarian. As Jean-François Lyotard says, it is a reaction against the universalizing theories or grand narratives/metanarratives. In his influential book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* Lyotard opposes the totalizing nature of metanarratives and their reliance on some form of transcendent and universal truth. He defines postmodernism as incredulity toward metanarratives. [p. xxiv] As Hugh J. Silverman observes, postmodernism tries to marginalize, delimit, disseminate, and decenter the primary (and often secondary) works of modernist and premodernist cultural inscriptions. [p. 1] Postmodernists thus attempt to re-read the texts and traditions that have made premodernist and modernist writing possible. They thus oppose the basic assumptions of modernist thought. Mary Klages has listed out a few premises which are central to humanism/modernism. We shall examine some of them. There is the concept of an autonomous self with its ability to know itself and the world through reason. Based on this assumption, modern philosophy had tremendous faith in the power of science. It believes that science provides unbiased, objective and universal truths that lead us toward progress. Reason is here taken as the ultimate judge that decides what is true, what is right, and what is good and language, which is the distinctive human capacity, is considered as the representation of the world.

The Modern and the Postmodern

Modernity was a reaction against the inadequacies of traditional worldviews. The modernists contended that all the traditional ways of understanding the world and society have become obsolete and there was an urgent need to come up with new moral, philosophical, cultural or political principles to understand and deal with the changing world. The (re)emerging idea of reason had provided them the hope for building a new world on universally objective foundations.

The postmodernists in turn have argued that these modern attempts to reinvent humanity are insufficient and futile. They have contended that reinventing new and absolute principles amount to newer forms of authoritarianism and have concluded that all such hopes are false. In this context the postmodernists have urged the abandoning of all metanarratives that are foundational principles. This they thought would expose the infinite field of differences within humanity. The idea of constitutive otherness is derived from this insight. Through their critical approaches,

the postmodernists have attempted at exposing the mistakes of modernity and have declared that modernity has come to an end.

The two most important features of postmodernity are their opposition to the idea of progress and their rejection of metanarratives. By opposing the idea of progress they have questioned the modernists' conviction that reason and science would lead to progress. Based on this optimism all the so-called modern institutions aim at this rational ideal. The idea of universal rationality itself is a metanarrative and modernity has many such metanarratives which consume different local narratives. For instance, with its notion of universal rationality, modernity has its idea of human welfare, which it blindly applies to all possible situations and all human communities. In this process it neglects the ideas of welfare nourished by different societies and communities in relation with their local surroundings. It thus pretends to send out a universal message and often forcefully suppresses or consumes the local narratives.

By advocating the idea of a concept of universal knowledge, the modern West committed a major mistake. It contended that such a notion of value-neutral, objective knowledge could be discovered by the human mind and the modern West did possess it. Correspondingly, it had assumed the possibility of a disinterested knower who possessed such knowledge. It also believed that the entire humanity was benefited by this knowledge. The postmodernists assert that this supposition is a myth. They thus proclaim that modernity has ended.

In one sense, ruptures were already present in the Enlightenment concept of rational modern society. Kant's rational project had exposed the fragmentation of the modern society and self into three different and autonomous domains of reason; pure, practical and aesthetic rationalities. Kant had attempted to reunite this with aesthetics, but the problem of fragmentation persisted. This has been recognized as a problem of the Enlightenment project in general; the central unity underlying all aspects of human experiences Vs. fragmentation of the self and of society. Hegelian idealism and many other philosophies of modernity tried to find a solution to this problem, but had failed to achieve complete success. In Nietzsche's writings we find an ultimate proclamation of this fragmented society that was devoid of any universal sacred values and meanings. Nietzsche's Zarathustra preaches the death of God and the coming of the Superhuman. As Sim observes:

Postmodernism has drawn heavily on the example set by antifoundationalist philosophers, perhaps most notably the iconoclastic nineteenth-century

German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, whose call for a 'revaluation of all values' constitutes something of a battle-cry for the movement. [p. 3]

Different philosophies like Marxism, existentialism, Phenomenology and psychoanalysis also depict the estrangement of the individual from his or her authentic modes of experience and being and the experiences of fragmentation and meaninglessness in an increasingly technologizing and industrializing world. The post World-War II France had witnessed the emergence of many new philosophical approaches like structuralism and poststructuralism. Thinkers like Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard, who have later contributed significantly to the postmodern philosophy, initially belonged to the structuralist tradition.

The Roots of Postmodernism

The term postmodernism was first used by the German philosopher Rudolf Pannwitz in 1917, while he was referring to the nihilism of twentieth-century Western culture. In literary criticism it appears as a reaction against aesthetic modernism during 1950s and 60s and in philosophy it was associated with French poststructuralist philosophy. The important 19th and 20th century intellectual and philosophical movements like Marxism, existentialism and Phenomenology and their methods consider the notion of self as central to their framework. They all consider the alienation of the self as an important philosophical problem and have discussed the possibilities of authentic and inauthentic human existence. What is common to these philosophical approaches is their dislike toward abstract theorization. As we have seen in some previous chapters, existentialism particularly stresses on the individual man and his/her problems in the world.

Structuralism on the other hand, focuses on culture and hence on structures like language, ritual and kinship that creates the self. But this does not amount to a natural scientific enquiry of the individual subject. Yet, it does not adopt a purely subjective approach, but concentrates on language which is thought to exhibit a relative stability in the production of meaning. Structuralism holds that culture decides the nature of language-world relationship. Hence the word—object connection is arbitrary and conventional. Nevertheless, it is not merely subjective. They maintain that language is a system of signs, which induce a predictable response on the part of the linguistic community. But the stress on language and the attention it

gives to the aspects of conventions and customs make structuralism a unique philosophical approach that is different from many modern philosophies.

Poststructuralism, on the other hand rejects structuralism and its methods. Like structuralism, here too language is considered philosophically significant, but the poststructuralists have opposed the scientific pretensions of structuralism. Their approaches were influenced by the idea of constructed self. They have adopted a more radical approach to the conceptualization of language and have challenged the possibility of rational inquiry into truth. They have opposed the idea that the world is knowable with the methodology suggested by structuralism.

Poststructuralism was a reaction against modern rationalism and all forms of foundationalism. It originated in France in the 1960s and rejected many fundamental intellectual pillars of modern Western civilization. The poststructuralists have challenged the conceptions of objective knowledge of the real world. They have opposed the idea of one single textual meaning and have challenged the conceptions of a historical human subjectivity. In this sense, the poststructuralists vehemently criticized the notion of universal truth. The influence of this anti-foundational approach was visible in the fields of art, literature, politics and culture in general. The emphases on multiculturalism, feminism, identity politics etc., which are features of postmodern scenario, reflect this poststructuralist temperament.

Following these insights, the post-modern period witnesses an opposition to all concepts of a unified self. The postmodernist thinkers criticize the concepts of objective and unquestionable meaning. They too emphasize the importance of language, culture and discourse, but categorically assert the decentered aspect highlighted by many others.

As mentioned above, postmodernism is not just an intellectual reaction against modernity or a philosophical school that opposes modernism. It is a movement which has contributed to the evolution of a cultural and intellectual environment which stresses decentering, opposes all kinds of metanarratives and criticizes the conception of a unified self and the idea of a common rational ideal for all men. Along with philosophers, writers, artists, painters and architects have participated in this radical reaction against and rejection of modernism. With postmodernism, art became more and more eclectic. The postmodernists have challenged all traditional distinctions in art are like high-low, fine-commercial, truth-seeking modern avant-garde-superficial, classical-popular etc. Hence the impact of postmodernism is felt more intensively in

the domain of art and culture and the difference between the two approaches of modern and postmodern can be brought out by highlighting how modern and postmodern artists have approached their profession

The modern artist is a person who has materialized a break with tradition and with the past. He offers a critique of the conditions of his own culture and society, as he takes a privileged view of the social and the psychological concerns of the day. The example for such a modern artist is Charlie Chaplin in the movies *Modern Times*, and *The Great Dictator*. In these movies we see the artist as a visionary, who has a grand dream for the entire humanity. He is critical about certain practices of the industrial society. He has a universal message to all humans, which ensures humankind emancipation. On the contrary, the postmodern artist does not have any privileged status. He never claims to be an authority of meaning and value. Unlike the modern art, the text in postmodernism is decentered. It has no intrinsic value or meaning, but it acquires value in its intertextual relations with other texts.

Several social and political developments witnessing 20th century have significantly contributed to the development of the postmodern condition. It was a period that has witnessed the end of European colonialism. The development of mass communications and media culture has suggested drastic changes in the ways humans perceive things in the world and live in it. Changes in the global economic sphere and the growth of international marketing have suggested radical changes in culture. The end of cold war has opened up the possibilities of new alliances in international politics and trade, but has also led to the possibilities of new hostilities and polarization. The decline and fall of Marxism was arguably the most significant political event of post WW II Europe. All these developments have created new global equations at the economic, political and social realms, which ultimately led to the emergence of a post-industrial society, which made old meanings and values irrelevant

The post-industrial society is characteristically different from the modern industrialized world, as with its emergence, knowledge and information have become crucial for economic and cultural survival. This period had witnessed a revolt against many existent forms of authority and it challenged the rationalism and liberal individualism that were the hallmarks of modern societies. As Sim would put it:

One of the best ways of describing postmodernism as a philosophical movement would be as a form of scepticism-scepticism about authority,

received wisdom, cultural and political norms, etc.-and that puts it into a long-running tradition in Western thought that stretches back to classical Greek philosophy. [Sim. 3]

Some Postmodern Themes

Let us now discuss some important postmodern themes. We shall focus on four of them here.

1. Presence or presentation Vs. representation and construction
2. Origin Vs. phenomena
3. Unity Vs. plurality
4. Transcendence of norms Vs. Immanence of norms.

1. Denial of Presence

The idea of presentation refers to what is directly and immediately given in experience. For example, the epistemological tradition of modern philosophy has treated the perception or sensation or sense data as the directly given, which is more reliable or certain. Countering this, the postmodernists have emphasized the notion of representation and affirm that everything is mediated by the human factor. We employ the mediation of linguistic signs and concepts in order to construct them. They thus argue that nothing is immediately present.

2. Denial of the Notion of Origin

Both traditional and modern philosophies have subscribed to this notion of origin. In the modern period we have a rational and secular interpretation of this notion of origin. This refers to the idea of the ultimate source of meaning, of selfhood, of life, of reality found by reason. There is an attempt to understand the deeper realities of the phenomenal world. Many philosophies and theoretical approaches that were dominant during the first half of 20th century like existentialism, psycho-analysis, phenomenology and Marxism attempt to discover the origin of the self. In early hermeneutics, particularly in the works of Schleiermacher and Dilthey we find an approach that tries to locate the meaning of the text in the author's intentional life, which they believed was an historical sphere from where it needed to be discovered using a method. Contrary to this postmodernism has proclaimed the death of the author.

3. Denial of Unity

The postmodernists have challenged the idea of unity manifested in the notions of meanings and conceptions of self. They assert that all cultural elements like words, meanings, experiences, human selves, societies etc. are constituted by relations to other elements. They maintain that nothing is simple, immediate or totally present. They also oppose the possibility of a complete analysis of anything and therefore argue against the idea of absolute meaning.

4. Transcendence of Norms Vs. Immanence of Norms

The postmodernists have opposed the notion of transcendence of norms and have argued that values like truth, goodness, beauty, rationality, etc. are not independent but are products of and are immanent in the processes they find application as norms. Every such norm is conditional to the time and place and serves certain interests. They depend on certain social contexts.

From this radically different idea about meaning, the postmodernists have derived another important theoretical insight; the idea of constitutive otherness. They categorically affirm that all normative claims are problematic and hence there are no fixed norms or guidelines to decipher the meaning of the text. In this context, the postmodernists suggest textual analysis through constitutive otherness. As Cahoon says:

The apparent identity of what appear to be cultural units — human beings, words, meanings, ideas, philosophical systems, social organizations — are maintained in their apparent unity only through...an active process of *exclusion, opposition, and hierarchization*. A phenomenon maintains its identity...only if other units are represented as foreign or “*other*” through a hierarchical dualism in which the first is *privileged* or favored, and the other is *deprivileged* or devalued in some way. [p. 11]

They deny the idea of textual unity and argue that every text needs to be understood in terms of the dependency of its elements to others. They then emphasize on the excluded or "marginalized" elements of the text and argue that it is the margins that constitute the text. Accordingly, we must be sensitive to the elements that are not mentioned or devalued in the text explicitly. In other words, they claim that every text implies a repression and the privileged theme of the text depends on the marginalized, which will be brought out in the analysis.

The Postmodern Subject

Since the postmodernists oppose all kinds of unity, they reject the idea of a unified subject with a self-sufficient agency. They refuse to identify anything universal or a-historical in the conception of the self. They also deny the idea of one-dimensionality associated with the notion of self and argue that the subject is necessarily fractured and indefinite due to the complex social relationships it enters into and the multiple ways it interacts with the world.

This idea of a fractured self is directly in contradiction with the idea of self, advocated by modern philosophers. The modern self is the autonomous knowing subject for whom the world is an object of knowledge. They have contended that the perceptions of the self are representations of an external world and knowledge is based on representations. The Cartesian-Kantian ideals of the self posit a rational, universal, knowing subject as the human self.

Contrary to this, the postmodern view of the subject is conditioned by several factors. As Foucault observes, our subjective experience is socially and historically constituted by factors that we unconsciously internalize. He emphasizes the social aspect of discourse in which the self is situated and formed. Fredric Jameson presents another very interesting idea of the self. He presents the picture of a subject that lacks cognitive maps, which allow us to position ourselves in this world and to know where we are. The post-industrial postmodern scenario forces us to have serious rethinking about subjectivity from the context of humans-technology interfacing. This is because science and technology have drastically altered the subject, its interactions, its potentials and its self-conceptions. It is a fact that certain drugs can significantly alter our behaviour and thereby our subjectivity. As Deleuze and Guattari observe in *A Thousand Plateaus: Cybernetic and informational machines form third age that reconstructs a generalized regime of subjection: recurrent and reversible "humans-machines systems" replace the old nonrecurrent and nonreversible relations of subjection between the two elements; the relation between human and machine is based on internal, mutual communication, and no longer on usage or action.* [p. 458]

This novel conception of subjectivity has very important social and political implications. With its rejection of universalizing theories, it opposes oppressive ideologies like Fascism and Communism. Various political initiatives like the

feminist movement, racial equality movements, homosexual rights movements, peace movements, anti-globalization movement etc., have also gained importance with the postmodern era. Here too, like its theoretical position, postmodernists do not postulate any ideal for all humanity, but criticize and oppose the existing structures that are oppressive and exploitative.

Quiz

1. Which of the following was opposed by postmodernism?
(a) Liberal humanist ideology (b) Capitalistic ideology (c) Industrial rationality (d) Secularism
2. Which of the following is not a feature of postmodernism?
(a) The disbelief in the purity of knowledge (b) Opposition to the enlightenment concept of progress (c) Advocacy of the concept of an autonomous self (d) Rejection of the idea that reason is the ultimate judge.
3. Which of the following did Structuralism emphasize?
(a) Universal rationality (b) Culture (c) Literary works (d) Human existence
4. Which of the following is not a feature of poststructuralism?
(a) Language is philosophically significant (b) The idea of constructed self (c) Belief in the possibility of rational inquiry into truth (d) Opposes the scientific pretensions of Structuralism.
5. Which of the following is not implied or suggested by the idea of constitutive otherness?
(a) The excluded or marginalized elements of the text are more important
(b) Every text exhibits an internal unity (c) Every text implies a repression
(d) The privileged theme of the text depends on the marginalized.
6. Which of the following is not applicable to the postmodern notion of subject?
(a) Rejection of self-sufficient agency (b) Autonomy (c) Rejection of universal human nature (d) Essentially fractured

Answer Key

1. [a]
2. [c]
3. [b]
4. [c]
5. [b]
6. [b]

Assignments

1. Discuss the postmodern conception of the subject.
2. Discuss some of the key features of postmodernism.

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Web Resources

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