

Foundations of Postmodernism

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Postmodernism is a recent phenomenon. It is an idea of our understanding and a reflection of one's present condition. It also includes contemporary social, cultural and political condition. It belongs to our form of life, a form of reflection and a response to the limitations of modernity. People in the last decades of the 20th century believed that modernity brings uncertainties, doubts, anxieties etc. So the term 'postmodernism' is highly controversial and it extends to applying reactions against modernism.

In the 1970s the term postmodernism was adopted within philosophy as a rough synonym for deconstruction and post-structuralism. Philosophical postmodernism has two aspects: first, it is a reaction against modernism and second, it denies the distinction between 'high' and 'popular' art, which was important in modernism. We find Jean-Francois Lyotard as the prime advocate of postmodernism. According to him, "the essence of postmodernism is a carefree skepticism about every possible attempt to make sense of history."¹ It rejects all the "meta-narratives" of progress (whether Marxist or Liberal) in every respect of modernity and modernism.

The distinction between modernism and postmodernism is summarized in Jeremy Hawthorn's *Concise Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory*. He says that both give great prominence to fragmentation as a feature of twentieth century art and culture, but they do so in very different moods. That is the modernist laments fragmentation while the postmodernist celebrates it. And the other difference between the two is also a matter of tone and attitude.

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Three personalities have laid marks in the history of postmodernism: Juergen Habermas, Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard. In his influential paper 'Modernity - an Incomplete Project' Juergen Habermas stated that the modern period begins with enlightenment, when a new faith arose in the power of reason to improve the human society. He said that such ideas are expressed in the philosophy of Kant in Germany, Voltaire and Diderot in France, and Locke and Hume in Britain. In Britain the term 'The Age of Reason' was to designate the same period. The enlightenment project stands against the blind habit, precepts, bad elements of religious affairs and also stands for the application of reason and logic. This is what Habermas means by modernism.

The term 'postmodernism' was first used in the 1930s, but its present sense can be said to have begun with Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*.² Lyotard's essay 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?' was first published in 1982. Peter Barry in his *Beginning Theory* (1995) says that "for the Enlightenment whose project Habermas wishes to continue is simply one of the would-be authoritative 'overarching', 'totalising' explanations of things - like Christianity, Marxism, or the myth of scientific progress. These 'metanarratives' ['supernarratives'], which purport to explain and reassure are really illusions, fostered in order to some other difference, opposition, and plurality. Hence Lyotard's famous definition of postmodernism, that it is simply, 'incredulity towards metanarratives', grand narratives' of progress and human perfectability, then, are no longer tenable, and the best we can hope for is a series of 'mininarratives', which are provisional, contingent, temporary, and relative and which provide a basis for the actions of specific groups in particular local circumstances. Postmodernism thus 'deconstructs' the basic aim of the Enlightenment, that is 'the idea of a unitary end of history and of a subject.'³

Another theorist of postmodernism is the contemporary French writer Jean Baudrillard, whose book *Simulations* (1981)⁴ marks his entry into this field. Baudrillard shows the influences of films, TV and advertisements in our

contemporary life, and how these are subverting our ability to make distinction between real and imagined, illusion and reality, surface and depth. He says that this is the culture of 'hyperreality', in which distinction between these things are eroded. Jean Baudrillard reproduces the past era of 'fullness', when a sign was a surface of indication of an underlying depth of reality. The sign reaches its present stage of emptiness in a series of steps. Firstly, the sign represents the basic reality; the second is the sign that it misrepresents the reality behind it; the third step for the sign is when the sign disguises the fact that there is no corresponding reality underneath; and the last step for the sign is that it bears no relation to any reality at all. Barry (1995) states that Baudrillard's own example of the third step is Disneyland. Disneyland has the effect of 'concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle'. "Within postmodernism, the distinction between what is real and what is simulated collapses: *everything* is a model or an image, all is surface without depth; this is the *hyperreal*, as Baudrillard calls it"⁵

Ihab Hasan is another significant contributor on this topic. Hasan's postmodernist notes offer a reasonably exhaustive catalogue of non-mainstream American culture in the late 1960s. In the 1970s Hasan adds that the postmodern is not only the cultural shift, it also involves a new relationship between humankind and their environment. He suggests that "we are witnessing a transformation of man more radical than Copernicus, Darwin, Marx, or Freud ever envisaged."⁶

There is a widely held belief that no one can clearly indicate what postmodernism exactly determines, it is hard to get two postmodernists who are unanimous with their own position. But Peter Barry in his *Beginning Theory* (1995) raised some points what postmodernist literary critics do:

1. They discover postmodernist themes, tendencies, and attitudes within literary works of the 20th century and explore their applications.
2. They foreground fiction which might be said to exemplify the notion of the 'disappearance of the real', in which shifting postmodern identities are seen, for example, in the mixing of

literary genres (thriller, story, myth, saga and the realist psychological novel, etc.)

3. *They foreground what might be called 'intertextual elements' in literature, such as parody, pastiche, and illusion, in all of which there is a major degree of reference between one text and another, rather than between the text and a safely external reality.*
4. *They foreground irony, in the sense described by Umberto Eco, that whereas the modernist tries to destroy the past, the postmodernist realizes that the past must be revisited, but 'with irony.'*⁷
5. *They foreground the element of 'narcissism' in narrative technique, that is, where novels focus on and debate their own end and processes, and thereby 'de-naturalize' their content.*
6. *They challenge the distinction between high and low culture, and highlight texts, which work as hybrid blends of the two.*⁸

We stated earlier that postmodernism was adopted in philosophy as a rough synonym for deconstruction and post-structuralism. Deconstruction centers on theories of signification, indication, ideality and sense or meaning generally. Its proponent Jacques Derrida shows "prior metaphysical, epistemological, ethical and logical systems have been constructed on the basis of conceptual oppositions such as transcendental/ empirical, internal/ external, original/ derivative, good/evil, universal/ particular. One of the terms in each binary set is privileged; the other is suppressed or excluded."⁹ Derrida demonstrates that the privileged term is constituted by what it suppresses, and the latter returns to haunt it. Thus the privileged term never achieves perfect identity or conceptual purity; it is always already parasitic on or contaminated by the "marginalized" term. On the contrary, most structuralists shared a predilection for the psychoanalytic model of the unconscious and the Marxist model of determining social structures, while Ferdinand de Saussure was the first to indicate it as a science of structural linguistics.

It may be considered that postmodernism is closely articulated with modernity or it is treated as a modest modernity. It is a

sign of modernity that works with its own limitations. Giddens (1990)¹⁰ opines that it is a form of life 'beyond modernity'. It can be said that it is an approximate social feature, a condition, a form of life, and a different form of society. And it is a feature of future-oriented project that includes a post-scarcity order, multilayered democratic participation, demilitarization and a humanization of technology.¹¹ So in this sense it is an instance of the reconstitution of utopian thought.

Postmodernism is a burning issue in the field of Anthropology, Sociology, Philosophy, Geography, Theological Studies, Literary Criticism and Economics. A critical movement has already grown up against this postmodern concept. They are neo-conservative social analysts, critical theorists, classical and not so classical Marxists, rational-choice sociologists and standpoint feminists. Sometimes it is presented very ambiguously and generates mixed reactions from the critics.

Some analysts thought that it is an effort to mention the unmentionable, articulating the unacceptable, the indefensible, and the inconceivable. Someone thought that postmodernism is a redundant term and inappropriate to understand contemporary social, cultural and political condition. This is really a new idea and its followers are always admitting that we are living in the new times. Some one may say that we are living in an interregnum. Whatever the opinion is, it is undoubtedly clear that it is a new one. The sense of new times may perceive a recurring feature of modernity. And this idea of modernity may express "the consciousness of an epoch that related itself to the past ... in order to view itself as the result of a transition from the old to the new."¹²

References:

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