

# POSTMODERNISM AND THE PROBLEM OF THE MODERN AGE

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The word "postmodern," or "postmodernity," is a vague and deeply complex term which applies to culture and politics. The word itself suggests that the sun has set on the modern era and we have entered a new period with new assumptions, characteristics, values and sensibilities. For those who are humanists, postmodernism presents a formidable challenge. I would briefly like to try to explain what I think is at stake.

The discussion over postmodernism is an important one in some academic circles, especially in English departments where it has direct bearing on textual criticism. But such issues do filter down to the culture at large or at least reflect something in the culture to which academics are sensitive. It does not matter what name you give the phenomenon. Rather, its characteristics are what's important.

If postmodernism implies that the modern age has come to an end, then we first have to understand what is meant by the term "modern." We who occupy the modern age take for granted certain values that we live by and that are part of our culture. We take them for granted because they are so close to us, like the air we breathe. But if we could be magically transported to another time, let's say, the medieval world, live there

for a year, and then come back, the differences would become vividly apparent to us.

The values we live by in the West and which have given the modern age its particular character have a definite history. They came into prominence at a particular time, specifically, the age of the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, and if the postmodernists are correct, those values are now fading from the scene.

What are those values, or at least some of them, which constitute our modern sensibilities?

Among them is the belief that there is such a thing as objective truth-truth that exists above and beyond anyone person's mere opinion. Moreover, there is also the belief that the use of dispassionate, impartial reason is a necessary way to arrive at this truth. When we add the experimental or scientific method to the use of our reason, then we have arrived at the best vehicle by which to achieve a grasp of what is true. Intrigued by the success of mathematics to arrive at truths which are so compelling that they grip the mind, as it were, the philosophers of the Enlightenment extended the rational and scientific method to all forms of inquiry. It is the pursuit of truth and the devotion to science which color so much how we think and look at the world in our modern age.

Hand in hand with the application of the scientific method there has emerged a belief in progress, that is, that the future can in some sense be better, more prosperous, freer and happier than the past has been. Certainly this belief has served to undergird political revolutions in the modern period, whether French, American, Russian, as well as countless smaller movements which have aimed at the improvement of the human condition, Ethical Culture among them.

Among other, no less important values associated with the modern age is that of individualism. The idea

of the individual standing apart from his or her religious community or clan and possessing dignity and rights is a distinctively modern concept. Some historians have seen the seventeenth-century philosopher, Spinoza, as the first significant individual. Why so? Having left the Jewish community, Spinoza refused to join the Christian one. He thus stood alone outside of a community to work out his own thoughts and confront the world on his own terms. It is no accident that among the first novels of the modern period was Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* which deals with a man in isolation from community and society. Such a novel simply could not have been written at an earlier time.

The scientific mindset, when applied to human beings in their varieties and differences, gave birth to the idea of universalism; beneath the differences we find in people, short or tall, smart or dull, whether French, German, Italian or British, Christian or Jew, that there is a common humanity and a common human nature all of them share. This abstraction of humanity-in-general is primary, and any distinctions of ethnicity or other particular characteristics are secondary. From this universality emerges the ideas of equality and equal rights and, ultimately, modern democracy itself.

In fact, these ideas-rationality, objectivity, scientific inquiry, individualism and universality-are among the pillars of the modern state. Social contract theory, constitutional government, the separation of powers, concepts of human rights and civil liberties, limited government, and so on, all derive from this family of values which the modern age brought into being and by which we live.

Economically, the modern age has obviously given birth to capitalism, but also to socialism, communism and everything in between. It has spawned the modern industrial state, manufacturing, international trade, mass production and mass consumption. The modern

world can be equated with the development and application of technology to every sphere of life.

One, of course, sees in the values of modernity the values which lie at the heart of humanism as well. For those who are moved by a love of reason, freedom, democracy, and justice, such ideals become virtually a faith because we believe them to hold forth the best chance of bringing about a civilized, fulfilling and decent human future.

Such values as individualism and the rights and liberties which flow from them, the ideals of equality and the belief that there is a truth somewhere out there on which all reasonable people can at least in principle agree, are the anchors, the fixed points, the hooks on which we people of the modern age hang our souls.

One does not have to accept these ideals literally in order to believe in them or live by them. I may conclude that there is no Truth out there really, but I still accept that the search for it is monumentally important. I may assume that we will never succeed in building a world of real equality yet believe that the struggle to do so is necessary to keep us civilized. And I may conclude that there may be no such thing as humanity-in-general, just as there is no such thing as a flower-in-general. But the belief that we as human beings, female or male, black or white, French-speaking or English-speaking, Christian or Jew, do share some things in common, is, I believe, necessary in order to accept and protect any concept of basic rights on which an enlightened sense of tolerance is sustained.

Postmodernists look over this grand drama of the past three hundred years and proclaim that it is passe. It has burned up its fuel, its energy is spent. We have entered a new age with new assumptions and new sensibilities. We should not only acknowledge this, they say, but celebrate it.

The modern humanist looks at the modern world and the values on which it rests and concludes that although there are many flaws, to be sure, the modern project is still primarily good. And so he or she remains guardedly hopeful and recommits himself or herself to the struggle to make it better.

The postmodernists draw radically different conclusions. They look over the same modern landscape, and what do they see? They see that the reliance on rationality and science, on objectivity, on individualism and universalism has brought us instead alienation and the death of community, crushing bureaucracies, and a world of experts where power lies everywhere but within us. They look at rationality, science and technology and, more to the point, the mindset that lies behind it, and conclude that rather than deliver us to greater comfort, a fundamental reliance on rationality, science and technology has led to new forms of repression. Not only has this mindset enabled the flourishing of laissez-faire capitalism, which kills around the fringes, but it constitutes the basis even of such monstrosities as Stalinist totalitarianism and Nazi genocide. Postmodernists would argue it is no coincidence that out of the bosom of the most rationally committed, technologically and scientifically advanced nation of the modern age—namely, Germany, there emerged an Auschwitz where rationality, technology and bureaucracy were masterfully employed to annihilate the largest number of human beings at the most efficient cost.

The fact that the twentieth century *has* been the most viciously brutal and bloodletting century in all of human history should give us pause. However, the postmodernist critique is not saying that in this century reason, science and technology have been misapplied. Its criticism is much more radical than that. It is saying that a society which has such values at its core must *inevitably* lead to the centralization and abuse of power,

the destruction of local communities, the disempowerment of the individual and thus new forms of repression.

In short, it is an attack on the central values of the modern age as if to proclaim, as has Solzhenitsyn, that the Western Enlightenment was a colossal historical mistake.

Let me take this analysis one step deeper. Postmodernists would argue that the emphasis we put on objectivity and the search for objective knowledge has the effect of leading us to believe that the truth lies somewhere outside of us. The fetish with objective, scientific knowledge causes us, therefore, to distrust ourselves and our own powers. The modern mentality is disempowering. Consequently, by declaring that there is no truth, the postmodernist elevates subjectivity over objectivity in an effort to restore power to the person.

If we look at the values of universalism, the postmodernist declares that it is not only an empty abstraction but an impossibility and a fraud. Because there is no such thing as objective truth, the postmodernist asserts that no idea, however noble, can escape the prejudices that encompassed and produced it. So, when the fathers of the Enlightenment, such as John Locke, David Hume, Immanuel Kant and Thomas Jefferson, proclaimed the dignity and worth of the human being, or that "all men are created equal," seemingly making a universal statement applying to all people, they did not mean it. What they had in mind was not all human beings but a very restricted class—namely, white, Christian, European men.

What the postmodernist contends is that because of its obsession with framing abstract ideas, the West was able to establish and hold up an ideal type of human being to which all others would inevitably be compared. Such ideals by their nature invite comparisons and hierarchies. So if you are a Frenchman of the eigh-

teenth century and you are attempting to do the impossible by making a sculpture of the ideal, abstract human-being-in-general, it is not much of an accident that what you produce is going to look a lot like a French *man*, by which standards Englishmen, Italians, Jews, Africans and women do not stack up.

We perhaps think of universal values as the glorious safeguards of democracy and basic human rights-and I believe they are. From the postmodern standpoint, however, such universalism is but a mask which enabled those with power, namely, white Europeans, to engage in slavery, imperialist conquest, racism and sexism and ultimately the Holocaust and genocide, and to do so with a clear conscience because it was done in the name of reason and science, the best fruits of what the modern world has produced.

To sum up: where the modernist searches for truth, the postmodernist declares there is no truth. Where the modernist values objectivity, the postmodernist celebrates the subjective. Where the modernist believes in progress, the postmodernist says there is none. Where the modernist searches for this-worldly absolutes, the postmodernist says all things are relative and simply based on one's perspective. The modernist believes in ethics; for the postmodernist everything is simply a matter of taste or preference. The modern temperament is individualistic; the postmodern, communitarian. And where the modernist looks for universals, the postmodernist embraces the particular.

So where does all this leave us? If postmodernists look at the great, abstract, foundational values on which the modern world stands-reason, scientific inquiry, universalism and the search for objective truths, those values which we have come to think of as the very fountains of freedom, liberation, and hope-if they look at these values and proclaim that they are not really what we have been led to believe they are but, rather,

are the very sources of repression and discontent, what in the world do postmodernists put in their place?

The answer to this question, I think, goes far to explain some of the most disturbing realities we confront in our contemporary society. It is also the point at which I begin to turn what has been a rather abstract essay into something concrete which I think we can recognize all around us.

To understand what value lies at the heart of the contemporary postmodern movement, one has to look to the grandfather of the movement, the brilliant but shadowy German genius of the nineteenth century, Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche proclaimed the death of God. But he did much more than that. He declared the death of reason, science and morality, too. Nietzsche looked at the grand rational and scientific project of the nineteenth century and concluded that it repressed and sapped the vigor of contemporary man. Morality, Nietzsche believed, served to make people anemic. He particularly hated Christianity for that reason. Nietzsche hated priests, but he loved the noble barbarian who could rape and pillage without a guilty conscience. In place of the Apollonian virtues of reason, balance and truth, Nietzsche heralded the Dionysian impulses. For Friedrich Nietzsche, the only constant was what he called the "will to power," that is, the drive of every living organism to break the bonds of constraint, overcome its condition and assert its power on the world.

This brings us close to home on the American scene. If the postmodern world has given up on universal values, on the ideal of a common humanity, on a belief in progress, on the benevolence of liberal government to be just and to meet our needs, with what are we left? Tragically, we are left with a fragmented society having little sense of public goals, public virtues, public interests, a public politics, or shared ideals to inspire us and bring us together. What we have are fragmented par-

ticularist groups, each striving to assert its power over other groups without any sense of how we can cooperatively march together. And so you have women, gays, African-Americans, Puerto-Ricans, Jews, Irish, fundamentalists, and on and on—each group struggling for its own little piece of the pie. No glorious, unifying, abstract ideal of justice for all; only the self-interest of one's own particular group as opposed to other groups.

Since the postmodern age has discarded the ideal of a universal humanity, each group, following the phrase of Carol Gilligan, claims to speak in its own different voice. So women speak in their voice, men in theirs, Jews in theirs, African-Americans in theirs. Each group has its own voice growing out of its exclusive and unique identity. Soon you begin to hear voices all over the place, so many voices that it becomes a cacophony of voices—all to the detriment of being able to find any common voice so that people can begin to talk to one another once again.

And finally, if our culture has jettisoned the great ideals of a common society, of universal justice, of the common good, then it has abandoned the value of a public life and a public politics, also. And so it is. Americans have for the most part given up on politics and progressively replaced it with very private interests and satisfactions.

It would not be wrong to conclude, in my opinion, that political commitment has largely been replaced by the gratifications coming from an endless flood of consumer choices, ranging from all kinds of gadgets to increasingly titillating and moronic entertainment. Rather than protest your discontent through politics, which is a public act, you simply assuage it through consumption, which is a very private one.

But in case the significance of this privatization of interests is still not clear, one-need look no further than

the most recent Presidential race and the types of issues it raised.

Speaking of the 1992 Republican convention and its platform, columnist George Will, who, I assume, is a staunch Republican, was compelled to ask, since when is whether or not you hug your child an appropriate item on the agenda of national politics? Where is the discussion of the sweeping issues of social policy, of equality and justice?

When the Republican platform emphasized so-called family values, which was an assault on those whom we are not supposed to like, such as homosexuals, liberated women, and people on welfare-which I infer is also a thinly veiled racist allusion, it was doing several things. It was aggressively sticking government's nose where Republicans have themselves declared it does not belong, that is, into the private sphere. Second, it was attempting to garner votes by appealing to people's prejudices, a dangerous game which further divides an already badly divided people. Lastly, and more to the point, it gambles on the assumption that the political consciousness of the American populace is so narrow, so petty, so privatized that people simply cannot be appealed to on the basis of the great issues of social equality, economic justice and national renewal. The mania over not raising taxes is an example, par excellence, of how private and self-interested our political consciousness has become. My point here, again, is that the character of even our national political life reflects the fragmentation, self-interest and absence of ideals which some are describing as the postmodern condition.

I want to end and bring this all together with a declaration of where I personally stand on the issues I've raised. I think that the postmodern critique of our society does accurately describe much of our current situation.

Many people sense that our landscape in America and the West is, in fact, changing. Our economy is certainly shifting from a great manufacturing and industrial economy to a post-industrial service and telecommunications economy. And I do believe that the great humanist ideals of universal justice, of progress and commitment to public virtues and the common good have gone into at least temporary eclipse. I believe that as a society we are very much divided and that the interests of the American people have grown narrower and more private.

Nonetheless I must declare that this description need not be taken as a prescription. There is much in the postmodern critique which should challenge liberal humanists to think about and chasten their own values. Reason unsupported by the warmth of feeling and compassion is arid, cold and alienating. Science is not the totally benevolent deliverer we might once have thought it to be. It brings us nuclear waste and oceans of toxic garbage as well as refrigerators, computers and novocaine. And the presumption that there are universal ideal standards of humanity applicable to all people, and that *we* are in exclusive possession of them, can lead to arrogance, intolerance, repression and abuse. Moreover, I believe we suffer from a case of hyper-individualism in American life at the expense of nurturing communities. On all these points I agree with those who find fault with the modern age.

But, in the final analysis, I do not, nor can I, nor will I, abandon the great ideals on which our modern culture is built. To do so would be to forsake our society for nothing other than nihilism and despair, to invite a new Dark Ages characterized by little more than nasty, petty power squabbles between self-interested and isolated groups. I believe that our society and humanity can rise above that grim and shallow future. To do so we need hope, a hope inspired by a renewed vision of

timelessly pertinent and ever challenging ideals of truthfulness, justice, equality and human development. Not for some, but for all.

We do not know where our society is headed in the long range. No one does. But I do know that the future is an open one, and the social winds that blow in one direction one year can change their course and move in the opposite direction the next. I want to be part of that change.