

POSTMODERNISM, HUMANISM AND DIVERSITY

Patricia Hoertdoerfer

What is this thing called "postmodernism"? Young yuppie talk for New Age? Culture-speak for "post-industrial"? Anything that's cool now? A reaction to modernism and the cult of the new? A "bad attitude"? An exuberant mixture of styles, cultures, epochs and layers of meaning? Who cares? Obviously we do!

What does *postmodernity* mean? Postmodernity is a vague and inclusive term which pertains to both culture and politics. Looking at politics, we could say that if the modern period has been characterized by the grand theories of liberalism, socialism and human rights, then the postmodern period sees the universalism inherent in these ideas as a mask to hide the dominance of white European males. Postmodernity heralds the end of these theories and is concerned with the assertion of the power of particular interests. The emergence of ethnic or "identity politics" is a preeminent expression of postmodern values. We see it operative in the multicultural movement which denies the idea of a common culture in favor of perspectives which are Eurocentric, Afrocentric, Asiatic, and so on.

The modern viewpoint has proclaimed a common, universal humanity; postmodernity proclaims that one can see the world through the particularist eyes of female or male, white or black, gay or straight.abled or

disabled. Proclaiming the importance of objectivity, modernity searched for secular absolutes. Postmodernity celebrates the subjective and asserts that all things are relative. In the postmodern world there is no truth, just the competing interests of different culture groups.

Many look at the modern age and conclude that in its celebration of rationality, science and universal values, it has created a world mired in bureaucracy, technology, alienation and the threat of nuclear and eco-suicide. There is much to despair of in the modern age. Postmodernism is disdainful of history yet is embedded in it.

What is, then, a workable political point of view for the postmodern era? I think what we need is a politics of limits. Simply, limits must be set for what human beings may be permitted to do with their power. Most of the atrocities to which our species are prone can be understood as violations of limits. The essence of a politics needs to be rooted in three protections:

- (1) The Ecological Protection: the earth and human life must be protected against the bomb and other [hu]man-made perils;
- (2) The Pluralist Protection: social groups must be protected against domination by other social groups;
- (3) The Libertarian Protection: the individual must be protected against domination by larger groups.

A politics of limits respects horizontal social relations—multiplicity over hierarchy, juxtaposition over usurpation, difference over deference; and finally, disorderly life in its flux. The democratic, vital edge of the postmodern—the love of difference and flux and the exuberantly unfinished—deserves to infuse the spirit of politics.

Modernism was a series of declarations of faith—faith in reason, faith in human progress, faith in science. Postmodernism is living off borrowed materials, but does it have the resources for continuing self-renewal? The question is, how does a culture renew itself? The deeply unsettling and inspiring project that artists and theorists and all of us face is, more or less, the promise of something else. I'll call it "hot postmodernism," or a serious global culture, not the imposition of the master culture over the minor, or the elite culture over the popular. Rather, the foundational value, the overriding principle of this global culture, needs to be the preservation of the *other*. The hallmark is coexistence: in the preservation of the other is the condition for the preservation of the *self*. *We* are not *we* until *they* are *they*; for to whom else shall we speak, with whom else shall we think if not those who are different from ourselves?

The ideal toward which politics strives is conversation—and conversation requires respect for the other. The fundamental value is that the conversation continue toward the global culture. Humanism, born out of modern orientations and values, must change if it is going to have a critical role to play in the postmodern global culture. The vision that will carry us forward is one of culturally diverse membership in our humanist organizations. I believe it must be our intentional priority to welcome "people of every stripe"—female and male, Africans, Asians, Indians, Hispanics, Americans both European and Native, gays, lesbians and bisexuals, able-bodied people and people with disabilities, young and old—in our humanist communities and societies.

Why should we reach out to everyone and try to diversify Humanism? I think we have at least three reasons. The first reason is because our principles as Humanists include the "inherent worth of every per-

son," "acceptance of one another," and the goal of a world community based on peace, liberty, and justice for all. Our various Humanist institutions need to reflect these common values. The second reason is simply one of demographics. If we hope to grow, we need to reflect the population of the world-the rainbow coalition which I just named. The third reason is that without diversity and the multicultural experience, Humanism will risk becoming narrow, bleached out and dull. Humanism needs the rich gifts of interchange and interaction which diverse people of all persuasions will bring to our institutions and communities. Pluralism is our ideal; diversity is our cause. Yet, may our conversations and actions reflect the proposition that beneath all our differences and behind all our diversity may there be a unity that binds us together and makes us one human family.