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Postmodernism

Simon Susen

For the past four decades, the concept of ‘postmodernism’ has been a major source of debate in the humanities and social sciences (see Susen, 2015). Although there is no definite consensus on the exact meaning of the term ‘postmodernism’, it is generally associated with a set of ideas supporting the notion that an epochal change took place in the late twentieth century. ‘The discourse of the post is sometimes connected with an apocalyptic sense of rupture, of the passing of the old and the advent of the new’ (Best and Kellner, 1997: 3). In accordance with this narrative, the ‘postization’ of a large variety of concepts has been a fashionable trend in social and political thought from the late twentieth century onwards. There has been a proliferation of neologisms that contain the prefix ‘post’: ‘postmodernism’, ‘poststructuralism’, ‘postmaterialism’, ‘postindustrialism’, ‘post-Fordism’, ‘post-Keynesianism’, ‘post-socialism’, ‘postcommunism’, ‘post-Marxism’, ‘postsecularism’, ‘postcolonialism’, and ‘posthumanism’ – to mention only a few. The widespread presence of these catch-all concepts appears to indicate ‘that we . . . live in a post-something era’ (Wagner, 1992: 467) or, in a more holistic sense, in a ‘post-everything’ (Ashley, 1994: 55) period, characterized by a diffuse sense of ‘afterness’ (Jones, Natter, and Schatzki, 1993: 1). Postmodernism is part of this post-ontology, which may be regarded as a central feature of Western societies in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The first instances of the use of the word ‘postmodern’ can be found in art and literature, rather than in philosophy, history, or sociology. To be precise, the initial employment of this term in modern writings can be traced back to the realms of visual art and poetry.

In the earliest usage unearthed thus far, around 1870 an English painter, John Watkins Chapman, described as ‘postmodern’ painting that was supposedly more modern than French impressionism . . . The concept was similarly employed in literature in 1934 and again in 1942 to describe a related tendency in Hispanic poetry. (Dickens and Fontana, 1994: 1; see also Gibbins and Reimer, 1999: 12)

Referring to experimental tendencies in Western arts and architecture from the

1940 onwards, the term ‘postmodernism’ designates both the continuation and the transcendence of modernism, as reflected in an eclectic mixture of different aesthetic and intellectual traditions. In the social sciences, by contrast, debates on ‘postmodernism’ emerged only in the late twentieth century and are, in this sense, a relatively recent phenomenon (see Boyne and Rattansi, 1990: 9; Mouffe, 1993: 9).

‘Postmodernism’, far from constituting a coherent ideological tradition or clearly definable school of thought, has been shaped by an eclectic and heterogeneous set of intellectual currents, whose supporters share an attitude of radical skepticism toward beliefs and principles associated with modernity in general and the Enlightenment in particular. In light of this attitude, advocates of ‘postmodernism’ find themselves in a paradoxical situation: they are intellectually and socially attached to the historical horizon from which they seek to detach themselves – that is, the condition of modernity. In essence, postmodernism is the attempt to step outside, and to transcend, the horizon of modernity (see Bertens, 1995).

The list of scholars whose works are – rightly or wrongly – associated with postmodernism is long. In alphabetical order, we may mention the following thinkers, who – in many cases, contrary to their will, or, in some cases, posthumously and, hence, without their knowledge – appear to have played a noticeable role in the construction and development of postmodernism:

Perry Anderson (1938–), Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007), Zygmunt Bauman (1925–2017), Steven Best (1955–), Judith Butler (1956–), Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995), Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), Mike Featherstone (1946–), Michel Foucault (1926–1984), Francis Fukuyama (1952–), Félix Guattari (1930–1992), Donna J. Haraway (1944–), Sandra Harding (1935–), Nancy Hartsock (1943–2015), David Harvey (1935–), Ihab H. Hassan (1925–2015), Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), Agnes Heller (1929–2019), Linda Hutcheon (1947–), Andreas Huyssen (1942–), Luce Irigaray (1932–), Fredric Jameson (1934–), Keith Jenkins (1943–), Douglas Kellner (1943–), Ernesto Laclau (1935–2014), Scott Lash (1945–), Bruno Latour (1947–2022), David Lyon (1948–), Jean-François Lyotard (1924–1998), Michel Maffesoli (1944–), Doreen Massey (1944–2016), Chantal Mouffe (1943–), Linda J. Nicholson (1947–), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), Richard Rorty (1931–2007), Steven Seidman (1948–), Hugh J.

Silverman (1945–2013), Edward Soja (1940–), Keith Tester (1960–2019), John Urry (1946–), Gianni Vattimo (1936–), Robert Venturi (1925–2018), Wolfgang Welsch (1946–), Ludwig Wittgenstein [that is, the later Wittgenstein] (1889–1951), Iris Marion Young (1949–2006), and Slavoj Žižek (1949–).

The preceding list is far from exhaustive. The names of the critics and researchers whose works are associated with the rise of postmodernism can be classified in several ways. In terms of their geographical origin, the overwhelming majority are European or North American. In terms of their national origin, most of the ‘founding figures’ or ‘reference figures’ of postmodernism are French or US-American. In terms of their linguistic identity, it is noticeable that Francophone scholars have produced path-breaking works related to postmodernism, whereas renowned Anglophone scholars appear to have taken on the role of recyclers and creative interpreters of this intellectual current. Finally, scholars whose works are associated with postmodernism can be categorized as follows:

- *Posthumous and unwitting participants* (e.g. Heidegger, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein).
- *Reluctant and non-proselytizing participants* (e.g. Butler, Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault, Fukuyama, Guattari, Harvey, Heller, Irigaray, Jameson, Laclau, Latour, Massey, Mouffe, Rorty, Urry, Young).
- *Moderate sympathizers* (e.g. Anderson, Baudrillard, Bauman, Best, Haraway, Harding, Hartsock, Hutcheon, Huysen, Kellner, Lash, Lyon, Maffesoli, Tester, Vattimo, Venturi, Welsch, Žižek).
- *Enthusiastic supporters and contributors* (e.g. Featherstone, Hassan, Lyotard, Jenkins, Nicholson, Seidman, Silverman, Soja).

Given the large number of unwitting and reluctant participants (as well as of moderate sympathizers), it appears that postmodernism lacks explicit, strong, and widespread support amongst those who are considered key representatives of its intellectual spirit. Self-declared, open, and whole-hearted supporters of postmodernism are a minority.

For the sake of conceptual clarity, it is useful to be aware of the following terminological differentiation. The term ‘*postmodernism*’ denotes any ‘aesthetic, cultural, political, [or]

academic attempts to make sense of postmodernity’ (Gibbins and Reimer, 1999: 15, quotation modified) and to capture its historical specificity. The term ‘*postmodernity*’ refers to ‘an epochal shift or break from modernity involving the emergence of a new social totality with its own distinct organizing principles’ (Featherstone, 1988: 198). The term ‘*postmodernization*’ describes the material and symbolic processes contributing to the rise of postmodernity.

In terms of its sociogenesis, the impact of postmodernism on the humanities and social sciences reached its peak in the mid-1990s, as reflected in the number of publications containing the terms ‘postmodern’, ‘postmodernity’, and/or ‘postmodernism’ in these branches of knowledge (see Wilterdink, 2002: 192). Arguably, ‘the intellectual crisis of Western Marxism’ (Rojek and Turner, 2000: 635), shortly before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, played a pivotal role. Postmodernism appeared to fill an ideological void and political ‘power vacuum caused by the collapse of Marxism’ (ibid.: 636). In the context of an increasingly globalized world, in which, for many observers and commentators, *viable* alternatives to the hegemony of liberal-capitalist systems had lost all credibility and legitimacy, postmodernism was perceived, by many, as an attractive – and, allegedly, postideological – paradigm able to account for the chaotic and disorganized constitution of an epoch in which determinist and teleological conceptions of history served, at best, as simplistic templates for the reductive interpretation of fundamentally directionless and unpredictable societies.

The end of the Cold War led to the emergence of a new – arguably postmodern – era, in which ‘anything goes’ (Butler, 2002: 35; Gane and Gane, 2007: 131; Matthewman and Hoey, 2006: 536). The ‘anything-goes-world’ is characterized by unprecedented degrees of social, cultural, and political diversity, leaving little, if any, room for ‘big-picture ideologies’. For some scholars, therefore, the rise of postmodernity signals ‘the end of ideology’ (Bell, 2000 [1960]). Although postmodernism underwent a relative decline from 1995 onwards and is no longer as influential as during its peak period, its continuing presence in contemporary discourses illustrates its lasting impact upon society in general and academia in particular.

Six levels of analysis are crucial for exploring the principal characteristics of the historical condition associated with postmodernism: postmodernity.

1. On the *economic* level, the rise of postmodernity is associated with *postindustrialization*. The consolidation of postindustrial capitalism is one of the central driving forces of the postmodern age. In postmodern societies, informational, technological, and cultural goods are the main sources of economic production, distribution, and consumption, as well as the key resources at stake in terms of economic expansion, competition, and development.
2. On the *epistemic* level, the rise of postmodernity cannot be divorced from the notion of *relativization*. Science is regarded as one 'language game' amongst others. The decentered world of postmodernity is shot through with competing areas of discourse: economic, political, ideological, cultural, philosophical, artistic, religious, or scientific – to mention only a few. None of these areas of discourse can claim to possess an epistemic monopoly on the 'right' kind of interpretation of reality.
3. On the *political* level, the rise of postmodernity manifests itself in processes of *deideologization*. The gradual decline of traditional political ideologies has led to the rise of a '*postideological age*'. With the exception of liberalism, 'big-picture ideologies' – such as anarchism, communism, socialism, conservatism, and fascism – have lost the considerable influence they once had. Whilst the modern period was the age of ideologies, the postmodern era is an epoch seeking to move *beyond* ideologies.
4. On the *organizational* level, the rise of postmodernity is expressed in the tendency toward constant *flexibilization*. Since 'the end of organized capitalism' (Lash and Urry, 1987) has been announced, we have entered an era based on *short-termism*, *risk-taking*, and *self-responsibility*. The postmodern world thrives on flexible, responsive, and efficient forms of action coordination and permanent acceleration.
5. On the *cultural* level, the rise of postmodernity emanates from, and manifests itself in, processes of

hyper-individualization. This trend implies that the modern belief in 'the unitary subject' has been largely replaced with the postmodern celebration of 'the fragmented individual'. Postmodern actors draw upon diverse sources of identity, enabling them to develop a sense of unique subjectivity: class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, 'race', cultural preferences, lifestyle, religion, age, ability, and/or political attitudes (amongst other sociological variables). Postmodern actors require unprecedented degrees of adaptability, changeability, diversity, and complexity, as reflected in their intersectionally constituted and fluid (individual and collective) identities.

6. On the *philosophical* level, the rise of postmodernity cannot be understood in separation from the task of *deconstruction*. The 'deconstructive attitude' (Butler, 2002: 16) endorsed by postmodern philosophers is suspicious of Enlightenment optimism, notably its advocacy of 'evidence-based', 'value-free', and 'universalizable' knowledge generated by science. The age of postmodernity is characterized by radical *incredulity* toward metanarratives (Lyotard, 1984 [1979]) and by deep *skepticism* toward the alleged objectivity, neutrality, and universalizability of scientific knowledge. On this account, all attempts to obtain the total and unequivocal mastery of a relationally constituted – and, hence, constantly shifting – reality end up reproducing the stifling logic of ethnocentric, logocentric, or anthropocentric claims to validity. Postmodern deconstruction requires irony, incredulity, uncertainty, skepticism, and openness, rather than epistemic hubris.

The defense of a 'postmodern social theory' (see Seidman, 1994) tends to be based on ten key assumptions.

1. Postmodern social theory is an *interdisciplinary* endeavor. Cutting across traditional epistemic boundaries within and between the humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences, this commitment is motivated by the conviction that no disciplinary approach can claim to capture the entire complexity of human reality.

2. Postmodern social theory is a *foundationalless* endeavor. In a world characterized by multiplicity and heterogeneity, the system-building task of depicting the complexity of society by virtue of ‘grand theories’ and ‘big-picture ideologies’ appears to have lost credibility.
3. Postmodern social theory is a *non-teleological* (or even *anti-teleological*) endeavor. A social theory without guarantees carries no promise of a society free of domination, thereby rejecting the teleological spirit underlying ‘low-resolution’ accounts of human emancipation.
4. Postmodern social theory is a *public* endeavor. It challenges the traditional division of labor between the ‘scientific enlighteners’, who direct and control their epistemic inferiors ‘from above’, and the ‘ordinary to-be-enlightened’, who follow and obey their epistemic superiors ‘from below’.
5. Postmodern social theory is a *situationist* endeavor. Owing to its interest in socio-historical specificities, it speaks the language of particularity rather than obeying the rigid logic permeating the search for lawfulness and universality.
6. Postmodern social theory is a *pragmatic* endeavor. A ‘pragmatic turn’ in social theory permits us to do justice to the fact that human actors – that is, both experts and laypersons – are equipped with reflexive, critical, and moral capacities.
7. Postmodern social theory is an *ethno-conscious* endeavor. If we accept the sociocultural particularity pervading all epistemic claims to validity, then we are obliged to face up to the structuring power exercised by the ineluctable weight of historicity.
8. Postmodern social theory is a *socio-conscious* endeavor. A socio-conscious perspective has major epistemological implications: whether we consider a statement right or wrong depends not only on *what* is being said but also on *who* says it *when*, *where*, *to whom*, and *how*. In ‘real speech situations’, validity is a matter not only of *facticity* (‘What?’) but also of *social authority* (‘Who?’), *spatiotemporal contextuality* (‘Where and when?’), *interactional relationality* (‘To whom?’), and *symbolic performativity* (‘How?’).
9. Postmodern social theory is a *pluralist* endeavor. Highly differentiated societies are centerless formations in the sense that they lack a structural, ideological, or behavioral epicenter from which all institutions, discourses, and practices derive and upon which allegedly peripheral areas of interaction, or derivative forms of existence, are parasitic.
10. Postmodern social theory is a *historicist* endeavor. In the twenty-first century, most social theorists have abandoned the quest for ‘ultimate foundations’ and ‘grand narratives’ and, hence, the ambitious pursuit of providing catch-all conceptual frameworks designed to offer once-and-for-all explanations of both the agential and the structural forces shaping society.

Given its profound impact upon the humanities and social sciences, is it likely that postmodernism is here to stay.

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