

The Philosophical Roots of Postmodernism: A Critical Discussion

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“Postmodernism”, says Hans Bertens, “is an exasperating term” (1995:1). Bertens’s remark has been testified by many other theorists and critics of postmodernism. The reason behind the difficulty in defining the term is its enormous complexity and the daunting multiplicity of views about its meaning, scope and implications. Ihab Hassan states that, “postmodernism suffers from a certain semantic instability, that is, no clear consensus about its meaning exists among scholars” (1987:87). This point is elaborated further by Bertens:

Postmodernism, then, means and has meant different things to different people at different conceptual levels, arising from humble literary-critical origins in the 1950s to a level of global conceptualization in the 1980s. (1995:1)

This lack of unanimity and complex diversity notwithstanding, postmodernism has assumed an enormous significance in the philosophical, aesthetic and cultural debates over the past few decades. The term is used to refer to a wide range of phenomena such as an epistemological stance, a cultural and aesthetic style, a critical practice and an economic condition. Some critics have tried to underline the main usages of the term. Patricia Waugh, for example, remarks that postmodernism tends to be used in three main senses; as a reference to the contemporary cultural epoch, as an aesthetic practice and as a development in the philosophical thought. (1992:3)

The first thing to catch attention in the term postmodernism is its etymological derivation from modernism. The suffix ‘post’ seems to imply something that comes after modernism, and therefore connotes periodization. How postmodernism stands in relation to modernism has, however, been a subject of intense debates which have centered around the crucial question: if and how postmodernism is a break from modernism. While for some theoreticians postmodernism constitutes a break from modernism, for others it is essentially a continuation of modernism. It has, nevertheless, become increasingly clear that postmodernism has come to be understood as a concept which despite certain overlappings with the primary concerns of modernism, cannot be equated with it. It is now asserted by most critics that postmodernism connotes a different set of responses to the issues of philosophy, art and culture than modernism. For example, Lyotard who is arguably the most oft-quoted figure on postmodernism, in *Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984) presents the postmodern condition as one characterized by the breakdown of all systems and foundational truths. He sees postmodernism offering a critique to modernism which he regards continuing, in some important ways, the project of the Enlightenment:

I will use the term *modern* to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth. (1984:3)

As against modernism which is characterized by some kind of faith in a grand narrative, he defines postmodernism as “incredulity toward all grand narratives.”

Silvio Gaggi describes the critical stance of postmodernism towards modernism in these terms:

Often the modern period is used to refer to the entire epoch of Western civilization since the Renaissance. Postmodernism, in this context, suggests not simply that which follows the early twentieth century culture, but that which follows the entire humanist tradition, a central component, of the culture of the modern period. The creation of a new designation suggests that in some way the postmodern world is different from the modern one. Not surprisingly, therefore, the term posthumanism is another of the numerous ‘post’ prefixed words bandied about in the postmodern period. When postmodernism is used this way, the suggestion is that certain fundamental premises of the humanist tradition- the confidence in reason as a faculty enabling humans to come to an understanding of the Universe, the belief in the existence of the self and the acceptance of the individual as the primary existential entity- have been transcended or rejected as no longer tenable. (1989:82)

The perception that postmodernism departs significantly from modernism underlies the arguments of even some of its most vocal critics. Jürgen Habermas, for example, regards postmodernism as a betrayal of modernism which he sees as continuing the project of the Enlightenment. His thesis is that modernity is an unfinished project that has the potential of achieving the emancipatory goals in the social and political domains. Postmodernism, Habermas argues, by its explicit admission of skepticism regarding human reason, tends to subvert the aims of modernity. Hans Bertens describes Habermas’s position in these terms:

...he sees aesthetic modernity (avant-gardist modernism) as engaged in an attempt to enable a return to the project of modernity as it was originally conceived. That project as formulated by the philosophers of the Enlightenment, consisted in their efforts to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art, according to their inner logic. At the same time, this project intended to release the cognitive potentials of each of these domains to set them free from their esoteric forms. The Enlightenment philosophers wanted to utilize this accumulation of specialized culture for the enrichment of everyday life, that is to say, for the rational organization of everyday social life. (1995:119)

For its champions, postmodernism adopts a critical stance towards modernism by subjecting to a rigorous critique some important assumptions of humanism that had continued to be intact in modernism, the faith in human reason being a central one. A seminal point here is the appropriation of the main ideas of French poststructuralism by the postmodernist thought. The enormous impact of poststructuralism on contemporary thought can be witnessed in the manner in which the fundamental assumptions of the humanist tradition like the belief in human reason, the stable human subject, the belief in emancipation through progress, and the neutrality of linguistic discourse, have been radically contested by it. Although postmodernism began to be debated rather independently in America when critics like Ihab Hassan tried to theorize it without relating it to poststructuralism, yet very soon a virtual conflation between the two occurred. As Hal Foster rightly remarks, “postmodernism

is hard to conceive without the continental theory, structuralism and poststructuralism in particular”(1983:x).

The enormous influence of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century writers like Freud, Marx and Nietzsche had already unsettled some of the long-established ideas of the humanist tradition. What the poststructuralist writers did was to problematize even more radically these notions with newer insights and perceptive tools. It is worth mentioning that poststructuralism, in essence, has been seen as continuing further the philosophical projects of thinkers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger. Derrida and Foucault, especially, have substantially drawn on the insights of these thinkers. Postmodern critics too trace its origins to Nietzsche and Heidegger. Ihab Hassan, for example, while discussing the roots of the postmodern thought remarks:

Nietzsche’s radical perspectivism, not merely his skepticism, challenged the grounds on which philosophy, from Plato to Hegel, had sought to build. Nature, language, and, mind, no longer congruent, defied the articulations of a sovereign code. (1987:52)

Similarly, Best and Kellner note that Nietzsche’s assault on the fundamental categories of Western philosophy provided the theoretical premises for many poststructuralist and postmodern critiques:

He [Nietzsche] attacked philosophical conceptions of the subject, representation, causality, truth, value, and system, replacing Western philosophy with a perspectivist orientation for which there are no facts, only interpretations, and no objective truths, only the constructs of various individuals or groups. (1991:22)

Even Patricia Waugh regards Heidegger’s critique of the Cartesian assumption of a radical split between the knowing subject and the inert object of knowledge as a shaping influence on postmodernism:

From his first major work, *Being and Time* (1927) and more insistently in later essays collected in *The Question Concerning Technology or Poetry, Language, Thought*, Heidegger developed a critique of Cartesianism as the founding methodology of modernity: one which he saw as productive of the violences of the West and inadequate as a ground for knowledge. For Heidegger, the Cartesian assumption of a radical split between knowing subject and inert object of knowledge has led to a world in which the detached superiority of the scientist becomes the model and ground of all existence. Instead of experiencing world as a texture through which we come to be, world is observed as an inert material body to be manipulated through a series of dualisms generated by the subject-object split (mind/body, spirit/matter, reason/emotion, masculinity/femininity). (1992:2)

It is these rather unsettling ideas that reached their culmination in the works of Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault, Barthes, Lacan, Kristeva and others. Lyotard’s work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* attempts to capture the spirit of the age characterized by a loss of belief in all grand narratives and totalizing philosophies which make political, religious, social and ethical prescriptions. These grand narratives lay claim to the knowledge of truth and hence claim for themselves grounds of legitimacy. They include Marxism, Christianity and the Enlightenment Project, all

of which have lost their credibility as universal truths. For Lyotard, Wittgenstein's 'language games' offer a better alternative of little narratives which function on the principles of performativity and on a smaller scale. Human experience is fragmented into numerous localized roles, into different 'language games', each with their particular contexts and rules for judging actions.

Lyotard's book established that the postmodern condition would have pluralism, heterogeneity and performativity as the principles of legitimacy for knowledge. Postmodern condition, hence, is characterized by a problematization of all knowledge. Using the traditional philosophical terminology, it can be argued that postmodernism is a thorough-going critique of both subjectivity and objectivity. The important point, however, is that this critique derives its strength largely from the critical insights provided by poststructuralism and hence foregrounds the primacy of language in its critical activity.

The traditional Western thought was premised upon a concept of the human subject that serves as a condition for the possibility of all knowledge. Descartes' '*cogito ergo sum*' provides the basis for this idea of a rational, self-sufficient and enormously competent human subject capable of arriving at conclusive epistemological truths by means of rational inquiry. Contrary to this, postmodern thought concludes that the human subject is itself constituted by a complex web of cultural and linguistic factors that precede it. This idea about the human subject can be seen as having its point of departure in the works of Marx, Freud and Nietzsche, all of whom challenged the notions of a unitary, stable and autonomous subject.

One of the earliest theorists to draw from these theoretical insights was Louise Althusser who argued that "ideology interpellates individuals as subjects", and, "has the function of *constituting* concrete individuals as subjects." In fact, Althusser's interpretation of Marx's ideas on human subjectivity is as illuminating as it is provocative:

He [Marx] drove the philosophical categories of the *subject*...etc from all the domains in which they had reigned supreme. Not only from political economy (rejection of the myth of *homo economicus*, that is of the individual with definite faculties and needs as the *subject* of the classical economy); not just from history (rejection of social atomism and ethico-political idealism); not just from ethics (rejection of the Kantian ethical idea); but also from philosophy itself: for Marx's materialism excludes the empiricism of the subject (and its inverse: the transcendental Subject). (1969:228)

Althusser's remarks suggest that one of Marx's important contributions to philosophy lies in his challenge to the traditional concept of the human subject.

However, the most influential poststructuralist to have challenged the notion of the unified self is Michel Foucault, who is constantly invoked in the debates on postmodernism. In the words of Louis McNay:

Foucault's whole oeuvre is oriented to breaking down the domination of a fully self-reflexive, unified and rational subject at the centre of thought in order to clear a space for radically 'other' ways of thinking and being. (1994:4)

The very concept of 'archaeology' which Foucault uses to critique the traditional historical analysis derives from his idea that the human subject is not at the centre of historical process. Mc Nay explains this in these words:

Foucault argues that there does not exist any prediscursive subject that can be located as the origin of meaning, but rather that the notion of a unified subject is an illusion generated through structural rules that govern discursive formations. The technique of archaeology- the disclosure of these latent, deep level structures that constitute the condition of possibility of all thought and speech- represents a powerful attack on the subjectivism of phenomenological and biographical approaches to intellectual history. (1994:11)

Foucault, describing the archaeological method, writes:

Archaeological analysis individualizes and describes discursive formations...Far from wishing to reveal general forms, archaeology tries to outline particular configurations. (1972:10)

This approach is actually an attempt to reveal the inherent flaws in the traditional historical approach which assumes a kind of general historical continuity of the past. As against this, the archaeological method describes how the very concepts of knowledge are constituted within specific discursive formations and how human subjectivity itself comes to be constructed by these discourses. The idea of a sovereign subject is thus shown to be flawed by interrogating the assumptions that lead to the privileging of the subject as operating prior to and independent of discourse.

Foucault uses yet another concept which he calls genealogy to critique the liberal humanist concept of a sovereign subject. He himself describes his project in the following terms:

One has to dispense with the constituent subject, to get rid of the subject itself, that is to say, to arrive at an analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework. And this is what I would call genealogy, that is, a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledge's discourses, domains of objects, etc. without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history. (1980:188)

Foucault's thesis bases itself on a more rigorous inquiry of the social process of subject formation which is the site of complex power relations. Foucault states his position in emphatic terms:

If there is one approach that I do reject...it is that...which gives absolute priority to the observing subject, which attributes a constituent role to an act, which places its own point of view at the origin of all historicity-which, in short, leads to a transcendental consciousness. It seems to me that the historical analysis of scientific discourse should, in the last resort, be subject, not to a theory of the knowing subject, but rather to a theory of discursive practice. (1973:xiv)

Yet another influence on the postmodern idea of subjectivity has been of Jacques Lacan, the French poststructuralist theorist. Lacan explored the construction of subjectivity by an analysis of linguistic and ideological structures that organize both

the conscious and the unconscious of the humans. Lacan's model offers a critique of the humanist conception of the subject existing prior to and independent of the linguistic discourse. For Lacan, subjectivity is brought into existence by the process of signification. It is the human subject's entrance into the social order through language that determines its perception of itself and reality. The human subject, in other words, owes its existence as a social being, to the differential system of language that precedes it and determines its perception. Lacan, like Foucault, emphasizes the role of 'the other' in the process of the construction of subjectivity. Humans always acquire concepts about themselves in relation to others, individuals and events alike, and hence the subject bears within itself a condition of absence. By acquiring language, Lacan argues, the human subject enters the symbolic order where it is reduced to an empty signifier within the field of 'the other'. Lyotard, explaining the postmodern position about the subject, writes:

A self does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before. Young or old, man or woman, rich or poor, a person is always located at "nodal" points of specific communication circuits, however tiny these may be. (1984:15)

Linda Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, quotes the statements of some important theorists whose ideas about human subjectivity have been of vital importance to postmodern thought. She approvingly quotes the following remark of Emile Benveniste:

Language is the possibility of subjectivity because it always contains the linguistic forms appropriate to the expression of subjectivity, and discourse provokes the emergence of subjectivity because it consists of discrete instances. (1988:168)

Hutcheon incorporates yet another remark of Benveniste:

It is in and through language that man constitutes himself as a subject, because language alone establishes the concept of 'ego' in reality, in *its* reality. (1988:168)

The implications of these insights are described by Hutcheon in these words:

If the speaking subject is constituted in and by language, s/he cannot be totally autonomous and in control of her or his subjectivity, for discourse is constrained by the rules of the language and open to multiple connotations of anonymous cultural codes. (1988:168)

Inextricably linked to the above discussed critique of the humanist position on subjectivity is the critique of the objective knowledge, another central concern of postmodernism. The traditional philosophical schools' assumption of the possibility of objective knowledge has remained the foundation of realism in art. Postmodern thinkers have offered a radical critique of these ideas in their views about how knowledge is always bound up with its essential complicity with factors like power, situatedness and textuality.

The two main propounders of these ideas, Derrida and Foucault, in their critical projects, demonstrated how the notion of objective knowledge rests upon flimsy grounds. Both have used their critical methods to critique our long-established notions about the past and its availability through historical texts. Their works demonstrate the

untenability of the idea that we can have an unmediated, objective knowledge of the past, since past is available to us only through texts and texts are discursive practices. It is important to remember, however, that postmodernism does not reject the past, neither does it say that no knowledge of the past is possible, but that all knowledge of it is textual and available in the form of narratives.

Foucault, as already discussed, employs certain new approaches which he calls 'archaeology' and 'genealogy', to demonstrate the inherent flaws in the traditional historical thought. In Foucault's analysis, there are no moments of origin and no purposive movements in the historical flux. Instead of these, his analysis discovers dispersion, disparity and difference that are very often covered up by the traditional historical thought. A seminal essay by Foucault 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History' serves to demonstrate his use of some Nietzschean insights to reveal the tendency of the traditional historical thought to construct the essence of historical events and then claim its discovery or retrieval. Contrary to this, the method employed by Foucault strives to identify the ruptures and points of dissolution in the seemingly unbroken continuity of the past and tries to preserve the dispersion inherent in the occurrence of events. Barry Smart describes the Foucauldian paradigm of genealogy in these terms:

By way of summary we may note that genealogy stands in opposition to traditional historical analysis; its aim is to record the singularity of events; to reveal beneath the constructed unity of things not a point of origin but dispersion, disparity and difference, and the play of dominations. Genealogical analysis is thus synonymous with the endless task of interpretations for there is no hidden meaning or foundation beneath things, merely more layers of interpretation which through accretion have achieved the form of truth, self-evidence and necessity and which, in turn, it is the task of genealogy to breach. (1985:59)

What genealogy affirms significantly for the postmodern thought is the concept of perspectivism in knowledge especially historical knowledge. This is reminiscent of Nietzsche's rejection of a single and final perspective of knowing. Foucault, following Nietzsche, concludes that what we call truth is the product of countless factors lying outside the object of knowledge and is hence a construct.

Foucault's concept of genealogy is seminal for understanding his another influential idea of the relation between knowledge and power because while investigating the complex relation between the two, he examines the production of epistemological ideas within the web of power-knowledge relationship. For Foucault, what usually passes for objective knowledge are actually discourses inflected with power mechanisms of a complex nature. The very condition of the possibility of knowledge is inextricably bound with the operations of power that are ubiquitous. Foucault states that "power is constructed and functions on the basis of particular powers, myriad issues, myriad effects of power."

The traditional historical thought has been contested by yet another line of thought within postmodernism and that is Derrida's deconstruction. Derrida's critical strategies have radically altered the views about textual discourses and their referentiality to events. In Derrida's whole oeuvre, it is his ideas on textuality that have problematized the traditional notions about history and its truth-value. For Derrida, history is a text and a text itself is a configuration in which meaning is

always produced by a process of signification that never reaches what he calls the 'transcendental signified.' Nicholas Royle has rightly noted that "the implications of Derrida's work for historiography are quite massive" (1995:18).

Derrida's perceptive analysis of writing and the implications of this analysis have already been recognized by contemporary literary theory. The same critique applies to historiography. Royle explains the implications of deconstruction for historiography in these terms:

To say that history is radically determined by writing, then, is to say that it is constituted by a general or unbounded logic of traces and remainders- general and unbounded because these traces and remains, this work of remainders and remnants are themselves neither presences nor original: rather they too are constituted by traces and remains in turn. (1995:20)

Hence, for Derrida textuality is the condition of history and textuality itself carries with it the potential of its own critique. Derrida argues that there can be no meaning inherent in the text without a context and context itself is unbounded. It is this state of being 'unbounded' that generates a perpetual difference of meaning. Applying this idea to history, we see that history can never escape the condition of being a text whose production involves a process of constructing meaning in language. Rather than capturing something 'given', the very exercise of writing implies a process of selection, distribution, contextualization, combination and reconstruction, connecting and disconnecting and ultimately endowing the 'seamless past' with certain meanings and not others. History, therefore, cannot lay claim to the objective and neutral knowledge of the past, since everything that a historian relies on for his work of historiography, including himself or herself is a text. Historians, howsoever objective they might try to be, can never escape their condition of situatedness in a web of discourses. There exists no Archimedean point from which to carry out a truly objective study of the past. There are only some events that find a place in the historical records and become 'facts'. History itself is permeated by the institutional forces that work to promote certain favoured versions to the exclusion of the others.

In recent years, these ideas have received a new impetus at the hands of certain writers like Hayden White, Richard Evans, Frank Ankersmit and Dominick LaCapra. Their analytical studies have, despite a stiff resistance offered by traditional historiographers, now found a firm foothold in academic circles and can no longer be dismissed as mere 'intellectual vandalism'. The postmodernist position on history, therefore, contests all thought-systems which claim to derive their strength from history, Marxism being the central one. This calls for addressing the main charges brought against postmodernism by its detractors, mainly Marxists and liberal humanists. It is argued that postmodernism upholds the negation of history and referentiality, and is ultimately complicitous with and affirmative of contemporary consumerism. These critics accuse postmodernism of a culpable escape into textuality at the cost of engagement with reality. It is argued that postmodernism is informed by the ideology of linguistic determinism that reduces all reality to linguistic codes. Newman's caricature offers an example of this:

It [postmodernism] is fiercely dedicated to the integrity of autonomous verbal expression, and stands four square against the extra-literary pressures that

have always surrounded fiction as a genre. It recognizes that its basic resources are irreparably, and without apology, literary. Above all, this writing is concerned with language, if not as the creator of reality, then as the ultimate shaper of consciousness. It is never framed by a dominant outside reality, and it thus tends eventually to reduce all distinctions to linguistic ones, exemplifying both temporal and historical subjectivity. It is radical aesthetically, largely apolitical and ahistorical, and in its relation of even the most terrifying matters, purportedly value-free. (1984:172)

Such criticism, it must be said, is provoked by the claims of certain theorists who equate postmodernism with the final disappearance of reality. Jean Baudrillard, for instance, has been associated with this kind of approach to postmodernism. His thesis is that the contemporary times are characterized by the all-pervading presence of signs leading to a condition where simulation replaces the original and reality collapses into hyperreality:

There is no longer any critical and speculative distance between the real and the rational. There is no longer really even any projection of models in the real ... but an in-the-field, here-and-now transfiguration of the real into model. A fantastic short-circuit: the real is hyperrealised. Neither realised nor idealised: but hyperrealised. The hyperreal is the abolition of the real not by violent distinction, but by its assumption, elevation to the strength of the model. (1983:83)

In his book *The Illusions of the End* (1994), Baudrillard argues that with the acceleration of change and transformation during the course of modernity we have now reached a point at which things happen too quickly to make sense:

the acceleration of modernity, of technology, of events and media, of all exchanges - economic, political and sexual - has propelled us to 'escape velocity', with the result that we have flown free of the referential sphere of the real and of history. (1994:1)

It is of utmost importance to understand that postmodernism's contestation of the epistemological status of history does not amount to a rejection of the past. Simon Critchley has shown that Derrida's purpose is not to reduce the world of real objects, things and events into discourses, into mere texts, which means rejecting their existence altogether. Explaining Derrida's concept of the text, he says that this idea does not:

wish to turn the world into some vast library, nor does it wish to cut off reference to some 'extra textual realm'. Deconstruction is not bibliophilia. Text *qua* text is glossed by Derrida as the entire 'real-history-of-the-world and this is said in order to emphasize the fact that the word 'text' does not suspend reference 'to history, to the world, to reality, to being and especially not to the other'. All the latter appear in an experience which is not an immediate experience of presence--the text or context is not present, but rather the experience of a network of differentially signifying traces which are constitutive of meaning. Experience or thought traces a ceaseless movement of interpretation within a limitless context. (1992:32)

Derrida himself clarifies his position in these terms:

What I call 'text' implies all the structures called 'real', 'economic', 'historical', 'socio-institutional', in short all possible referents. Another way of recalling once again that 'there is nothing outside the text'. That does not mean that all referents are suspended, denied or enclosed in a book, as people have claimed, or have been naïve enough to believe and to have accused me of believing. But it does mean that every referent and all reality has the structure of a differential trace and that one cannot refer to this 'real' except in an interpretative experience. The latter neither yields meaning nor assumes it except in a movement of differential referring. That's all.
(1992:32)

The above discussion clarifies certain common misconceptions about postmodernism, some of which are that it rejects referentiality of language by reducing everything to the concept of text, regards history as no more than a fictional construct and the human subject as merely an effect of power. Understood in their proper context, these ideas do not imply any emasculation of critical thinking but suggest postmodernism's rigorous interrogating stance.

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