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ROBERT FIALA

POSTMODERNISM

In 1959, C. Wright Mills speculated that “the Modern Age is being succeeded by a post-modern period” in which assumptions about the coherence of the Enlightenment values of scientific rationality and political freedom were being challenged (1959, p. 166). Critical theorists had earlier speculated about how the revolutionary potential

of the urban laboring classes of the nineteenth century was co-opted by the shift to a postindustrial twentieth-century society, a society characterized by mass consumerism and war economies. The characteristics of postindustrial societies were explored more recently in Daniel Bell’s analysis of contemporary capitalism (1976). In the modern information societies, Bell argues that the class forces that drove nineteenth-century social change have been replaced by new processes. Under welfare capitalist states, scientists, technicians, managers, and bureaucrats formulate social tensions as administrative and technical issues based on political consensus. For Bell, postindustrial societies with their information bases hold the key to social harmony and the end of misery.

Alain Touraine’s view (1984) is different. He also stresses how class antagonism has changed under welfare capitalism, but for Touraine the information managers, guided by technological thinking, tend to “steer the entire social order toward the perfectly programmed society, the ultimate technocratic prison” (Baum 1990, p. 5). Touraine also writes that the categories of basic sociological analysis have become out of touch with changes in contemporary societies. In particular, he rejects the modernist supposition of evolutionary progress over time, culminating in what he calls “the impoverishing homogeneity of modern civilization” (Touraine 1984, p. 38), the sociologist’s conception of the national states as units of analysis, and the gradual expunging of the cultural diversity of traditional societies. The collapse of modernism arises from a failure of sociology to keep abreast of the developing autonomy of cultural products, the globalization of capital, and the rise of new forms of social control and of public resistance to them. In this analysis, “the crisis of modernity . . . is not all-encompassing . . . the crisis in modernity is not considered to be total or terminal but limited in scope, if deep” (Smart 1990, p. 408). Though Bell and Touraine have been associated with critiques of postindustrial societies, the meaning of “postmodernism” has become far more radical, and draws on earlier sources.

De Saussure’s “structural” theory of linguistics (1959) distinguished the “sign” from the “signified” and developed a science based on the discovery that symbolic systems might have formal properties that were unrelated to the meanings of

the objects they signified but that might hold across different systems of symbols. The system for describing, for example, the animal kingdom and the protocols for siting teepees might reflect the same logic—without any inherent equivalence to the things they described or organized (Giddens 1987). “Poststructuralism” deepened this disinterest in the signified objects by dismissing any link binding words/symbols to things. Things were only the hypostatizations of language. All analysis was “deconstruction,” or unmasking of phenomena in terms of their underlying rhetorical conventions. For poststructuralists, texts only pointed to other texts. The world was viewed as an intertwining of systems of representation without any derivation from or basis within “terra firma.” Everything became text—including violent speech and violent symbolic acts such as incest, war, or spousal abuse.

The postmodern twist is the application of the linguistic implications of poststructuralism to the three core principles connecting contemporary civilizations with the project of the Enlightenment: scientific knowledge (Truth), aesthetics (Beauty), and morality (the Good). The Enlightenment project—“modernism”—refers to the rise of the Age of Reason. It was characterized by the gradual shift away from religious sensibilities and to scientific objectivity, the rational exploitation of nature for human needs, the perspectival representation of nature in art and humanistic truth in fiction, and the struggle for a humane society. Modernism was realist in its epistemology and progressive in its politics. Truth could be attained—particularly with scientific advances. Beauty could be distinguished from trash. Humanism could nurture moral conduct and decent conditions of life. And history was purposive and progressive.

Postmodernism is the sensibility that arises when the credibility of these “master narratives” is questioned. The postmodern period, as described by Lyotard (1984) and Baudrillard (1983), is the one we now confront. Though it is often dated as a creature of the post-World War II period, it is thought only to have become generalized with mass consumerism in the age of electronics and to have been initiated by dramatic changes in contemporary capitalism. Capitalism has ushered in global communication and exchange, and has created a self-sustaining cybernetic system that almost

completely transcends the ability of individual governments to control their directions and objectives. As a result, postmodernity is sometimes referred to as posthistorical society in the sense that the mission or sense of purpose that guided nation-states in the past through events such as the French Revolution has been overtaken by global consumerism. The view of history as a struggle for the gradual liberation of humanity and progressive evolution of more humane societies is dismissed by Lyotard as mythic. In addition, the transcendence of communities by electronic representations makes the idea of “the social” purely illusory (Bogard 1990). The objectivity of societies, nation-states, communities, and history is viewed only as “narratives” or “simulacra” (Baudrillard 1983). Referents disappear in favor of a world of simulations, models, performatives, and codes—in short, “information” (broadly conceived), which becomes the predominant phenomenon of exchange among the masses through the mass media.

One of the important theoretical aspects of the postmodernist position is its explicit rejection of Marxism in general and Habermas’ theorizing about creating a rational society through communicative competence. Where Habermas (1973, p. 105) speculates that a rational community might be able to “arrive at the conviction that in the given circumstances the proposed norms are ‘right,’” Lyotard rejects the myth of reason behind the Habermasian project. The project implies that there is a correct moral and scientific standard to which communities ought to aspire. Enforcement of such standards valorize conformity and, as witnessed in the fascist European states in the 1920s and 1930s, promote terrorism to extract it. This introduces a tension within postmodernism that has not been worked through (Frank 1990). On the positive side, the supposition of “multivocality” in scientific and moral discourse promotes the “excavation” of minority voices and minority experiences which have been occluded in “master” modernist ways of thinking. Every point of view can be heard, none can be privileged. On the other side, postmodernism seems ill equipped to distinguish between any particular moral or objective position and any other, including the fascist discourse that is associated with modernism. Choosing between Holocaust history and Holocaust denial would seem in principle to be a matter of rhetorical preference—which is clearly nihilistic.

When we move away from epistemology to postmodernity's impact on art and architecture, the situation is different. Postmodernism celebrates a rejection of hegemonic traditions and styles by mixing elements from competing schools and by bringing the rim of representation into focus as an organic element of the depiction. Novels exploit the discontinuities in perspective and the fragmentations in contemporary society. In architecture, postmodernism represents a repudiation of high-density ("efficient") functionality based on centralized city planning with an emphasis on no-frill construction. Decentralized planning emphasizes collage and eclecticism and the development of spaces to heighten aesthetic possibilities (Harvey 1989). The globalization of experience encourages such exchanges and experimentation. However, the replacement of "efficient" spaces like public housing, with their brutalizing side effects, with more particularistic designs is part of the emancipatory interest of modernity—so that at least here, postmodernity is still part and parcel of the Enlightenment. This raises three questions.

First, to what extent has the case been made that the changes in capitalism during the past two decades have been so profound as to represent a destruction of modernist society and a disappearance of history and "the social" (i.e., real face-to-face community)? Some critics dispute the claim (Baum 1990); others point out that Baudrillard's evidence is unconvincing since his own postmodern manner of exposition is self-consciously rhetorical, inflationary, and, consistent with the idiom, only one possible reading of recent history (Smart 1990). Second, if we have no careful (i.e., modernist) analysis of the factors that have contributed to the demise of our confidence in the "master narratives" of modernism, would it not seem to be impossible to discern which ones have been shaken, and how seriously our confidence in them has been eroded? Skepticism is insufficient. Finally, under these circumstances, is it not predictable that there is no consensus about the meaning of postmodernism? Arguably this dissensus is inherent in the perspective. For Baudrillard (1983), postmodernism spells the end of sociology (and other modernist subjects); for Bauman (1988), it is simply a new topic—a sociology of postmodernism, but not a postmodern sociology. For Brown (1990), it is an opportunity to rethink the continuing

relevance of the role of rhetoric in politics and science in order to employ knowledge in guiding human conduct. Under these circumstances, the proclamation of the death of modernism would seem premature.

Over the past decade two debates have emerged which raise questions about the postmodern project and which deal respectively with the issues of (1) epistemology, or the postmodern struggle with truth and the special standing of the natural sciences, and (2) of morality and the struggle to define and achieve the "good society" within democratic politics.

The first issue is raised by the famous hoax perpetrated by Alan Sokal, professor of physics at New York University, a left-leaning radical who taught math in Nicaragua under the rule of the Sandanistas. His "transformative hermeneutics of quantum gravity" was a spoof of the pretentious claims about science running through the leading figures of the French intellectual establishment—Derrida, Lacan, and Lyotard—spiked, according to Sokal, with the usual nonsensical and impenetrable jargon and buzzwords (Sokal 1996b). The parody was published in a special issue of *Social Text* designed by the editors to rebuke the criticisms of their antiscientific agenda by leading scientists. Sokal published an exposé at the same time in *Lingua Franca* (1996a). The hoax ignited a storm of criticism on both sides which some have referred to as "the science wars" (Natoli 1997, pp. 115 ff.; Kingwell 1999). The hoax continues to provoke debate today (see <http://www.physics.nyu.edu/faculty/sokal/index.html>). Although Sokal abused the good faith of the editors of a journal in a humanities discipline, he justified his behavior by reference to the naïveté of those editors, whose credentials could scarcely permit them to draw the conclusions about the purely rhetorical foundations of science or to discredit centuries of scientific progress. Yet in neither side was the "demonstration" definitive. The validity of the scientific method is neither established by the hoax, nor rubbished by what Richard Dawkins writing in *Nature* dubbed "the vacuous rhetoric of montebanks and charlatans" on the Left Bank (1988, p. 141). Nor is it undermined on this side of the Atlantic by Steven Seidman's claims in *Contested Knowledge* that the scientific community in eighteenth-century Europe prevailed over aristocracy and the

Church because it provided the forces of liberalism with a convenient but essentially vacuous cudgel with which to rout the older order: "Is the claim that only science ensures true knowledge . . . not merely another ruse on the part of a rising social elite wishing to legitimate their own aspirations for privilege? . . . [S]cience, just like religion, rests upon a series of assumptions that cannot be scientifically proven . . . Enlightenment science is as weak a guarantor of truth as religion." (1994, p. 24). Science for Seidman and the other postmodernists is just faith in a secular vein without any special epistemological leverage. The proponents of the Enlightenment were simply replacing priests with scientists, and religion with another form of superstition. Sokal and Bricmont's *Fashionable Nonsense* (1998) calls the postmodernists' bluff on such charges. At this point, it is premature to draw conclusions about the future of this controversy. Suffice it to say for the time being that poetry and physics should be cataloged separately.

On the issue of morality and everyday politics, John O'Neill's *The Poverty of Posmodernism* takes a similarly critical view of "the academic trendiness" of advocates of cynicism and fragmentation who have forsaken humanism and the critique of social injustice as part of the postmodern turn. "Today we are told to jettison the old-fashioned belief in unique values . . . we are wholly ruled by prejudice and politics . . . we are asked to believe that human beings are now so speciated by gender and race—though we are silent about class—that there can be no universal knowledge, politics, or morality." As O'Neill stresses, "these ideas have not grown up among the masses who have sickened of the injustices and exploitation that grinds their life . . . it is not these people who have abandoned idealism, universalism, truth and justice. It is those who already enjoy these things who have denounced them on behalf of the others" (1995, p. 1)—the new "illiterati" of the simulacrum, the Disney World theorists and the esthetes of the radically chic. "Too much of the world still starves, dies young and is wasted by systematic greed and evil for anyone to write the obituaries of philosophy, ideology and humanism" (p. 196). O'Neill argues that there are good philosophical foundations in the phenomenology of everyday life, the transcendental instinct of reason to fasten on the contradictions of existence, and commonsense scepticism

to keep alive the distinction between truth and falsity, freedom and slavery, and justice and injustice. The idea that political discourse has been reduced to mere perspective, that there is nothing outside language or that there is no "extratextuality" deny the vision of history and community, and exhaust culture with cultural industry, communication with fashion. "The claim that there are no longer any grand stories capable of under-writing common sense . . . gives comfort only to those who lack community at any level of society other than intellectual fashion" (p. 198). O'Neill's own inspiration for criticizing the antirationalism of postmodernism is founded on what he describes as the tension between language and vision, between elites and masses, between reality and possibility. The static linguisticity of postmodernism is a trap, an illusion. The current celebration of relativism by what used to be the progressive left is not only ill founded but politically nihilistic. It valorizes only minoritarianism while leaving unexamined the consequences of globalization and the dismantling of the welfare state by the political right. That state, with all its blemishes, has been an achievement in which civic democracy took root, in which politics was driven in part for reasons other than naked self-interest. In his vision, O'Neill says that postmodernism undermines our sense of cultural debt to the past and removes the duty which each generation has to pass on what it has learned to the future. "Those of us who own knowledge, who enjoy literacy, health, self-respect and social status have chosen to rage against our own gifts rather than to fight for their enlargement in the general public. We have chosen to invalidate our science, to psychiatrize our arts, to vulgarize our culture, to make it unusable and undesirable by those who have yet to know it. We honour no legacy. We receive no gifts. We hand on nothing" (1995, p. 2). Yet if O'Neill's critique of antirationalism is sound, all this changes and his self-flagellation is premature.

The moral and epistemological concerns of O'Neill and Sokal are quite different from the critiques of commodity esthetics in George Ritzer's *The McDonaldization of Society*, which provides a useful point of comparison. Following Weber's insight about the intrusiveness of rationalization, Ritzer shows how the McDonald fast-food franchise led to a widespread adoption of commodity

production and consumption based on standardization, efficiency, leveling of tastes, and the stifling of worker experiences that has come to set the model for our individual relationships with the market, if not the world generally. But McDonaldization calls forth that critical posture which Veblen labeled "the instinct of craftsmanship" ([1899] 1962, p. 75), without which waste and conspicuous consumption would be unbridled. Like Veblen, Ritzer applauds the resistance to such trends; but his perspective is Weberian and transcendental. By contrast, for students of postmodernism, scientific truths and emancipatory projects are merely further commodities, fashions, or fictions caught up in the McDonaldization of empirical truth and the social good. Sokal and O'Neill represent the opening of serious dialogues on these engaging issues.

(SEE ALSO: *Popular Culture; Postindustrial Society; Social Philosophy*)

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POVERTY

Scholarly as well as ideological debate has long centered around the most elementary questions concerning poverty. What is poverty? How can it be measured? What causes it? Is it a natural phenomenon or a symptom of a poorly ordered society? Though answers to all these questions abound, there is no definitive answer to any one of them, nor can there ever be, for the questions are not purely demographic, but moral, ethical, and political as well. Poverty is a concept, not a fact, and