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Where do postmodernists come from?

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Abstract

A comprehensive assessment of postmodernism and its impact on culture is presented. Postmodernism should not be viewed as a reaction to the defeat of Communism--it is a response to the "success" of capitalism.

Imagine a radical movement that had suffered an emphatic defeat. So emphatic, in fact, that it seemed unlikely to resurface for the length of a lifetime, if at all. As time wore on, the beliefs of this movement might begin to seem less false or ineffectual than simply irrelevant. For its opponents, it would be less a matter of hotly contesting these doctrines than of contemplating them with something of the mild antiquarian interest one might have previously reserved for Ptolemaic cosmology or the scholasticism of Thomas Aquinas. Radicals might come to find themselves less overwhelmed or out-argued than simply washed up, speaking a language so quaintly out of tune with their era that, as with the language of Platonism or courtly love, nobody even bothered any longer to ask whether it was true. What would be the likely response of the left to such a dire condition?

Many, no doubt, would drift either cynically or sincerely to the right, regretting their earlier views as infantile idealism. Others might keep the faith purely out of habit, anxiety, or nostalgia, clinging to an imaginary identity and risking the neurosis that that may bring. A small clutch of left triumphalists, incurably hopeful, would no doubt carry on detecting the stirrings of the revolution in the faintest flicker of militancy. In others, the radical impulse would persist, but would be forced to migrate elsewhere. One can imagine that the ruling assumption of this period would be that the system was, at least for the moment, unbreachable; and a great many of the left's conclusions could be seen to flow from this glum supposition. One might expect, for example, that there would be an upsurge of interest in the margins and crevices of the system--in those ambiguous, indeterminate places where its power seemed less secure. If the system could not be breached, one might at least look to those forces which might momentarily transgress, subvert, or give it the slip. There would be, one might predict, much celebration of the marginal--but this would be partly making a virtue out of necessity, since the left would itself have been rudely displaced from the mainstream, and might thus come, conveniently enough, to suspect all talk of centrality as suspect. At its crudest, this cult of marginality would come down to a simpleminded assumption that minorities were positive and majorities oppressive. Just how minorities like fascist groups, Ulster Unionists, or

the international bourgeoisie fitted into this picture would not be entirely clear. Nor is it obvious how such a position could cope with a previously marginal movement--the ANC, for example--becoming politically dominant, given its formalist prejudice that dominance was undesirable as such. The historical basis for this way of thinking would be the fact that political movements that were at once mass, central, and creative were by and large no longer in business. Indeed, the idea of a movement that was at once central and subversive would now appear something of a contradiction in terms. It would therefore seem natural to demonize the mass, dominant, and consensual, and romanticize whatever happened to deviate from them. It would be, above all, the attitude of those younger dissidents who had nothing much, politically speaking, to remember, who had no actual memory or experience of mass radical politics, but a good deal of experience of drearily oppressive majorities.

If the system really did seem to have canceled all opposition to itself, then it would not be hard to generalize from this to the vaguely anarchistic belief that system is oppressive as such. Since there were almost no examples of attractive political systems around, the claim would seem distinctly plausible. The only genuine criticism could be one launched from outside the system altogether; and one would expect, therefore, a certain fetishizing of "otherness" in such a period. There would be enormous interest in anything that seemed alien, deviant, exotic, unincorporable, all the way from aardvarks to Alpha Centauri, a passion

for whatever gave us a tantalizing glimpse of something beyond the logic of the system altogether. But this romantic ultra-leftism would coexist, curiously enough, with a brittle pessimism--for the fact is that if the system is all-powerful, then there can be by definition nothing beyond it, any more than there can be anything beyond the infinite curvature of cosmic space. If there were something outside the system, then it would be entirely unknowable and thus incapable of saving us; but if we could draw it into the orbit of the system, so that it could gain some effective foothold there, its otherness would be instantly contaminated and its subversive power would thus dwindle to nothing. Whatever negates the system in theory would thus be logically incapable of doing so in practice. Anything we can understand can by definition not be radical, since it must be within the system itself; but anything which escapes the system could be heard by us as no more than a mysterious murmur.

Such thinking has abandoned the whole notion of a system which is internally contradictory--which has that installed at its heart which can potentially undo it. Instead, it thinks in the rigid oppositions of "inside" and "outside," where to be on the inside is to be complicit and to be on the outside is to be impotent. The typical style of thought of such a period, then, might be described as libertarian pessimism--libertarian, because one would not have given up on the dream of something quite other than what we have; pessimism, because one would

be much too bleakly conscious of the omnipotence of law and power to believe that such a dream could ever be realized. If one still believed in subversion, but not in the existence of any flesh-and-blood agents of it, then it might be possible to imagine that the system in some way subverted itself, deconstructed its own logic, which would then allow you to combine a certain radicalism with a certain skepticism.

If the system is everywhere, then it would seem, like the Almighty himself, to be visible at no particular point; and it would therefore become possible to believe, paradoxically enough, that whatever was out there was not in fact a system at all. It is only a short step from claiming that the system is too complex to be represented to declaring that it does not exist. In the period we are imagining, then, some would no doubt be found clamoring against what they saw as the tyranny of a real social totality, whereas others would be busy deconstructing the whole idea of totality and claiming that it existed only in our minds. It would not be hard to see this as, at least in part, a compensation in theory for the fact that the social totality was proving difficult to crack in practice. If no very ambitious form of political action seems for the moment possible, if so-called micropolitics seem the order of the day, it is always tempting to convert this necessity into a virtue--to console oneself with the thought that one's political limitations have a kind of objective ground in reality, in the fact that social "totality" is in any case just an illusion. ("Metaphysical" illusion makes your position sound

rather more imposing.) It does not matter if there is no political agent at hand to transform the whole, because there is in fact no whole to be transformed. It is as though, having mislaid the breadknife, one declares the loaf to be already sliced. But totality might also seem something of an illusion because there would be no very obvious political agent for whom society might present itself as a totality. There are those who need to grasp how it stands with them in order to be free, and who find that they can do this only by grasping something of the overall structure with which their own immediate situation intersects. Local and universal are not, here, simple opposites or theoretical options, as they might be for those intellectuals who prefer to think big and those more modest academics who like to keep it concrete. But if some of those traditional political agents are in trouble, then so will be the concept of social totality, since it is those agents' need of it that gives it its force.

Grasping a complex totality involves some rigorous analysis; so it is not surprising that such strenuously systematic thought should be out of fashion, dismissed as phallic, scientific, or what have you, in the sort of period we are imagining. When there is nothing in particular in it for you to find out how you stand--if you are a professor in Ithaca or Irvine, for example--you can afford to be ambiguous, elusive, deliciously indeterminate. You are also quite likely, in such circumstances, to wax idealist--though in some suitably new-fangled rather than tediously

old-fashioned sense. For one primary way in which we know the world is, of course, through practice; and if any very ambitious practice is denied us, it will not be long before we catch ourselves wondering whether there is anything out there at all. One would expect, then, that in such an era a belief in reality as something that resists us ("History is what hurts," as Fredric Jameson has put it) will give way to a belief in the "constructed" nature of the world. This, in turn, would no doubt go hand in hand with a full-blooded "culturalism" which underestimated what men and women had in common as material human creatures, and suspected all talk of nature as an insidious mystification. It would tend not to realize that such culturalism is just as reductive as, say, economism or biologism. Cognitive and realist accounts of human consciousness would yield ground to various kinds of pragmatism and relativism, partly because there didn't any longer seem much politically at stake in knowing how it stood with you. Everything would become an interpretation, including that statement itself. And what would also gradually implode, along with reasonably certain knowledge, would be the idea of a human subject "centered" and unified enough to take significant action. For such significant action would now seem in short supply; and the result, once more, would be to make a virtue out of necessity by singing the praises of the diffuse, decentered, schizoid human subject--a subject who might well not be "together" enough to topple a bottle off a wall, et alone bring down the state, but who could nevertheless be presented as hair-raisingly avant garde in contrast to the smugly centered subjects of an older, more

classical phase of capitalism. To put it another way: the subject as producer (coherent, disciplined, self-determining) would have yielded ground to the subject as consumer (mobile, ephemeral, constituted by insatiable desire).

If the "left" orthodoxies of such a period were pragmatist, relativist, pluralistic, deconstructive, then one might well see such thought-forms as dangerously radical. For does not capitalism need sure foundations, stable identities, absolute authority, metaphysical certainties, in order to survive? And wouldn't the kind of thought we are imagining put the skids under all this? The answer, feebly enough, is both yes and no. It is true that capitalism, so far anyway, has felt the need to underpin its authority with unimpeachable moral foundations. Look, for example, at the remarkable tenacity of religious belief in North America. On the other hand, look at the British, who are a notably godless bunch. No British politician could cause anything other than acute embarrassment by invoking the Supreme Being in public, and the British talk much less about metaphysical abstractions like Britain than those in the United States do about something called the United States. It is not clear, in other words, exactly how much metaphysical talk the advanced capitalist system really requires; and it is certainly true that its relentlessly secularizing, rationalizing operations threaten to undercut its own metaphysical claims. It is clear, however, that without pragmatism and plurality the system

could not survive at all. Difference, "hybridity," heterogeneity, restless mobility are native to the capitalist mode of production, and thus by no means inherently radical phenomena. So if these ways of thinking put the skids under the system at one level, they reproduce its logic at another.

If an oppressive system seems to regulate everything, then one will naturally look around for some enclave of which this is less true--some place where a degree of freedom or randomness or pleasure still precariously survives. Perhaps you might call this desire, or discourse, or the body, or the unconscious. One might predict in this period a quickening of interest in psychoanalysis--for psychoanalysis is not only the thinking person's sensationalism, blending intellectual rigor with the most lurid materials, but it exudes a general exciting air of radicalism without being particularly so politically. If the more abstract questions of state, mode of production, and civil society seems for the moment too hard to resolve, then one might shift one's political attention to something more intimate and immediate, more living and fleshly, like the body. Conference papers entitled "Putting the Anus Back into Coriolanus" would attract eager crowds who had never heard of the bourgeoisie but who knew all about buggery.

This state of affairs would no doubt be particularly marked in those societies which in any case lacked strong socialist traditions; indeed, one could imagine much of the style of thought in question, for all its

suspiciousness of the universal, as no more than a spurious universalizing of such specific political conditions. Such a concern with bodiliness and sexuality would represent, one imagines, an enormous political deepening and enrichment, at the same time as it would signify a thoroughgoing displacement. And no doubt just the same could be said if one were to witness an increasing obsession with language and culture--topics where the intellectual is in any case more likely to feel at home than in the realm of material production.

One might expect that some, true to the pessimism of the period, would stress how discourses are policed, regulated, heavy with power, while others would proclaim in more libertarian spirit how the thrills and spills of the signifier can give the slip to the system. Either way, one would no doubt witness an immense linguistic inflation, as what appeared no longer conceivable in political reality was still just about possible in the areas of discourse or signs or textuality. The freedom of text or language would come to compensate for the unfreedom of the system as a whole. There would still be a kind of utopian vision, but its name now would be increasingly poetry. And it would even be possible to imagine, in an "extremist" variant of this style of thought, that the future was here and now--that utopia had already arrived in the shape of the pleasurable intensities, multiple selfhoods, and exhilarating exchanges of the marketplace and the shopping mall. History would then most certainly have

come to an end--an end already implicit in the blocking of radical political action. For if no such collective action seemed generally possible, then history would indeed appear as random and directionless, and to claim that there was no longer any "grand narrative" would be among other things a way of saying that we no longer knew how to construct one effectively in these conditions. For this kind of thought, history would have ended because freedom would finally have been achieved; for Marxism, the achievement of freedom would be the beginning of history and the end of all we have known to date: those boring prehistorical grand narratives which are really just the same old recycled story of scarcity, suffering, and struggle.

Even the densest reader, may by now have guessed that the condition I am describing is not entirely hypothetical. Why should we be invited to imagine such a situation when it is staring us in the face? Is anything to be gained by this tiresome rhetorical ploy? Only, I think, a kind of thought experiment by which, putting actual history in brackets for the moment, we can come to recognize that almost every central feature of postmodern theory can be deduced, read off as it were, from the assumption of a major political defeat. It is as though, confronted with the fact of postmodern culture, we could work our way backward from it until we arrived at the defeat in question. (Whether it has been, in reality, as absolute and definitive a defeat as the existence of postmodernism seems to imply is not at issue here.) This whole speculative enterprise has, of

course, the advantage of hindsight, and should not be taken entirely seriously; nobody could actually read off deconstruction or political correctness or Pulp Fiction from the winding down of working-class militancy or of national liberation movements. But if postmodernism is not an inevitable outcome of such a political history, it is, for all that, a logical one--just as Act V of King Lear is not dictated by the four preceding acts, but is not just an accident either.

But isn't this just the kind of historically reductionist explanation that postmodernism itself finds most distasteful No, because there is no suggestion here that postmodernism is only the consequence of a political failure. It is hard to see how Madonna or mock-Gothic buildings or the fiction of Umberto Eco are the offspring of such a repulse, though some ingenious cultural commentator will probably try it on. Postmodernism has many sources--modernism proper, so-called postindustrialism, the emergence of vital new political forces, the recrudescence of the cultural avant garde, the penetration of cultural life by the commodity form, the dwindling of an "autonomous" space for art, the exhaustion of certain classical bourgeois ideologies, and so on. But whatever else it is, it is the child of a political rebuff. Its raising of issues of gender and ethnicity have no doubt permanently breached the ideological enclosure of the white male Western left, about whom the most that can be said is that at least we're not dead, and at the same time taken for granted a

rampantly culturalist discourse which belongs precisely to that corner of the globe. These valuable preoccupations have also often enough shown a signal indifference to that power which is the invisible color of daily life, which determines our existence--sometimes literally so--in almost every quarter, which decides in large measure the destiny of nations and the internecine conflicts between them. It is as though every other form of oppressive power can be readily debated, but not the one which so often sets the long-term agenda for them or is at the very least implicated with them at their core. The power of capital is now so wearily familiar that even large sectors of the left have succeeded in naturalizing it, taking it for granted as an immutable structure. One would need, for an apt analogy, to imagine a defeated right wing eagerly discussing the monarchy, the family, and the death of courtesy, while maintaining a stiff silence on what after all most viscerally engages them, the rights of property, since these had been so thoroughly expropriated that it seemed merely academicist to wish them back.

Postmodernist culture has produced a rich, bold, exhilarating body of work across the whole span of the arts, and has generated more than its fair share of execrable kitsch. It has pulled the rug out from beneath a number of complacent certainties, prised open some paranoid totalities, tainted some jealously guarded purities, bent some oppressive norms, and shaken some rather solid-looking foundations. It has also tended to surrender to a politically paralyzing skepticism, a flashy populism, a full-blooded

moral relativism, and a brand of sophism for which, since all conventions are arbitrary anyway, might as well conform to those of the Free World. In pulling the rug out from under the certainties of its political opponents, this postmodern culture has often enough pulled it out from under itself too, leaving itself with no more reason why we should resist fascism than the feebly pragmatic plea that fascism is not the way we do things in Sussex or Sacramento. It has brought low the intimidating austerity of high culture with its playful, parodic spirit, and in thus imitating the commodity form has succeeded in reinforcing the crippling austerities of the marketplace. It has released the power of the local, the vernacular, the regional, at the same time as it has contributed to making the globe a more drearily uniform place. Its nervousness in the face of concepts like truth has alarmed the bishops and charmed the business executives. It consistently denies the possibility of describing how the world is, and just as consistently finds itself doing so. It is full of universal moral prescriptions--plurality is preferable to singularity, difference to identity, otherness to sameness--and denounces all such universalism as oppressive. It dreams of a human being set free from law and constraint, gliding ambiguously from one "subject-position" to another, and sees the human subject as no more than the determined effect of cultural forces. It believes in style and pleasure, and commonly churns out texts that might have been composed by, as well as on, a computer.

All of this, however, belongs to a dialectical assessment of postmodernism--and postmodernism itself insists that dialectical thought can be consigned to the metaphysical junkheap. It is here, perhaps, that it differs most deeply from Marxism. Marxists are supposed to be "doctrinaire" thinkers, yet recognize that there can be no authentic socialism without the rich heritage of enlightened bourgeois liberalism. Postmodernists are self-declared devotees of pluralism, mutability, open-endedness, yet are constantly to be caught demonizing humanism, liberalism, the Enlightenment, the centered subject, and the rest. But bourgeois Enlightenment is like social class: in order to get rid of it, you must first work your way through it. It is on this point more than any other that Marxism and postmodernism are perhaps most profoundly at odds.

Postmodernism has a quick eye for irony; but there is one irony above all that seems to have escaped it. Just at the time when it was denouncing the idea of revolution as "metaphysical," scorning the notion of a "collective subject," and insisting on the dangers of totality, revolution broke out where everyone had least expected it, as a collective subject of some kind struck against the "total system" of the postcapitalist bureaucracies. The current results of that transformation are not, of course, ones that a socialist can contemplate with any equanimity; but the dramatic upheavals in Eastern Europe give the lie to many of the fashionable assumptions of the postmodern West. In a powerfully estranging gesture, they expose postmodernism as the ideology of a peculiarly jaded, defeatist wing of the

liberal-capitalist intelligentsia, which has mistaken its own very local difficulties for a universal human condition in exactly the manner of the universalist ideologies it denounces. But, though postmodernism may be thus usefully "estranged" by what has happened to the east of it, it was certainly not caused by that collapse. Postmodernism is less a reaction to the defeat of Communism (which it anyway long predated), than--at least in its more reactionary versions--a response to the "success" of capitalism. So here is another irony. In the crisis-ridden 1990s, it seems more than a little odd to treat capitalist success as if it were a general and immutable law of nature. If that is not just the kind of unhistorical absolutizing that postmodernists so fiercely reject in others, it is hard to see what is.

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