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Abstract

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Keywords: Modernity, Postmodernity, Postmodernism, Neoliberalism, Historical Materialism

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Revisiting Postmodernism: A Critical Analysis



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Abstract

Postmodernism emerged in the late 20th century as a critical response to assumption of modernity particularly the beliefs in grand narratives and universal truths. This research work analyses the canonical debates ‘for’ and ‘against’ postmodernism. Marxist-inspired theorists believe that modernity and postmodernity represent the two different stages of capitalism. It is not taken as an abrupt turn from capitalism because the core agenda of wealth accumulation still applies. The proponents argue that postmodernism challenges the dominant narratives/universal truths which had greatly marginalized the alternative voices in the history like those belonging to post-colonial and non-western societies. Conversely, the opponents believe that postmodernism undermines the probability of objective knowledge and collective action. The paper explores the intellectual tensions between varying perspectives and its relevance to the contemporary world. Like how postmodernity has become an ideology normalizing neo-liberal capitalism to restore class power rather than the emergence of entirely new post-industrial society.

Keywords: *Modernity, Postmodernity, Postmodernism, Neoliberalism, Historical Materialism*

Introduction

Since 1970s, the world has been experiencing a new historical epoch that is said to have life after modernity. It is not simply a transition from one concept to another i.e. modernity to postmodernity but the universalization and maturation of capitalism. The shift is characterized by social and economic developments at one end like globalization, consumerism and a decline in grand narratives and universal truths on the other. Various academics and thinkers have described the period in their own unique way. Some of them placed more focus on cultural transformations while others emphasized economic shifts like the changes in the modes of production and marketing strategies, multinational capitalistic approach, globalization and flexible accumulation. Despite various perspectives, there is a unanimous agreement that the maturation phase is deeply rooted in advanced technology and communication (Wood, 1997). All the ideas we have witnessed in the past few decades have been merged into the concept of ‘postmodernity’, which is the transition from one stage to another and the maturation of capitalism, at the same time.

Through Marxist Lens

According to Marxism inspired theorists like David Harvey and Fredric Jameson, modernity and postmodernity represent the two different stages of capitalism. It is significant to note that the shift



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does not reflect a complete turn from capitalism, though, nature still exists and the logic applies that is the accumulation of wealth. When it comes to the concept of postmodernity, David Harvey has given some of the most important insights on the subject. He describes the whole concept as a move from 'Fordism to flexible accumulation' where goods as well as labor associated with these goods have been superseded by flexibility- i.e. the team concept, mass production, diverse commodities for markets and mobile capital (Harvey, 1989). The development of postmodernity phase is only possible due to information and communication revolution in the form of technology, automation and mechanization.

Keeping into consideration the shift from modernity to postmodernity, Harvey elaborates cultural changes as well. In his account of postmodernity, he thoroughly talks about the concept of 'time- space compression' which is again possible because of new technologies (Harvey, 1989). Telecommunication has not only introduced the new modes of production like outsourcing and remote jobs but also fasten marketing and introducing new modes of monetary organization like neo-banks, digital currencies and super apps. This is how the new intellectual and cultural debates of 'postmodernism' comes forward.

It is obvious from above-mentioned short analysis that postmodernity emphasizes the plurality and diversity of culture, it insufficiently talks about class relations, capitalist exploitation and power dynamics. Rejection of universal truths and global narratives also weakens the overall capacity to explain in detail the structural inequalities rooted in colonial as well as postcolonial histories. *The research is based on the argument as how postmodernity plays its role in becoming an ideology normalizing neo-liberal capitalism to restore class power rather than the emergence of entirely new post-industrial society.*

For this research, I am going to enclose wider debates around to explain the concepts 'for' and 'against' postmodernity, focusing in particular on the extent to which these debates consider non-western societies. It is important to note that globalization and technology have increased the awareness of interconnectedness and multiple perspectives. This is the main reason why debate on postmodernity has become influential. Furthermore, it is contested in academic circles because of its critique of relativism. Moreover, its challenging instance to Euro-centric views offers new insights for non- western societies. Postcolonial experiences also resonate with postmodern critique.

Canonical Arguments 'for' Postmodernity

Postmodernity opens a debate for plurality and differences. It helps to critique grand narratives and Eurocentric universal truths. It talks about changes in media, culture and capitalism. Like many other postmodern proponents, Baudrillard explores how social realities define the postmodern culture. He specifically highlights the key ideas of hyperreality and simulacrum. According to his ideas, simulations have played a key role in replacing 'the real' in post capitalist societies. Especially in the contemporary world, simulations have become so powerful to influence the overall consumer culture. Actual objects as well as experiences are broadly replaced by this contemporary consumer culture that is based heavily on representations. The images mediated the consumer culture, which is a great shift and considered by the writer as hyperreality. The distinction between real and representation has collapsed. There is a great impact on consumers what is circulating all around. Baudrillard views that the boundary between elite and the masses increasingly become blurred due to this consumer culture. The work of Ryszard Wolny connects the whole concept of Baudrillard with the real-world phenomena like celebrity culture, media, advertising and promotion that shape our everyday experience. So, it creates a new form of control over the "real reality" and "real time", and this is what Baudrillard's theory viewed as in postmodern culture that 'images' seem more real than our real world lived experiences. For examples the logos of brands like Nike, Louis Vuitton,

Gucci, Adidas and Apple assume more importance than the product in actual. So, the consumer culture revolves around technologies, brand appeal and globalization and redefine the overall ideas and values of human life (Wolny, [2017](#)).

In addition to Baudrillard's view of postmodernity, Lyotard assumes that postmodernity is not a simple historical concept/ break that has originated after modernity. He mentions that postmodernity is an insight into the contemporary world that has shaped by culture and knowledge. Lyotard presents postmodern concept as the reflection of those questioning the years old large and totalizing theories like Marxism and Enlightenment thought. For Lyotard, society is constituted by little narratives, absurd ideas and localized, diverse versions of thoughts. He talks about twentieth century advancements and technological developments that have changed the whole scenario from unified theories to plural standards. Diversification and pluralism challenge the overall notion that culture, society and politics cannot be judged by a universal criterion (Lyotard, [2001](#)). Niels Brugger also discusses that postmodernism is not something that just happened after modernity, but it was already present within modernity. Postmodernism has not replaced modernity but itself emerged from modern tendencies. It is wrong to say that it is a historical break, but it is something already built in modernity. It is important to note that Lyotard considers postmodernity as structural change rather than chronological phase after modernism (Lyotard, [2001](#)).

Besides, Lyotard's disbeliefs towards metanarratives, Robert Paul Resch in his work titled 'Modernism, Postmodernism, and Social Theory: A Comparison of Althusser and Foucault' also compares the theoretical approaches of Michael Foucault and Louis Althusser whose respond about history, power, agency and structure can help in understanding the rise of postmodern perspective. Until 1960s, both the thinkers rejected the concept of traditional historicism which focuses on the linear progress. For Althusser, the critique was done to restructure Marxism in a more scientific manner. Whereas Foucault was deeply concerned of history as a continuous and reliable mean of describing reality. According to him structuralists have heavily criticized the overall notions of history of being a truthful and clear account of the past. According to them history involves many ruptures and it is not a continuous process. Moreover, history is shaped by power relations as well as depends upon hidden institutional structures. So, history is not objective concept, as well.

Similarly, according to these French thinkers, modernism is not a monolithic concept, and postmodernism is not just a direct successor to modernism, but it emerges through various shifts. Foucault's point of view regarding power and genealogy offers divergent ways to understand power, history and subjectivity. Foucault's ideas are very close to what we termed as postmodernism. He focuses more on the lineage of power than totalizing concepts connected to grand narratives and social structures. For him, knowledge and power operate through various practices and institutions, and it is not possible to fit it into a single structure such as economy or class. This postmodern flavor in Foucault's approach emphasizes fragmentation and molecular aspects of power structure. Foucault rejects the unified social theory and structural totalities and focuses more on micro level ideas same as post-structuralism puts forward. According to post- structuralists meaning is not fixed and objective reality. Meaning always reflects the culture as well as the power structures that are always changing based on the context of the event. It underlines subjectivity and interpretation while dismantling the overall notion of binary opposition (Resch, [1989](#)).

Canonical Debates 'against' Postmodernity

As mentioned earlier, postmodernity is considered as flexible accumulation engaging the concept of neoliberalism by writers like David Harvey. Pro- postmodernists view the concept as a necessary recognition of fragmentation, pluralism and the collapse of grand narratives whereas anti modernists talk about the unclear explanation of material realities in post- modernism. The concept

weakens the overall class analysis. Writers like David Harvey, Alex Callinicos, Fredric Jameson and others argue postmodernity as a cultural expression of late capitalism. They are of the view that postmodernism indicates the changes within capitalism rather than a complete historical rupture or a departure from modernity. For instance, Fredric Jameson connects postmodernity with late capitalism. According to him postmodernity is all about a new periodization of consumerism, informational excess and multinational culture which is nonetheless a phase of capitalism. In his famous work titled *Marxism and Postmodernism*, Fredric Jameson insists that Marxism remains crucial for understanding the concept of postmodernism because postmodernity is the outcome of late capitalism. The fragmentation it offers does not refute Marxism. The features like relativism and fragmentation always allow reasonable Marxist analysis. He contended how individuals try to make connections between cultural experiences and economic structures. However, he also critiqued the rejection of grand narratives as put forward by postmodernity. Jameson is of the view that traditional Marxist theory requires revisions but total rejection to grand theories is equal to political paralysis. Grand narratives are always required to understand the structure of capitalism. Basically, Jameson does not reject postmodernity outright. Nor his aim to oppose the theory culturally but to interpret the material and structural realities as well (Jameson, 1989).

Steve Pile and Gillian Rose (1992) also examine the binary opposition between modernity and postmodernity. The writers argue that modernity is often thought of universal appeal with authoritative and oppressive grounds whereas postmodernity talks about differences and diversity and idealized as emancipatory, plural and democratic in its content. However, such a binary reflects ambiguity between the two traditions, especially when it comes to subjectivity and power. The position of both the traditions is further complicated when it comes to geography, especially of non-western countries because of their colonial legacy. Modernism is imposed in non-western countries through colonialism so the critique of universalism clashes with development. Moreover, non-western societies have quite different priorities, values and historical background so universal claims could be challenging for them. Such universal claims can also clash with local needs for unity as well as progress and development.

Locating the Middle Ground in Postmodernist Thought

According to the writers of 'All or nothing? Politics and critique in the modernism-postmodernism debate' totality of modernity and fragmentation of postmodernity are not the choices that political critique requires. Inequality and power can be better understood with the help of reflexive analysis that encourages critical thinking as how we can shape our knowledge. Furthermore, the writers are also critical of postmodernism's rejection of structural analysis. Although representation and identities are very important but abandoning broader theories and frameworks may cause political risks. From geographical perspective, the writers also talk about the significance of culture, space and subjectivity in the understanding of political action. The writers offer the middle grounds in opposition to extreme notions and totalizing claims of modernity and fragmentation of postmodernity. According to them, political critique will be more effective if it combines with the awareness of structure of power and critical engagement of subjects.

While focusing on the irrationalism of postmodernity scholarship, Gibson Burrell presents the analysis of Habermas' work and maintains that Habermas' thoughts revolve around alternatives to both modernity and postmodernity. Unlike postmodernity which focuses on fragmentation, rejection of grand narratives and relativism, Habermas concentrates more on universal norms and rational discourse and action for social change. Habermas approach to modernity seems more critical and reflexive than naive ideas of rationality. He is not a naive advocate of rationality but more rational in his approach towards modernity. Habermas critically assumes that modernity has produced a form of domination like bureaucracy, however it does not make the whole concept as

static. Modernity can be emancipatory through its rationalism. It is not a failed project in its true sense but can be reconstruct or reformed. Burrell (1994) highlights several elements of Habermas work that are contributing to organizational analysis in relevance to modernism and postmodernism. For example, instrumental rationality can be observed as a dominant tool of control in organizational environment, however through communicative rationality like consensus, dialogue as well as mutual understanding, it can be emancipatory. Organizations can become a site of inclusive dialogue and collaborative communication. Through reasoned dialogue, the actors can reach mutual understanding and finally decision making. Habermas organizational analysis contributes to debates like whether such analyses retain critical rationalism embracing uncertainty and seeking improvements through ethics and communicative actions or it should go with postmodern skepticism. The work of Habermas involves limitations like it is evaluated via organizational theory, so it does not offer empirical examples as how the writer's concepts play within organizational settings.

Finally, yet importantly, another writer Alex Callinicos also belongs to anti-modernist camp. His writing under title 'Postmodernism, Post-Structuralism, Post- Marxism' signals his position on the subject. Callinicos claims that it's a very wrong claim put forward by postmodernists that Marxism is obsolete (Callinicos, 1985). According to him, Marxism is always required to develop an understanding of capitalism in true sense. He also negates the concept of pro- postmodernists who prefer to deviate from class analysis or who want to dilute the structural significance. For Callinicos class is not just an identity. Class is basically a structural form that is shaped by societal structures like economic systems, institutional arrangements and labor markets. It is not just an individual difference, but it is all about how a society is actually organized and influence opportunities. Thinker like Karl Marx highlights the same multidimensional character of a class. Callinicos also argues postmodernist skeptical approach towards grand narratives and totality. According to him it is totally politically disabling as it undermines the collective actions. Callinicos work is a serious Marxist intervention against postmodernism (Tajbakhsh, 1991).

Do the Debates of Postmodernity adequately involve non- western societies?

Postmodernity theory is mostly developed in western countries and involves a linear path from primitive stages to modern and finally postmodern stages of development. So, it can be observed that postmodernity involves a historical sequence that is not shared by postcolonial or non- western societies. From historical perspectives, we can note that societies first mastered industrial modernity then moved to the later stages known as postmodern conditions like fragmentation, pluralism and flexible capitalism. What comes after modernity is termed as postmodernity. The non-western or postcolonial societies such as those in South Asian region did never experience the modernity stage in the way western societies did in the past. The anti- colonial movements predominantly focused on self- rule. Those movements were more of a nationalist character and established on a clear urgency of "now." The decolonization movements also introduced groups as well as classes including tribals, workers, peasants, most often belonging to suppressed and subordinate social groups of the third world countries. The movements were aimed to create a support base for democracy.

Historicism did not disappear from the world at that time but it was not aligning with the pressing need of "now" that marked all the popular nationalist movements of the time. All the ideas, norms, beliefs as well as institutions were historically conditioned in the western world. Modern institutions like educational institutions, health set-ups, judiciary and others were introduced by colonial rulers and they were also not organic development of their native regions. Modernity arrived there to dominate the masses rather their emancipation. The overall developmental project sponsored by west to non- western societies came forward as an incomplete version of modernity.

Stable labor regimes and welfare states were never fully achieved because of this distorted modernity. Hence, there was no clear transition in postmodern period, especially in non- western societies.

By and large, western societies passed through stages like industrialization to welfare state and then Fordism to flexible accumulation. On the other hand, non- western societies passed through colonial domination to extraction and then weak industrialization. These societies were more agrarian than industrial at its core due to their dependency and extreme domination in the form of external control. There was no success in sequence towards development. Canonical debates on postmodernity suppose a linear transition that involves modernity to postmodernity. This transition is deeply rooted in western historical experiences. However, when applied to non- western societies, one can observe uneven development. This is the main reason why many contemporary writers consider that European history is no longer seen as universal human history. Historicism, by and large, is not an objective concept. It is an ideological structure that is heavily dependent on western concept of modernity, Eurocentric and colonial domination. The whole debate of modernity frames the European countries as the beginning of modernity. And in this equation, the non- western countries are always treated as “dependent” ones. The theory of Karl Marx clearly strengthens such claims of developmental teleology. Chakrabarty's (2007) publication ‘Provincializing Europe’ also emphasizes how the historicism associated with western developmental stages is not an objective or neutral concept. The whole concept legitimizes colonization as a pre-requisite of development while denying the right of self- rule to Indians and Africans. However, the rise of nationalist movements and decolonization during 1950s and 1960s offer a new historical framing. The formal colonized societies and empires were collapsed and gave a new beginning to democratic societies. It is noted that the idea of historicism still exists but after decolonization and democratization it persists in tension and displaced, partially. It is significant to note that nationalist movements expanded the political domain and challenged the Eurocentric ideas of development and governance. Democracy became the mass- mobilized movement rather than any compulsion for developing nations. Those were the times when the connotation of ‘third world’ was also replaced by ‘Global South’ or ‘post-colonial societies.’

Conclusion

From the above-mentioned discussion, it can be concluded that postmodernism is directly proportion to neoliberal tendencies. The essay acknowledges that neoliberal norms like free markets, privatization, deregulation, fragmentation and flexible accumulation of wealth directly correspond to a decline in grand narratives that once thought to be the shared vision for future. The hyperreality and Simulacrum as analyzed by Jean Baudrillard further enhance the neoliberal capacities. The critics argue that neoliberalism is a way to benefit wealthy elite while increasing inequality among the masses. So, the cultural capital of postmodernity as mentioned by Spanos (1990) is the point that turns neoliberalism into an ideology for the restoration of class power, in long run. Basically, neoliberalism provides the economic base and political conditions whereas postmodernism offers cultural grounds to normalize these conditions. So, postmodernism is an ideology that normalizes neo-liberal capitalism rather than the emergence of entirely new post-industrial society.

Last but not the least; postmodernism is an expression of late capitalism. While this ideology rejects grand narratives like Marxism; challenges universal truths and focuses on diverse values, it can undermine the probability of collective action. Without shared goals and narratives, it is very difficult to mobilize the masses towards change. Common struggles can be sidelined as a result. Furthermore, critics like Jameson, Callinicos and Harvey simply argue that postmodernism has made class relations quite unclear. It also weakens the political critique by rejecting historical materialism. Although postmodernity highlights important transformations in late capitalism, it is seriously failed to engage postcolonial and non- western societies. Last but not the least, the silence or ignorance to explain material realities and class relations also limit its explanatory power.

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