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MODERNITY, POSTMODERNISM AND POLITICS (IN PLACES LIKE SOUTH AFRICA)

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Introduction

Perusing texts on postmodernism leaves one with an impression similar to Sartre's impression about existentialism in 1948:

> Most of those who are making use of this word would be highly confused if required to explain its meaning. For since it has become fashionable, people cheerfully declare that this musician or that painter is "existentialist." A columnist in *Clartés* signs himself "The Existentialist," and indeed, the word is now so loosely applied to so many things that it no longer means anything at all" (Sartre 1948:25,26).

A superficial reading of postmodern texts could lead one to lack the confidence about the concept of postmodernism that Sartre had about the concept of existentialism, viz. that it can be easily defined and explained. The reason is that authors refer to debates in and about postmodernism as appearing to be at first sight "an impenetrable and specialized debate" (Boyne 1990:1), calls the concept postmodernism "hoch umstritten" and "inflationär gebraucht" (Welsch 1988:9), and claims that the popularity of postmodernism made "die doolhof van die postmodernisme al hoe ondeurdringbaarder" (Kirsten 1988:29). Kirsten argues that there is no agreement on how postmodernism must be defined, how its claims must be assessed, or how it must be placed within contemporary culture (1988:20).

However, in this article I want to show that it *is* possible to interpret an important group of postmodern texts as presenting intellectual and practical challenges with a specific focus that is worth the serious attention of everyone interested in politics. My interpretation intends to show that a certain strand of postmodern thought is not only consonant with a liberal democratic political morality, but also modifies and extends it in an eminently desirable direction. Such an interpretation has become possible because a significant consensus has emerged from the writings of prominent commentators and participants in the debates about postmodernism. In this article I will reconstruct this emerging consensus by referring specifically to the contribution of these postmodern texts to politics, thus leaving aside its possible contribution to the arts and sciences. I will start by giving an exposition of a new understanding of modernity that has been brought about by the debates on modernity / postmodernism. Then I will characterize the postmodern political condition by describing those changes in contemporary modern societies that stimulate and facilitate the development and growth of postmodernism. The next section provides an interpretation of the political philosophy contained in the work of prominent postmodern thinkers such as Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard and Jencks. In this overview I show that an emphasis on the importance of heterogeneity and otherness unifies the diverse contributions of these postmodernists to political philosophy. I conclude the article by drawing some implications for politics in places like South Africa, from the insights I judge postmodernism provides to political philosophy in general.

A better understanding of modernity

Some authors describe postmodernism as "fundamentally a European innovation" (Heller and Fehér 1988:13). If it is true that postmodernism develops, lives and feeds on the achievements and dilemmas of modernity to the extent that it is in "every respect 'parasitic' on modernity" (Heller and Fehér 1988:11), then one must understand modernity before postmodernism can be defined. Furthermore, postmodernism will only be relevant to societies like South Africa in so far as they can be described as modern or modernizing countries.

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Postmodernism stimulates a deeper insight in, and better understanding of modernity. I want to give a provisional definition of postmodernism in Hegelian terms: postmodernism is the spirit of the Enlightenment (modernity) coming to self-consciousness, or as Giddens (1990:48) puts it: "modernity coming to understand itself." Postmodernism is in no way trans- or anti-modern; as Wolfgang Welsch says: "Sie ist eigentlich radikal-modern, nicht post-modern." I thus interpret postmodernism as reflection on the nature, potential, shortcomings and darker sides of modernity. Even if postmodernism's only contribution, it would be substantial, as the nature of modernity "has been poorly grasped in the social sciences hitherto" (Giddens 1990:3). This reflection on modernity enables us to understand and evaluate modern social structures, political practices, philosophical (theoretical) thought and everyday life. It is to some of these insights that I now turn to illuminate the nature of a modern society so that I can determine whether a society like South Africa could be classified as such.

A conspicuous feature of recent writings on modernity is that modernity is by no means interpreted as a monolithic whole (cf. Heller and Fehér 1988:15). Modernity is rather seen as consisting of several components which are compatible with various, though not all, cultural life-styles. Before discussing these components, it is helpful to note that modernity is not equal to European culture. Although it is true that modernity is the creation of Europe, Heller and Fehér (1988:146) notes the paradox that Europe in turn was created by modernity. By this they mean that a "specifically European identity" started to form only in the eighteenth century, at the same time that the patterns of modernity were "also put into final shape" (Heller and Fehér 1988:146). For a long time no distinction was made between European cultural life-styles and modernity, so that modernity was seen as a monolithic whole that placed Europe at the forefront of all other cultures. However, a close scrutiny of the extremely fast dissemination and easy appropriation of modernity throughout the world reveals that European nations rarely exported their music, fine arts, literature or other aspects of their cultural life-styles to their colonies and other modernizing countries; mostly specific "ingredients" or components of modernity were exported and appropriated by other societies into their cultural life-styles (Heller and Fehér 1988:157). The ability of components of modernity to infiltrate societies without replacing all aspects of their cultural life-styles explains why it can be called "a culture without a culture" (Heller and Fehér 1988:156).

What are the main components or dimensions of modernity? If modernity refers to "modes of social life or organization which emerged in Europe from about the seventeenth century onwards" (Giddens 1990:1), then the emergence of modern science, which revolutionized both our view of the world and technological development, must rank as one of the first dimensions of modernity. The success of modern science generated a strong belief in the "liberating potential immanent in the application of reason and science to both the natural environment and to social relations" (Boyne 1990:3). A capitalist mode of production is another of the dimensions, or as Heller and Fehér (1988:15) puts it, the "developmental logics" of modernity. Characteristic of capitalism is that it is a system of commodity production for competitive markets, and centred upon "the relation between private ownership of capital and propertyless wage labour" (Giddens 1990:55). Modern technology enabled industrialization, another dimension of modernity, in which inanimate sources of material power are used in the production of goods, with machines playing a central role (Giddens 1990:56). Industrialization and a capitalist mode of production have several effects on a society, the chief ones being the creation of several new human environments and the destruction of the natural as well as other human environments; large scale urbanization and rapid urban growth; the development of mass communication that facilitates a fast flow of information previously undreamt of; and a speeding up of the tempo of life (Berman quoted in Boyne 1990:2,3).

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The development of nation-states, coupled with new administrative systems that make "coordinated control possible over specific geographical areas," is also a component of modernity (Giddens 1990:57). No premodern state had anything similar to this administrative coordination, which depends on the development of "apparatuses of surveillance" (Giddens 1990:57). Surveillance can be defined as the supervision of the activities of citizens of a nation-state and is mostly based on "the control of information" (Giddens 1990:58). Two other political developments are components of modernity. One is described by Heller (1990:148) as the "most crucial aspect" of modernity, viz. symmetric reciprocity. The gradual development of liberal democracies premised on human rights is an expression of symmetric reciprocity, in such a way that Connolly (1987:3) refers to them as the "pride and hope of modernity." However, democracy is not the only expression thereof, as various other kinds of relationships are examined and renegotiated in these terms. The language of human rights has become the *lingua franca* of modern liberal democracies (Heller 1990:152), and it presents continual challenges to "all principles, institutions and arrangements of asymmetric reciprocity" (Heller 1990:157). The other aspect of modern states that seems peculiar to modernity is the Weberian exclusive control of the means of violence (Giddens 1990:58). In pre-modern societies, so Giddens (1990:58) argues, the governing forces typically could not secure a monopoly of the means of violence within its geographic borders, as they could not secure stable military support for long enough.

These various components or dimensions of modernity do *not* come as a package deal that has to be implemented together as a whole. To see it thus would imply not making the error of seeing "everything modern as belonging to one Enlightenment package" (Taylor 1989: 605). For a society to qualify as a modernizing one, it must be a society in the process of renewal, in which one or more of the components of modernity, though not necessarily all of them, are implemented or take effect. This implies that a society can be judged to be modern in varying degrees. In this sense one can speak of the full "gamut of alternative modernities which are in the making in different parts of the world" today (Taylor 1989:606). The advantage of this interpretation of modernity is to free both non-European (non-Western) modern societies from "the distorting grid of a bogus universality" and Western moderns from "our ethnocentric prison" (Taylor 1989:623). Furthermore, the different aspects of modernity do not necessarily interlock and support one another harmoniously. Although it often happens that some components of modernity mutually reinforce one another, such as is mostly the case with capitalism, industrialism, and scientific technology, it can also be that they contradict one another or that one or more components subordinate others to themselves.

These components or dimensions of modernity have certain features which distinguish the modern era from all other eras. One such feature is the reflexive nature of institutions and practices, referring to the way they are constantly evaluated and modified in the light of new knowledge and information about them (Giddens 1990:38). Giddens views this "chronic revision" facilitated by new information as "part of the very tissue of modern institutions" (Giddens 1990:40). As an example Giddens (1990:43) refers to the way that knowledge about changes in family institutions and sexual morality affect those people who are married or consider marriage. The working of (especially) knowledge produced by the human sciences in modern societies is thus summarized by Giddens (1990:45): "Knowledge claimed by expert observers (in some part, and in many varying ways) rejoins its subject matter, thus (in principle, but also normally in practice) altering it."

Another feature of modern societies is that they have differentiated into various spheres or social practices to a "previously unknown degree" (Heller and Fehér 1988: 76). There has been a differentiation between various public, private and intimate spheres. This means that the political and economic spheres have differentiated and the cultural sphere has subdivided into several subspheres (Heller and Fehér 1988: 76). For example, science liberated itself from religious and metaphysical constraints and autonomously

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determines its standards and objectives. Similarly, art and philosophy emancipated themselves by "rejecting the imposition of alien norms on their autonomous territory" (Heller and Fehér 1988: 76). This meant that each differentiated sphere developed norms and rules appropriate to its needs (cf. Kirsten 1988:21), as is exemplified by codification thereof in curricula and in numerous codes of professional ethics. Nevertheless there still are meta-norms of the society which may not be contradicted (Heller and Fehér 1988:76), often expressed in rights language. This differentiation leads to the formation of a complex society which has several centres of varying importance and power.

One of the very obvious features of modernity is the pace of change that it creates, as well as the scope of the changes, as Giddens puts it: "waves of social transformation crash across virtually the whole of the earth's surface" (Giddens 1990:6). Obviously rapid and comprehensive changes are very demanding on those undergoing it. This seems to be only a small part of the 'dark side' of modernity, which also demands our full attention.

Modernity promised much in its early stages: new opportunities for all people, increased wealth fairly equitably distributed, improved living conditions, social freedom, a happier life, and so on. These promises generated a general faith in human progress. However, modernity has a Janus-face, or alternatively, it is a "double-edged phenomenon" (Giddens 1990:7). Connolly notes that supporters of modernity would, in their optimistic moments, define it by contrasting it to earlier periods which are "darker, more superstitious, less free, less rational, less productive, less civilized, less comfortable, less democratic, less tolerant, less respectful of the individual, less scientific and less developed technically than it is at its best." Opponents of modernity often endorse some of these differentiations, but evaluate them differently as they think that modernity has lost "a world of rich tradition, a secure place in the order of being, a well-grounded morality, a spiritual sensibility, an appreciation of hierarchy, an attunemnet to nature; and these vacated places have been filled by bureaucracy, nationalism, rampant subjectivism, an all-consuming state, a consumer culture, a commercialized world or, perhaps, a disciplinary society" (Connolly 1988:1).

Although modernity has abundantly delivered some of its promises in that millions of people today live far better lives than most kings of premodern times, it also has its dark and somber side - created not only by failing to live up to some of its promises, but also by generating new forms of power that restrict human freedom. Some aspects hereof is the threat of a nuclear holocaust; the devastation brought about by modern wars; the loss of values, identity and purpose; environmental disasters and catastrophes; various forms of alienation; genocide and the Gulag (cf. Kirsten 1988:18). A particularly pernicious part of the legacy of European modernity is the "discursively produced" cultural and moral superiority of Western imperial powers which legitimated the discovery, exploration and subjugation, alternatively, the domination and exploitation of the Orient, Africa and Asia by commercially expansive colonizers such as Britain, France or Holland (Boyne 1990:35).

Postmodernism as an intellectual movement reacts in various ways to different aspects of the components, achievements, dilemmas and disasters of modernity. In what follows I want to present an interpretation of what I regard as some of the more important postmodern insights relevant for politics and political philosophy, that could help us cope better with modern institutions and practices in order to live more meaningful lives. What I am doing here is a typical modern thing to do, viz. to refashion the self-criticism of modernity into elements within it. Part of being modern is to aspire to that which is new, to differentiate it from the past. In this sense postmodernism, as leaving behind the old-modern, is "one of the paradigmatic ways of to be modern" (Connolly 1988:3). Postmodern insights could help to "reassess some of its [modernity's] central assumptions" (Boyne 1990:41) and to complete the unfulfilled, though redefined

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and differently understood project of modernity. To put it differently, the task would now be to realize the various projects current in our postmodern modernity. This latter expression means that, though we still live in modernity, "wir tun es genau in dem Maße, in dem wir 'Postmodernes' realisieren" (Welsch 1988:6).

The postmodern political condition

The insights of postmodernism can only be understood against the background of the "postmodern political condition" (Heller and Fehér 1988) or the "postmodern problematic" (White 1991:4). Obviously the exposition of modernity given above is a central part thereof, but it is worthwhile to examine some of the other *specific phenomena in contemporary modern societies* that are associated with the development and growth of postmodernism. That postmodernism developed in reaction to events in modern societies is affirmed by Welsch (1988:83) when he says that "das postmoderne Denken ist keineswegs etwas Exotisches, sondern die Philosophie dieser Welt."

Jean-Francois Lyotard isolated one of these phenomena as "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard 1979:xxiv), or as that the "grand narrative has lost its credibility" (Lyotard 1979:37). These narratives are attempts at interpreting the world in such a way that they indicate where something (persons, groups, nations, societal institutions) come from, what they are and where they are going to (Heller and Fehér 1988:2). They have the function of legitimating what people are doing and provide justification for people's choice of their actions. The end of such grand narratives would imply the rejection of "the hegemonical claims of any group or organization to 'represent' the forces of history, to be moving with such forces, or to be acting in their name" (Benhabib 1991:141). An example of such a metanarrative that has become incredulous is the idea that unlimited scientific and technological progress would enable moderns to reach the ideal of the good life (cf. White 1991:5).

Another metanarrative that has lost its force is that the class struggle is the motor of history and would eventually lead to a classless, harmonious and prosperous society of equals. For Boyne (1990:40) the failure to grasp the importance of "non-class sites of domination" is enough to discredit any social or political theory. The reason is the gradual weakening and withering away of political activity based on class characteristics (Heller and Fehér 1988:3). Contemporary politics sees the continual appearance of new social issues, which are pursued by new social movements. Examples of such movements are the women's movement, radical ecologists, antinuclear movement, ethnic movements, and gay and lesbian movements. They are often oriented towards single issues and harbour a "suspicion of totalistic revolutionary programs" (White 1991:11). These social movements - often the result of identification with local issues and values - contrasts interestingly with the strong global consciousness fostered by the development of the so-called global village.

The emergence of such new social movements gives a strong impetus toward diversity and plurality in modern states - something that is already stimulated by liberal democratic institutions. This is another typical phenomenon of the postmodern problematic. As grand narratives break down and new social movements emerge, one finds that supporters of various small narratives - such as local, ethnic, cultural, religious, or ideological - have to find ways of co-existing harmoniously (Heller and Fehér 1988:5).

The last phenomenon that plays a central role in the postmodern problematic is the proliferation of new informational technologies that "vastly enhanced the circulation of images and information" (White 1991:8). Jencks (1987:44) refers to the organized network of world communication, whose significance lies in the "sudden emergence of an integrated system of global communication which is quick and effective." These communication technologies have immense power to structure the consciousness of those making use

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thereof, and could do so in ways that would empower individuals and new social movements, or that enslave people to the ideologies and interests of dominant groups (White 1991:9). Whatever the case may be, there has certainly never been a time in history in which it was easier for "a determined group to come to public attention through the mass media, primarily television" (White 1991:130). One of the crucial issues surrounding the new informational technology is whether knowledge and information will be disseminated and thus accessible to everyone that needs to make decisions based on such knowledge (cf. Lyotard 1979:14, 67). Access to relevant information becomes politically indispensable.

Postmodernism and politics: heterogeneity and otherness

What can postmodernism contribute to make life better in modern societies with dilemmas as outlined above? For the purposes of this essay I want to interpret a certain group of postmodern texts as having some coherence in that their various contributions are united by a "self-proclaimed commitment to heterogeneity, fragmentation and difference" (Boyne 1990:9). Welsch (1988:39) identifies the crux of postmodernism, as "indem sie die zutage tretende Vielfalt in ihrer Legitimität und Eigenart zu sichern und zu entfalten sucht," and Jencks (1987:55) sees the "new attitude of openness" as perhaps the biggest shift brought about by postmodernism. The obvious problem of this strong emphasis on plurality is "die Schwierigkeit der Vereinbarung des Heterogenen" (Welsch 1988: 34). I do not mean to deny the political variety and indeterminacy of postmodernism (cf. Boyne 1990:26), which make it possible to derive conservative as well as radical conclusions from it; indeed, as Rosenau (1992:157) points out, postmodernism "permits different readings with contradictory implications." Its political content is often ambivalent, as can be seen from the uneasy alliance (cf. Benhabib 1991 and Fraser 1991) between two of the "most important political-cultural currents of the last decade," viz. feminism and postmodernism (Fraser and Nicholson 1990:19). My interpretation of these postmodern texts is guided by Welsch's (1988:7) remark that "Die Postmoderne ist wesentlich ethisch grundiert," and done with the objective of redefining and refining modern liberal democratic political morality.

The most important contribution of postmodernism to our postmodern modernity seems to be the creation of an awareness of our responsibility to heterogeneity and otherness (difference). This flows from the analyses of several postmodern thinkers that expose and track how the harmony and unity promised by our modern cognitive machinery have an inevitable cost in that it denies the ineradicability of dissonance and engenders the other that is devalued and disciplined (White 1991:20). This can be explained and illustrated by reference to four of the key postmodern figures, viz. Derrida, Foucalt, Lyotard and Jencks.

Deconstruction, mainly associated with Jacques Derrida, aims at demystifying a text, with the aim of ripping it apart to reveal arbitrary hierarchies and presuppositions (Rosenau 1992:120). It examines what a text leaves out, what is excluded, unnamed or concealed, and what it represses. By deconstructing a text one can show its ambivalence, reveal its contradictions and inconsistencies, and try to "undo, reverse, displace, and resituate the hierarchies involved in polar opposites such as object/subject, right/wrong, good/bad, pragmatic/principled" (Rosenau 1992: 120). As everything - persons, events and institutions - is regarded as texts, it implies that deconstruction is applicable to a wide range of phenomena. In Derrida's own words, deconstruction is

> a matter of gaining access to the mode in which a system or structure, or ensemble, is constructed or constituted, historically speaking. Not to destroy it, or demolish it, nor to purify it, but in order to accede to its possibilities and its meaning; to its consstruction and its history (Mortley 1991:97).

If understood in the above defined way, deconstruction has an intrinsically political character, as it breaks down anyone's claims of being authoritative, logical and universal and exposing them to be arbitrary,

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ambiguous and particular instead (White 1988:188). In general, it exposes power phenomena where people have claimed that only reason exists (White 1988:188 and 1991:16). Behind deconstruction lies an "ethico-political impulse," which McCarthy (1990:154, 158) describes as follows: "a commitment to bear witness to the other of Western rationalism: to what has been subordinated in hierarchical orderings, excluded in the drawing of boundaries, marginalized in identifying what is central, homogenized or colonized in the name of the universal." Bernstein (1991:181) identifies various motifs as expressive of Derrida's ethical-political horizon, such as exclusion, violence, the "condemnation and abomination of what is taken as other, the power of the 'word' (which is never merely the word), the establishment of fixed 'natural' hierarchies and orders." According to Bernstein people like some Jews, blacks, and women find that Derrida's texts has something special to say to them. The reason is that Derrida writes with "enormous sensitivity and discernment about the violence done to those who have been exiled and condemned to the margins" (Bernstein 1991:182). In this sense Derrida's philosophy finds its mirror image in the serious music of the contemporary composer Arvo Pärt. His music re-enacts biblical events, but is also described as enfolding the "manifest suffering of mankind" in recent times, which has been reduced by great upheavals to an "inhuman common denominator, that of the *Century of the Refugee*." Pärt, so Conen (1991) tells us, has personal experience thereof, and he relates it to the three-fold tragedy of "*flight, exile and inner emigration*."

What can one do with deconstruction within the framework of liberal democratic values such as equal respect for all people and the equal consideration of everyone's interests? As it enables a critical look that borders on disrespect and advocates that we never cease questioning authority (Bernstein 1991:183), deconstruction thus facilitates an inspection, examination and evaluation of classifications, categorizations, definitions, patterns of behaviour, practices and institutions. For example, definitions of various categories of gender identity can be interrogated, evaluated, overturned, and disrupted (Boyne 1990:32), to show what they exclude and the subordination and marginalization caused by practices and institutions can be similarly exposed, so that closures can be opened up and different voices - those that were previously silenced - can be heard, and new spaces can be constructed for new inhabitants.

One of Michel Foucault's main contributions is his analysis of the normalizing tendencies in modern democracies which occur in those areas of life "into which bureaucratically enforced norms have penetrated" (Connolly 1987:8). This leads to the formation of "ubiquitous but ultimately uncentred power relations" (Boyne 1990:18). The extent to which normalization, with its accompanying power relations and disciplinary control, has become part of modern democracies, becomes clear when one considers the amount of people employed today in institutions whose primary purpose is

> to observe, control, correct, confine, reform, cure, or regulate other people (e.g., the police, the military, intelligence agencies, polling centers, reform schools, therapeutic centers, halfway houses, prisons, welfare agencies, nursing homes, juridical institutions) or is the object of these operations (e.g., illegal aliens, prisoners, tax evaders, dissidents, welfare recipients, delinquents, the mentally disturbed, the retarded, nursing-home clients, divorcees (Connolly 1987:8).

Foucault shows in his work that any "new discourse is always another new mode of power" (White 1988:189, 190) as social institutions give practical effect to discursive distinctions such as reason/madness and normal/abnormal (White 1991:17). Power gets a new definition as a "slowly spreading net of normalization that invades our language, our institutions, and even (and especially) our consciousness of ourselves as subjects" (White 1988:190). Foucault elucidates how normalization has the result that "an 'Other' is *always* pushed aside, marginalized, forcibly homogenized, and devalued" (White 1988:190).

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Hereby he exposes the persistent, ineradicable, though submerged presence of discord in the lives of modern people, that unsettles the deep-rooted modern quest for harmony and unity (White 1988:191).

One effect of normalization is that it produces the abnormal, the other, or that which does not fit. Traditionally this has been treated as something not worthy of respect, something to be "corrected, eliminated, punished, or integrated" (Connolly 1987:10). The postmodern challenge, however, is to establish "more space for otherness to be" (Connolly 1987:11). This can best be done, according to Connolly (1987:15), by revising modern democracies, as they provide a medium "through which these voices of otherness can find expression in the self and the public world."

The way in which normalization and thus disciplinary control has extended into various facets of social life in modernity is the reason why Foucault refers to the "carceral texture of society," a society in which the judges of normality are everywhere present and normalizing power is strengthened especially by surveillance and observation (Foucault 1977:304).

Foucault indeed uncovered the workings of important sets of power relations in various modern institutions such as the hospital, the asylum, the school and the prison. Experts with specialized knowledge exercise power and the others in the institution are mostly barred from any participation in decision making. However, this does not imply that the experts can exercise unlimited power. Within modern liberal democracies, citizens and the state must guard "the integrity of its various institutional settings" (Walzer 1983:290), which means to tie professional people to the social meanings of those institutions. This means continual reflection on the reasons for, and the purposes of those institutions, as well as on the appropriate conduct of its officials (Walzer 1983:289). Walzer defines the role of the experts as pilots of ships whose destination have already been determined by the society. This agreement on its destination limits what they can do; as Walzer explains: "our understanding of the purpose of a prison (and the meaning of punishment and the social roles of judges, wardens, and prison guards) sets limits to the exercise of power within its walls" (Walzer 1983:289). Such institutions must be responsive to these social meanings and any violations thereof be judged by government, the law and the civic consciousness of citizens.

Lyotard shows particular sensitivity to otherness or difference. He fears totalising discourses that can lead to totalitarianism. Benhabib (1991:141) says that one of the most formative experiences of postmodernist intellectuals such as Lyotard was "the critique of the various totalitarian and totalizing movements of our century from national socialism and fascism to orthodox marxism and other nationalisms." Brodsky (1987:297) identifies one of the political motivations of postmodernism as to provide grounds for "resisting totalitarian ideologies and policies" by deconstructing foundations and metanarratives that "goes hand in hand with totalitarian politics." Lyotard's strong focus on metanarratives is driven by the conviction that these metanarratives purports to be a privileged discourse capable of "situating, characterizing, and evaluating all other discourses but not itself to be infected by the historicity and contingency which render first-order discourses potentially distorted and in need of legitimation" (Fraser and Nicholson 1990:22). He renounces terror, which he says assumes that all uses of language is uniform. Against this, Lyotard (1979:66) argues for the heterogeneous nature of various uses of language. There is no uniform use of language that everyone has to comply with, although the use of various language games in a society is what binds it together, not grand narratives (Lyotard 1979:15). If grand narratives have lost their power to unify modern societies, this does not mean that social institutions and practices should exist without any justification. Rather temporary contracts, subject to eventual cancellation, must be negotiated by those participating in particular practices and institutions.

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Postmodernism - especially as defined by Jencks (1987) - also fosters a strong rejection of Eurocentrism, as well as a strong appreciation of 'other' cultures. Furthermore it emphasizes - especially in various forms of art - a rejection of a culture of experts and strongly supports democratizing the arts to make it accessible for mass consumption, as well as to infuse it into the everyday life of people. As a result of the information explosion (new knowledge and mass communication) and the openness to plurality, our time has become one of "incessant choosing" (Jencks 1987:7). Postmodernism enables and encourages us to choose in such a way that one combines traditions selectively, i.e. to choose "those aspects from the past which appear most relevant for the job at hand" (Jencks 1987:7). Successful choosing through inventive combination can result in a striking synthesis of traditions (or "double coding" as Jencks (1987:14) calls it), thereby realizing the promise inherent in the many freedoms, cultural riches and kaleidoscopic heterogeneity of a radically pluralistic society (Jencks 1987:7). Moreover, and of special relevance for modernizing societies, is that the postmodern sensibility "thrives on dispositions different from its own" and therefore it can "willingly include the Modern and Pre-Modern conditions as essential parts of its existence" (Jencks 1987:56). This implies that a typically postmodern attitude would be to appropriate personal or societal lifestyles selectively from components of premodernity, modernity, and postmodernism. Obviously this will lead to a multitude of varying versions of modernity and thus a postmodern celebration of plurality and heterogeneity.

Postmodernism and politics (in places like South Africa)

What implications for South African politics can be drawn from the above exposition of modernity and my interpretation of various postmodern texts? A better understanding of modernity, a grasp of the social changes that constitute the postmodern political condition and a heightened sensitivity to heterogeneity and otherness (difference) do imply several things for places like South Africa.

What South Africa must urgently do is to modernize under the guidance of a postmodernist ethos. First and foremost needed are founding documents and events that will help grant legitimacy to the new (modern) institutions of symmetric reciprocity to be established in the democratic South Africa (cf. White 1991:78). In South Africa a choice between concrete institutional alternatives must be made and one of these will have to be judged as better and more defensible than the others (cf. White 1991:146). This choice with strong modern overtones, would have to be strongly influenced by the postmodern awareness of the "perpetual necessity for remaining sensitive to otherness" (White 1991:146). Also needed are other components of modernity such as a strong market economy, technological innovation, scientific application, and effective control of the means of violence by the state. To learn lessons from the experience fully modernized countries had with with the introduction of these developmental logics of modernity is imperative to avoid the darker side of modernity enveloping citizens already involved in a major political transition. Thus, the success of modernizing South Africa depends on whether such postmodern insights will play a guiding role. For example, if South Africa opts to become a modern country, then postmodernism with its emphasis on the *selective appropriation* of various possibilities of modernizing would save the country from some of the mistakes made elsewhere. This emphasis implies that South Africans must decide for themselves which components of modernity they want to utilize and emphasize, and which of the local traditions they want to incorporate, preserve and sustain in the modern society they are creating. In this way a unique South African modernity could come into place.

Modernizing in such a way implies the rejection of Eurocentrism, or Western chauvinism, as the view that Western (European) culture is simply the best and all other cultures must be obliterated by it. Such an attitude is particularly apt at this stage in South Africa's history, as a large part of the genesis and maintenance of apartheid institutions was built upon Eurocentric views. The liberalization of South Africa

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has already brought about a new awareness of the diversity of non-Western cultures and the need to give them their rightful place.

South Africa's transition to democracy, or alternatively, its modernizing drive to implement symmetric reciprocity, has led South Africans to experience a growing incredulity towards metanarratives, especially those about the special role of the Calvinist Afrikaner in Africa and the divine creation of different peoples which have to live on their own territories. Postmodernism cautions against totalising metanarratives which tend to subordinate "plurality and heterogeneity to unity and homogeneity under the regime of some purportedly universal principles of justice" (White 1991:118). It does not seem possible to escape using metanarratives - even Lyotard seems to rely on one, as he narrates a "fairly tall tale about a large-scale social trend" (Fraser and Nicholson 1990:25). South Africans must be critical toward metanarratives and rather opt for a plurality of both larger historical narratives, as well as smaller local narratives, "as it permits each to counteract the distorting tendencies of the other: local genealogizing narratives correct the tendency of large-scale accounts to congeal into 'quasi-metanarratives', while larger contextualizing accounts help prevent local narratives from devolving into simple demonstrations of 'difference'" (Fraser 1991:168).

The liberalizing of the South African society since 2 February 1990 has brought about an awareness of a greater diversity of social issues. A postmodern attitude will reinforce and foster this trend, also stimulated by the above-mentioned incredulity toward metanarratives.. Political issues as defined by political parties will have to diversify - a process that has already started - in the same way as feminist theories had to accommodate the experiences of lesbians, women of colour and poor, working-class women. These marginalized women objected to feminist theories "which failed to illuminate their lives and address their problems". They exposed these theories as "false extrapolations from the experience of the white, middle-class, heterosexual women" (Fraser and Nicholson 1990:33).

To make a diversity of political issues a reality would mean that it would be a good thing for all modern democracies - South Africa's emerging one as well - to drop the assumption that all interest groups get a hearing, let alone a fair hearing, from all who matters in society. Recent political history shows that this rarely happens. Much better would be to assume that various voices might be unable to speak, not capable of speaking a language or in conventions that are understood, or might be misunderstood or deliberately ignored (cf. White 1991:131). Postmodernism nurtures an awareness of such voices and stimulates a sensitivity towards various forms of otherness, created by factors such as economic interests, moral uprightness, social prejudice, institutional differentiation, and so on. Not only should such voices be tolerated, but they should also be fostered. Once this is said, the problem of when to constrain and when to foster arises. A tentative solution would be to foster otherness to the extent that it is compatible with the moral constraints demarcated by a generous interpretation of human rights and their possible extension. White's argument that difference feminism seems best equipped to flesh out a new ethic to cope satisfactorily with otherness is convincing. The ethic of care, developed by difference feminism, emerges from women's experience of "connectedness, compassion and sensitivity to context" (White 1991:95, 96). For Carol Gilligan, mature judgement would comprise the more male ethic of justice, viz. That everyone ought to be treated the same, as well as the more female ethic of care, viz. that no one should be hurt (Gilligan 1982 :174), as both inequality and violence are destructive for those involved. However, postmodernism stimulates an ethic of care, which Gilligan described as follows: "Sensitivity to the needs of others and the assumption of responsibility for taking care lead women to attend to voices other than their own and to include in their judgment other points of view" (Gilligan 1982 :16). In her interviews with women she repeatedly came across the moral imperative that is so much stronger developed in women, viz. "an injunction to care, a responsibility to discern and alleviate the real and recognizable trouble of this

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world" (Gilligan 1982 :100). These moral imperatives seems to be underlying and complement the postmodern responsibility towards otherness, and would have to be cultivated in modern democracies with their diversity of social issues.

When South Africans eventually become participants in democratic political institutions, they are bound to have a sensitivity to all forms of power relations - especially those outside the traditional political institutions, such as power relations in prisons, hospitals, mental institutions and educational settings. This sensitivity must be strengthened and citizens must be empowered to articulate their views on the reasons and purposes for the existence of such institutions. By developing strong views on these matters citizens can ensure that such power relations are constrained, controlled and legitimated by the civic consciousness of democratic citizens.

A final remark about the relevance of postmodern insights for countries such as South Africa concerns the long and painful experiences of injustice that many citizens have had over a long period of time. These should be translated into a realistic appraisal of the prevalence of injustice in all societies, the best of modern democracies included. Instead of defining injustice as that which does not comply with the rules of justice, a more sensitive and far-reaching definition thereof can be given. Such a definition of injustice would enhance people's sensitivity "to the intractability and pervasiveness of injustice" and could offer a "finer-grained illumination of neglected ethical-political phenomena" (White 1991:123, 124). Judith Shklar (1990) gives such a penetrating analysis of injustice. Shklar's distinction between misfortune (that which is unavoidable and natural) and injustice (that which is controllable and social) (Shklar 1990:1) is illuminating, as well as her remark that "the line of separation between injustice and misfortune is a political choice" (Shklar 1990:5). Her definition of passive injustice as a "specific civic failure to stop private and public acts of injustice" (1990:6), as well as her emphasis that the self-understanding of victims "must also be taken into account by a full theory of injustice" (1990:36), suggests an approach to injustice that is caring, sensitive to persons, and aware of differences between situations.

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