

*Modernism, Postmodernism, and Ultra-modernism: The
Difference and the Continuity*

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Abstract:

This paper briefly presents the historical and philosophical link between Enlightenment philosophy and the emergence of Postmodern philosophy, i.e., the transition from modernity to postmodernity. While identifying and recognizing the “difference” and the sharp contrast, I will concentrate on showing the “continuity” between the two philosophies. This paper shows that postmodernism can be understood as *ultra-modernism* in at least two dimensions 1) in opting for a particular critical methodology and 2) in the intensification of subjectivity. This enactment of deconstructive criticism, skepticism, relativism, and subjectivism has generated a cultural condition that suspects and distrusts every knowledge and truth claim. As a result, the matters which are related to our shared communal concerns are becoming ambiguous.

The Enlightenment Project professed a unique place for human reason. It caused division between humans and the natural world by making the human subject exceptional and superior, having the ability to *reason* (Adorno and Horkheimer 2008, 203-204). Descartes’ mind-body dualism and method of doubt, Bacon’s idea of scientific domination over nature, and the Newtonian world of the mechanical process have developed modern philosophy and initiated the scientific revolution. Kant, later on, further intensified the idea of passive external nature, in contrast to human’s ability to actively reason. Resultantly, the ideas of rationalistic epistemology, uniqueness of human reason, subject-object duality, separation of church and state,

and objectivistic ontology changed and transformed the socio-politico-economic conditions of society. This new intellectual and societal condition of being “Modern” is referred to as “Modernity”.

In *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, John Dewey explained the transition from traditional ways of thinking and knowledge with the modern thinking. Epistemologically, this shift is not just about changes in the *means of acquiring knowledge*, but also in terms of the *goal of knowledge* as well, from “power over other men” to “power over nature”. He explicates the development of scientific knowledge and presents Francis Bacon as a prophet of the modern scientific revolution by writing:

Power over Nature was not to be individual but collective; the Empire, as he says, of Man over Nature, substituted for the Empire of Man over Man. (Dewey 1920, 37)

He further adds,

Bacon’s watchword that knowledge is power and his dream of continuous empire over natural forces, by means of natural science has been actualized. The industrial revolution by steam and electricity is the reply to Bacon’s prophecy. (Dewey 1920, 42)

Bacon believed that scientific knowledge would give human beings the power to serve human purposes by conquering “nature in action”. Later on, this control and command over nature became an essential concern of science and its accompanying technological advancement. The Enlightenment claimed that the traditional societies aimed at power to subjugate people and in order to achieve socio-political supremacy. In contrast, modern science aims to improve the human condition by acquiring knowledge of the material world. Francis Bacon famously said, “Knowledge is power” - for him, this knowledge is *scientific* and *empirical*.

With the acceptance of Enlightenment principles, coupled with the maturation of science, the Industrial revolution inevitably followed suit. David Bohm writes,

With the coming of the modern era, human beings’ view of their world and themselves underwent a fundamental change. The earlier, basically religious approach to life was replaced by a secular approach. This approach has assumed that nature could be thoroughly understood and eventually brought under control by means of the systematic development of scientific knowledge through observation, experiment, and rational thought. This idea became powerful in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. (Griffin 1988, 57)

This technological advancement of science is rooted in rational and detached understanding (of the epistemic ideals) of modern philosophy. In parallel, the idea of freedom and liberation also remained central to this modernist thought, which led to new social movements against old feudal tyrannies. Collectively, these ideas changed the material and social conditions of the world. The urbanization process, massive growth in transportation, animal farming, modern agriculture, modern medicine, political movements, capitalism, and secularization were integrated with these developments and are all notable facets of the modern human condition (Dewey 1920, 41). To describe this modern condition *intellectually*, Max Weber expressed it as the “disenchantment of the world” (Taylor 2007, 25). This rational and detached epistemology ultimately gave birth to scientific developments, in which humans have the power to explain, predict, and thereby control and manipulate the natural world. It is important to note that this paradigm change, which eventually led to industrialization and modernization, did materialize at the cost of humans getting control and power over nature at a collective level.

Postmodern philosophy sets for itself a task of unveiling the atrocities of the Enlightenment Project - it emerged as a reaction to modernity. (Later discussed, some thinkers have also identified postmodernism as *ultra-modernism* – as an extension of modern thinking, and presented as a necessary logical conclusion of modern thinking) (Griffin 2000, xi). The postmodern critique of the enlightenment project is multilayered. The postmodern thinkers claim that the declaration of Enlightenment thinkers towards liberating humanity from old oppression was deemed a failure. The modern societies that emerged from the Enlightenment project pose a further threat to human freedom and liberty. Modernity has done a few things to improve the human condition, but that is marginal compared to the carnage. The bloody wars, purges, and genocides of the 20th century are the actual outcomes of modernity. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer wrote

Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity. (Adorno and Horkheimer 2008, 1)

The criticism of postmodern thinkers is that the modern worldview has stripped out culture, religion, and tradition from modern societies by espousing ideals of freedom and liberty. Yet, modernity failed to materialize those ideals and maintained the farce via authoritative means to continue controlling and dominating the gullible masses. This persistence of domination is further used to normalize the stresses and anxieties of ordinary people. Postmodern thinkers often accuse that the doggedness of equality results in grounding more coercion. In-

stead of bringing freedom, modernity augments much more stringent prohibitions after the collapse of the traditional authority. The standardization in modern society is associated with its success, but this tool is immensely useful in controlling. There is immense stress in seeking knowledge in modern societies, but knowledge of specific epistemological values (positivism, empiricism, rationalization, and intellectualization). This knowledge will eventually translate as a driving source to manipulate the natural and social world.

It is not easy to define postmodernism - the difficulty lies in the vast, diverse, and complex collection of ideas. One elementary idea is the word “*Post-*” in *postmodernism* - referring to something after *modernism*. Many sociologists have defined cultural change with reference to their contemporary society. After the Enlightenment, the newly emerging society was identified as *modern*. In contrast, the previous societies were branded as pre-modern. The prefix of post- can be understood from the same pivotal point. These categorizations of different periods highlight the philosophical, theological, psychological, and cultural transformations in society, which later jointly became the dominant worldview. Although, ontologically and epistemologically, Postmodernists differ with Marx and any of utopian ideological aspirations, but it does adhere by and acknowledge Marx’s critique over modern bourgeois society. The criticism on how the capitalists, industrialists, politicians, and bureaucrats used science and technology to maximize their productivity and profit, and successfully established social regulations and laws to legalize the power hierarchy. Such a structural framework of economy and production alienates ordinary working-class people from the production process, the product, the fellow workers, and it also results in self-estrangement.

The postmodern worldview is that *there is no worldview, no grand narrative*; it rejects the notion of any unified idea that is fundamental or universal (Hicks 2014). Stuart Sim has described postmodernism as *antifoundational* in character, and as a philosophical movement, it is grounded in *skepticism*. He writes,

One of the best ways of describing postmodernism as a philosophical movement would be as a form of scepticism – scepticism about authority, received wisdom, cultural and political norms and so on – and that places it in a longrunning tradition in Western thought that stretches back to classical Greek philosophy. Scepticism is a primarily negative form of philosophy, which sets out to undermine other philosophical theories claiming to be in possession of ultimate truth, or of criteria for determining what counts as ultimate truth. The technical term to describe such a style of philosophy is ‘anti-foundational’. (Sim 2011, 3)

Jean Francois Lyotard defined postmodernism as “incredulity toward metanarratives or metadiscourses, or grand narrative” (Lyotard et al. 2005, xxiv). He calls out the Enlighten-

ment grand narrative in the following words, as

... a metanarrative implying a philosophy of history is used to legitimate knowledge, questions are raised concerning the validity of the institutions governing the social bond: these must be legitimated as well. Thus justice is consigned to the grand narrative in the same way as truth. (Lyotard et al. 2005, xxiv)

As postulated by Kant, the Enlightenment project began with the motto of individual liberty and freedom by relying on human reason, i.e., it centered on human cognitive ability (Kant and Nisbett 2009). The rapid industrialization and developments of the modern *cultural industry* embody this modern intellectual shift, and are grounded in the ideals of modernity. In the era of consumerism and commodification, the notion of external, apparent, perceptible, and visible became the characteristics of the self-identity, which defines human value. Postmodern thinkers suggest that this new setting has generated a culture of apparent independence and free choice: it re-defined our image to be show-off, shallow, and outwards (Adorno and Horkheimer 2008). Humans are not any more *citizens* (of Plato), but we have become just *consumers*. Hence, this cultural outline, the structural framework of the economy, and production of the modern world have put people into the iron cage of rationality, as Max Weber posits,

Specialists without spirit, hedonists without heart; in its conceit, this nothingness imagines it has reached a level of humanity never before attained. (Weber and Kalberg 2011)

The postmodern criticism is on the legitimization of knowledge and truth, where a particular class of people who control our economy, culture, politics, and even entertainment has all the authority and sanctioning power. Michel Foucault highlighted the same concern and points towards the central component of Power Relations in our social ordering. The legitimization of knowledge is intrinsically tied to power, and hence the validity of knowledge and truth claims are merited to the power structures only. Foucault states that

There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations". (Foucault 1977)

Foucault reversed the enlightenment slogan "*Knowledge is Power*" to "*Power is Knowledge*". In response to Kant, Foucault re-defined the Enlightenment as "a modification of the pre-existing relation linking will, authority, and the use of reason" (Foucault and Rabinow

1984). For Foucault, the metanarrative of Enlightenment was to legitimize knowledge, which can then legitimize power. This critical attitude, the method of doubt and suspicion over the soundness of knowledge and truth, was also fundamental in (Modern) Cartesian philosophy. Descartes's method of knowledge starts off with doubting the existing narrative. This critical attitude has been momentous in shaping contemporary pedagogy and the postmodern cultural outlook. This intensification of doubt and critical attitude culminated in much of the cultural transformation that we witnessed today – the collapse and destruction of our old ways of categorizing reality, truths, and facts.

For Postmodernists, truth is *socially constructed, relative, subjective*, and does not have any objective correspondence with external reality. This notion of subjectivity is another aspect that remained significant, which links modern philosophy to postmodern philosophy. The “subjectivism” of modernity intensified more in the postmodern worldview. From this perspective, the postmodern movement can be seen as an extension to the modernist movement, as some post constructivist thinkers have termed postmodernism as *ultra-modernism* (Griffin 2000, xi). After Descartes, Kant further radicalized the subject's centering, stating that we only have access to our subjective ordering of the world. Our subjectivity grants us a certain perceptual feel in space and time, which is a function of our organism, organization, and cognitive categorization. From Kant's perspective, all of modern philosophy is rooted in this idea of subjectivism. Nevertheless, we can still have the necessary universal knowledge and truth, even though our subjective capacities shape our inquiries. In that sense, postmodernism is also a form of modernism – and it can be called *ultra-modernism* because it still centers on the subject. It is just questioning the necessity and universality of that claim.

For postmodernism, *ideals* of universality break down; the recognition of multiple cultural perspectives explodes the idea that we could ever have a communal or universal ground to build scientific knowledge that would be true for other people, other places, and other times. The shift towards contingency to particularity, perspectivism, and relativism enjoy a central place in the postmodern era.

If we look at the works of prominent postmodern thinkers like Foucault, Lyotard, Baudrillard, and Derrida, their work is grounded in their criticism of modernism. However, philosophically, there are many paradoxes and self-contradiction in the postmodern position (Hicks 2014, 184). In augmenting Stephen Hicks, Robert Curry also points that postmodern philosophy is not just contradictory but is also against “common sense”. In highlighting the inconsistency and self-contradiction from a philosophical point. Here are some examples,

- On the one hand, all cultures are equally deserving of respect; on the other, Western culture is uniquely destructive and bad.

- Values are subjective—but sexism and racism are really evil.
- Technology is bad and destructive—and it is unfair that some people have more technology than others.
- Tolerance is good and dominance is bad—but when postmodernists come to power, political correctness follows, and opposing views are not tolerated. (Curry 2015, 149)

One conundrum, relevant to this paper, is in addressing communal, shared, and common issues across different regions and cultures. If there is no objectivity, no common/standard criteria of right and wrong, truth and falsehood, how do we act, choose, judge ourselves and other people, and share things? As of now, the questions that are related to our mutual and communal ethical and moral concerns turning to be ambiguous. The postmodern condemnation of all metanarratives has also challenged the veracity of any shared values. In highlighting the inner principle of the postmodern movement, Stephen Hicks identifies the psychological nihilism that emerges from the movement. Hicks said,

The final option is *not to resolve the tension*. Contradiction is a psychological form of destruction, but contradictions sometimes do not matter psychologically to those who live them, because for them ultimately *nothing* matters. Nihilism is close to the surface in the postmodern intellectual movement in a historically unprecedented way. (Hicks 2014, 191-192)

The enactment of deconstructive criticism, skepticism, relativism, and subjectivism, as postmodern epistemological ideals, have generated a cultural condition of post-fact, post-truth, disinformation, alternative facts, and fake news. This trickle-down criticism has gotten down to the masses, who now think there are no ‘true’ scientific facts; there are mere opinions. The masses’ gullibility in rejecting all authority and consensual facts have instead led many to believe in conspiracies and over-simplistic explanations. The logical outcome of this can be observed in many social phenomena: for instance, the 9/11 deniers, the illuminati conspiracy, Russians hijacking elections, Chinese coronavirus, and calling global warming a hoax are a case in point.

Although postmodern philosophy, in its claim, undermines modern philosophy and its quest for certainty. Nevertheless, Postmodern philosophy following modern philosophy, challenges and puts to question every value claim without any philosophical and experiential warrant. The disposition of iconoclasm and *criticism for the sake of criticism* is deep-rooted in *Cartesian Doubt*, and this ‘*critic-al*’ trait is at the heart of modern and postmodern ethics and

philosophy. Postmodern philosophy enacts the same logic of modern philosophy in its opting of the Cartesian method of doubt as a critical methodology. In this critical attitude, with the centering of subjectivity, *postmodernism* is *ultra-modernism*. Such an absolutist critical attitude is also detrimental for the community and their shared matters of concern. The cultural atmosphere that results from such an attitude necessitates disintegration, disharmony, and fragmentation.

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