

WHAT IS AT STAKE IN THE DEBATE ON MARXISM AND POSTMODERNISM?

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Abstract

In contemporary political philosophy, Marxism is often considered at odds with Postmodernism. Marxists often charge postmodernists with nihilism and obscurism, and a lack of commitment to society. This paper will address these charges and show the contribution which Postmodernism can make to Marxism and the addressing of social problems.

There is currently an interesting debate occurring between the advocates of Marxism and the advocates of postmodernism. These two camps often pit Marxism against postmodernism in such a way that they allow no middle ground. They behave in a way that echoes George W. Bush's famous remark: "Either you are with us or against us." To rephrase this remark to the best fit of these respective advocates of Marx and postmodernism: either you are Marxist or a capitalist and vice versa. The paper attempts to enter into the heart of debate between the Marxism and postmodernism, specifically the Marxist charges against postmodernist thought.

Let me first try to characterize the postmodernist approach before addressing some of the charges against it by the advocates of Marxism. At the heart of postmodernism is an attack on an Enlightenment rationality founded upon a transcendental all-knowing subject who can bring to us secure, all-pervasive and unquestionable truth. Postmodernism, on the contrary, questions the possibility of transcendental truth which exists beyond a given socio-cultural linguistic form of life. Postmodernist radical skepticism, hence, smashes every vestige of the Greco-Roman

tradition that claims for a trans-historical truth and human reason attributing it a grand narrative and totalizing essentialism. It replaces the notion of truth, knowledge and reality as contingent, subjective and local. They are considered as the “Modes of subjectivity, like theories of society or versions of history, are temporary fixings in the on-going process in which any absolute meaning or truth is constantly deferred.”¹

The postmodernist project seems to challenge every authority/center who in the name of trans-historical and unquestionable truth and sovereignty dictates over its ‘other’/margin. But this considers only the negative side of the authority, what about its ‘technical and positive’ side? Hence forward, I will try to present a commentary on some of the Marxist allegations against postmodernism.

Is Postmodernism Nothing More Than Neo-Nietzschean Nihilism?

Is Postmodernism nothing more than neo-Nietzschean nihilism and pessimist obscurism as Tim Hall regards it: “In the name of a Nietzschean irrationality, any philosophical heritage for revolutionary thought is thrown out the window and replaced with a drunken speculation detached from history and material reality?”² Can’t postmodernism promise us something beyond what its critics often charge it as ‘apocalyptic irrationalism,’ ‘cognitive atheism,’ or ‘dogmatic relativism’? Can we claim that postmodernism has no commitment to people and their politics and history, therefore, a useless nihilist attitude?

Perhaps we can recognize the postmodernist advocacy for plural and mutual coexistence that transformed European societies with its inclusion of various marginal voices from different social spaces during the decade of the 1970s? Or the surge of various social movements of the

1970s in Europe and the rapid ongoing social transformative movements in nonwestern societies in the recent decades are the implications of postmodernist philosophy accompanied by the unprecedented booms of capitalist technocratic mode of production.

Can we also not give credit to the postmodernist challenges of the West's colonialism, genocide, anti-Semitism, slavery and patriarchy under the veneer of its civilization? Or do we still want to resurface totalitarianism in the name of an absolute which dictates our social life either in the church in the name of an ambassador of God, in the family in the name of the head, in school in the name of all-knowing agency? Or we can even ask: does nihilism and pessimism have no function in society? Can we so ignorantly disregard their humanistic contents? The radical nihilism of post-world era inspired the Europeans to question every authority, and opened the new hope for liberation. For instance, Kierkegaardian nihilism inspired a challenge to the inhumanity of Christian religion. Likewise, nihilism, thus, has its own humanist promise. We cannot term it simply as irrelevant! Subversion and displacement of 'naturalized and reified' views of human truth and reality cannot be relegated merely to sheer nihilism and nothingness but have potential to herald a neo-humanist emancipation of human politics and history at the same time being critical to its goal itself. Our questioning of foundational assumptions of European enlightenment modernity does not kill it. Instead of its death, it is transformed into a new stage. Maybe we can call it neo-enlightenment. Does postmodernism still seem to be nihilism and ahistorical? David Wood says no:

It is very difficult to ask the question of Derrida's humanism without invoking the legacy of Heidegger (Letter on Humanism) and Sartre (existentialism and humanism), each of whom tried to rethink humanism in such a way that they could still claim to be

humanists, albeit in a deeper sense. Derrida follows this path, in a way, when he goes so far in reaffirming the importance of justice as to identify deconstruction with justice (just as Sartre will identify existentialism with radical freedom and responsibility). Is this compatible with nihilism? Surely so! If nihilism marks the recognition of the death of god, the absence of ultimate or absolute values, but rather the relocation of the excavation site, and perhaps too the attempt to wean us off a certain kind of desire for transcendence. Derrida surely inherits Nietzsche's hope that we can 'be true to the earth.'³

Does Postmodernism Herald the Death of History, Class and Consciousness?

Postmodernism does not banish consciousness from human discourse but redefines it. For the postmodernists, no objective pre-given Cartesian (or Kantian) subjectivity exists in us. The 'self' is constructed, fabricated, weaved and interpreted fiction. It is a function not fact, a process not essence, an effect (of language), not cause. This very notion of self suspends the Rousseauesque 'self' in natural man, the classical Marxist notion of 'self' (manipulated by a bourgeois 'false consciousness') and the liberal notion of 'self' (which strives for and achieves self-betterment in a democratic society). There is no coherent substance that we can call 'self', which can be politicized by talking about its alienation, its betterment and its naturalness or innocence. There is no unchanging core 'self' as such to be alienated, to be kept innocent or to be made better. All that we have in postmodernity are split selves in a constant flux which both Jameson and Deleuze and Guattari analyze in terms of a 'schizophrenic' self. Foucault says that 'self' is not as independent, 'transcendental' subject of Cartesian or Kantian discourse.

It is as a locus of multiple, dispersed or decentred discourses. For the traditionalists, discontinuity was both “the given and the unthinkable”; the past is made up of innumerable instances: “decisions, accidents, initiatives, discoveries” which the historian must annihilate by moulding them into a continuous narrative. In contrast Foucault stresses the fact that certain forms of knowledge (about the human mind and body, about biology, politics or language), after periods of stability in which the fundamental processes of a discourse remain largely unquestioned, and undergo rapid transformations⁴

However, our need for a coherent self to define us and our humanistic endeavors is one thing and to try to avoid the critical look over the very structure of the ‘self’ is another. The necessity of the thing should not preclude criticism of the thing. We can make a commitment to our history, class, consciousness, ‘realism’, ‘praxis’, ‘institution’, ‘organisation’, ‘revolution’ etc but we should do so without critical examination. If the postmodernist effort is meant to abolish them, I am not sure what kind of society we will have. But this is not what postmodernism means. The fact that some people try to vilify postmodernism does not mean it is a ‘monster’ out to destroy our commitment to our civilizational goals. Therefore the claim below by Tim Hall seems to be mere malice:

I found academic postmodernists (are there any other kinds?) to be smug and way too pleased with themselves. I think this is somehow connected with their rejection of almost everything that Marxism commits itself to: realism, praxis, organisation, revolution. So they can pose as some kind of leftists without any of the stigma of Marxism attaching. ⁵

Is Postmodernism Textual and Irrelevant to the Society and its Existing Reality?

The Postmodernist rejection of meta-narrative certainly assumes the responsibility for alternative narratives. It has its commitment to the local forms of life to empower them and give voices. At the same time, it is skeptical of any authority, even its own. In the name of empowering the other, it does not attempt to prevail over the other. Certainly deconstructive critics concentrate on the texts and their linguistic analysis of the texts. But this does not mean that postmodernism in general is textual.

Postmodernism, in its commitment to society, is in fact a “critique of the way modern societies control and discipline their populations by sanctioning the knowledge claims and practices of the human sciences: medicine, psychiatry, psychology, criminology and sociology.”⁶

Can we separate text from society? Is not it just like an impossible attempt to separate dance from dancer? A textual critique is a critique of the social because text is born out of social contents. Since text is already social, the charge that postmodernism is textual and irrelevant to the society itself seems irrelevant.

Does Postmodernism Demolish Humanist Ideals such as Truth, Reality and Knowledge?

The answer seems to be no. It has put these values into question but does not eliminate them. There exists no such thing as unquestionable truth. Truth is the “leap of logic” between the premise and the conclusion mediated through discourse. All claims for truth have equal status. There is no truth but only truth claims. Or as Gadamer says there is no single truth claim but there are truth claims: truth1, truth 2, truth 3, and so on. There is nothing prior to interpretation

or theoretical methods, and nothing that stands outside of interpretation or its methods that can be taken as a basis for judging its validity. The fact that there is no ultimate truth/reality/knowledge does not mean knowledge has no relevance. It does not mean that to gain more knowledge (even if that knowledge sometimes goes against itself) is not necessary for us. But it *does* mean that the conditions of the knowledge are not absolute. The conditions are contingent.

Is Postmodernism Nothing More than a Meaningless Neologism?

Does postmodernism still have a room for Chomskian resentment? Chomsky writes:

As for the "deconstruction" that is carried out, ... I can't comment, because most of it seems to me gibberish. But if this is just another sign of my incapacity to recognize profundities, the course to follow is clear: just restate the results to me in plain words that I can understand, and show why they are different from, or better than, what others had been doing long before and have continued to do since without three-syllable words, incoherent sentences, inflated rhetoric that (to me, at least) is largely meaningless, etc. That will cure my deficiencies—of course, if they are curable; maybe they are not, a possibility to which I'll return. ... In short, we seem to inhabit quite different worlds, and I find it hard to see why mine is "elitists," not theirs. The opposite seems to be transparently the case, though I won't amplify. ⁷

The truth is that academic space itself is an elitist space. It uses certain kinds of specialized jargon. These jargons are certainly unfamiliar to most people. Academic language is different

from language of everyday life. Chomskian jargon too may be difficult to understand for the common folk. Postmodernists are not the exception. Let me answer the Chomskian reservation concerning postmodernism in the above remark as “theoreticians” and “elitists”. One can often view that those who cannot theorize the social contents are mediocre. We cannot excuse the Chomskian silence to the question of rhetoric. On this ground many intellectuals today are reluctant to call Chomsky a scholar. About the charge of elitism, let me reiterate that academic space itself is elitist space. The space in which Chomsky’s works are manufactured and sold, is itself an elitist space.

Is Postmodernism Nothing More than “a Mental Slavery to the Bourgeoisie”?

Is postmodernism as Tim Hall says “a mental slavery to the bourgeoisie”? Hall in *Communist Voice* writes:

Postmodernism has produced diverse offshoots and projects. It poses as a radical challenge to the capitalist establishment, but in reality its philosophy undermines resistance to the ruling class. Its essence is a subjective idealism which attacks human reason itself and the materialist world view of science, reserving particular vehemence for Marxist revolutionary theory. Its logic prevents a coherent analysis of the natural world and especially of capitalist social reality and undermines revolutionary theoretical and political struggle against capitalism. Pomo claims to be a radical opponent of the "totalizing" critiques it sees embodied in rationalism and Marxism, but its own positions imply a complete ("total") destruction of all but the most fragmentary opposition of the oppressed class, the proletariat, to the capitalist exploiters. In the end, only "deconstructive" word-play is considered resistance.⁸

Postmodernism is no less critical to capitalism and its blind followers who brag about the capitalism as the best of all possible system. Postmodernism is more a philosophical system and capitalism a political one. They are not identical. Postmodernism is even critical to capitalism. Foucault, a postmodernist, regards capitalist modernity as the mindset of the dehumanizing logic of industrial capitalism. Maybe some cheap so-called postmodernists used and manipulated postmodernist thought for their vested interests but a genuine postmodernist has no malice to any system of thoughts. But he/she is, of course, critical of the nature of truth, knowledge and reality that were explained by foundationalists. He/she rejects any form of totalitarianism even capitalism if it ceased to speak the language of pluralism and mutual coexistence. He/she rejects the claim that what I speak is truth and any claims against me are false.

Conclusion

I do not want to contend that postmodernism is the best of all possible philosophies. But I believe that despite some of its seemingly nihilist (however, nihilism too has its humanist contents) assertions, its philosophical implications can pragmatically be coordinated with the findings of the research in the social sciences to achieve certain social goals. The insistence on the fusion of postmodernist philosophy with some of the core aspects of Marxian humanism seems to be more plausible in the politics of the 'New International' today. It seems counterproductive to place Marxism and postmodernism in hostility. In other words, it is very hard to see the difference of the advocacy made either by Marx and Derrida on behalf of the proletariat/margin. Their humanism desires to liberate the oppressed, to empower them, to give voice to them. Their prospective social goal is the same but the way they interpret it makes only

the difference. Marx analyzes the condition in terms of the existing reality of nineteenth century European society; Derrida interprets in terms of the 'New International'.

It is improper to say Marxism and (post) modernism are opposite. Both Marxism and (post) modernism resist the cultural conditions of capitalist modernity. Marx was already (post) modernist (because he has challenged the logic of capitalist modernity) and Derrida is still under the spell of Marx (see his book *Specters of Marx*). One cannot be Marxist without being postmodernist (Marxism anticipates radical skepticism of authority) and postmodernist without the philosophy of Marx (because (post)modernism without certain kind commitment to society is an anachronism (even though anachronism has its own logic). In his book *Specters of Marx*, Derrida recognizes the relevancy of Marx in the New International.

... communism has always been and will remain spectral: it is always still to come and is distinguished, like democracy itself, from every living present understood as plenitude of a presence-to-itself, as totality of a presence effectively identical to itself. Capitalist societies can always heave a sigh of relief and say to themselves: communism is finished since the collapse of the totalitarianisms of the twentieth century and not only is it finished, but it did not take place, it was only a ghost. They do not more than disavow the undeniable itself: a ghost never dies, it remains always to come and to come-back.⁹

His dissatisfaction is with the orthodox Marxists who are reluctant to recognize a new global scenario. What is needed as far as he is concerned, a change in the thinking of dogmatic Marxist *pundits* because so many things like the nature of capital, labour, exploitation, market value etc have changed. The increased sophistication of life world of the workers and "the egalitarian

distribution of income, increased workplace democracy, the end of economic exploitation and the eradication of class differences” has transformed the life world of the workers. They are not only workers but also owners of wealth and income. Marxism must adjust to this new reality. And it needs to question itself:

. . . how will intellectuals in the Marxist tradition respond. . . to the global transformations now occurring? How has the crisis in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union affected the way intellectuals, scholars, and government officials in those countries and around the world reconceived their intellectual and political projects? What is to be the status of Marxist social goals that informed so many Marxist thinkers and social revolutionaries throughout the world—the egalitarian distribution of income, increased workplace democracy, the end of economic exploitation and the eradication of class differences—given the current rush to various forms of capitalism in Eastern Europe, Russia, and China? Does the “end of history also portend the end of Marxist theory? What is living and what is dead in Marxism? ¹⁰

Let me point out that I cannot wholly agree with the grand claims concerning “the egalitarian distribution of income, increased workplace democracy, the end of economic exploitation and the eradication of class differences.” While it may be true for the Western world, the condition of factory workers in the third world is still more or less the same as Marx saw in Europe in his time. Yet Derrida’s assertion still remains true that self-assessment is essential within Marxism and perhaps within capitalism too. This means that so-called postmodernist *pundits* should stop bragging that the philosophy of Marx has no relevance today, so-called Marxists *pundits* should not see postmodernism “merely as [a] regressive inclination of the West, but [rather as] a new

reflexivity about itself that includes an acknowledgement that the West cannot define on its own ‘world history’ or even ‘Western history’. Rather, it must construct far more tentative, changing, and dialogic views of itself, as it accounts for the contributions and criticism of the other agents in the global arena”¹¹. Likewise, so-called postmodernist *pundits* must stop claiming that there is no truth, no reality and that the disciplines of the past are ‘dead.’ To say there is no truth does not deny a room for the truth claims that human beings need to live by on the earth. They create their own local and infinitesimal forms of truth and to pass their life. Postmodernism has no intention to plunder that form of truth from people and leave them in a world without truth value. To say that every interpretation is misinterpretation and everything is text does not mean that interpretation is not possible and texts are irrelevant. It means that our modes of interpretation and nature of textuality of the text are contingent and are often prone to give a mistaken views of reality. To recognize this fact is to avoid possible misinterpretation. Certainly we cannot say everything is misinterpretation. We must believe and almost we have no choice not to believe in the Habermasian communicative potential of human language. For as John Locke has already pointed out, we have no other means to think and communicate our thoughts than through language itself.

All fundamental reality is accessible to us through/in language. Whether there is an independent reality beyond language is debatable. But we can agree that language brings things into intelligibility. Even Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* say that language bears the immediacy of the actual of ‘thought.’ The nature of language, as John Locke has shown, does not reflect reality but a translated version of reality. David Hume seems to be correct when he says that the intelligibility of the world does not give us access to the reality of the world but to the habits of human mind. But all this means we should not underestimate any potential revolution

for the emancipation of the human beings. We should not underestimate the crude reality of exploitation of one class over the other. There is still a grim reality of exploitation and misery of the life-world of a big section of the population. We can question whether the exploitation is a cause or effect (of language). But our commitment toward the exploited cannot be withheld. Commitment and cognition sometimes go unparallel. But no one should preclude the other. In other words, our postmodernist sensibility and Marxist commitment to the 'have nots' should go parallel with the progress of society as well as its consciousness and knowledge.

ENDNOTES

¹Chris Weedon's *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (Blackwell Publishing, 1997) offers a clear and lucid interpretation of poststructuralist theory with the focus on the issues of language, subjectivity and power. 168.

²Tim Hall , editor of *Struggle*, a revolutionary working-class literary magazine accuses postmodernism of undermining the struggle of working class against capitalist ruling class in "Postmodernist philosophy is old subjectivist wine in new bottles." [Communist Voice #15](http://home.flash.net/~comvoice/15cPostmodern.html), October 25, 1997. URL:> <http://home.flash.net/~comvoice/15cPostmodern.html>

³ See Tyrus Miller's interview response to me in my book *The Humanities at Work: International Exchange of Ideas in Philosophy, Aesthetics, and Literature* (Kathmandu: Sunlight Publication 2008) 43.

⁴ the quote is adopted from notes of the second session of the postmodern meeting group held on July 07, 2007. URL:> <http://www.newphilsoc.org.uk/PostModernisam/postmodernism.htm>

⁵ the extract is adopted from discussion of Robert Day and Carlos Rebello about the debate between Marxism and postmodernism. Rober Day is accusing postmodernism of being an academic bourgeois enterprise. URL:> http://www.marxmail.org/archives/July99/marxism_and_postmodernism.htm

⁶ the quote is adopted from notes of the sixth session of the postmodern meeting group held on July 07, 2007. URL:> <http://www.newphilsoc.org.uk/PostModernisam/postmodernism.htm>

⁷ The quote is adopted from the electronic version posted by one jenm289@aol.com to rec.arts.books, 13 Nov 1995 where it is written: "The following was written several months ago by Noam Chomsky in a discussion about po-mo and its contribution to activism et al. The discussion took place on LBBS, Z-Magazine's Left On-Line Bulletin Board. . . ." URL:> <http://www.cscs.umich.edu/~crshalizi/chomsky-on-postmodernism.html>

⁸ Tim Hall "Postmodernist philosophy is old subjectivist wine in new bottles." [Communist Voice #15](http://home.flash.net/~comvoice/15cPostmodern.html), October 25, 1997. URL:> <http://home.flash.net/~comvoice/15cPostmodern.html>

⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (New Work: Routledge, 2006) translated ed. by Peggy Kamuf. Derrida says that the capitalist declaration of 'the death of Marxism' does not mean it is dead or that it is no longer relevant to the new politics.

¹⁰ Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg wrote the introduction to Derrida's book *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 2006). The quote of their view of Marxism is consistent with Derrida's view in the book.

¹¹ See David Wood's, interview response by me in my book *The Humanities at Work: International Exchange of Ideas in Philosophy, Aesthetics, and Literature* (Kathmandu: Sunlight Publication 2008) 243.