

A Review on Postmodernism Ideas and the Political Development

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Abstract

Political development is an issue for the time of modernism, and even then, at the time of clear meanings, there was some ambiguity about its implication. In postmodernism there are many doubts about its applicability: postmodernism is a scene of relativity and ambiguity, differentiation and tastes. At this period we can expect many lines of political developments. In this article the relation between postmodernism and political development (two different subjects for different tradition and periods) is discussed.

Key Words

Late capitalism, Modernism, Postmodernism, Political development, Relativism

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Introduction

To understand the idea of political development from postmodern perspective, we should primarily know political development and then postmodernism itself. To understand this phase of history or this culture, let's look at the definition(s) for political development and on the ideas of great postmodern thinkers and scholars who have written about postmodernism.

What Is Political Development?

The period following World War II particularly has been characterized by a concern for 'political progress'- typically under the expression of 'political development'. Indeed, development was viewed as a comprehensive process which should not be divided into compartments: improvements in one aspect of the society- political, social, or economic- depended on improvements in all the others.

Large numbers of social scientists and among them political scientists came, therefore, to study development. However, it soon became clear that *political development* at least was difficult to circumscribe and to define: thus L. W. Pye (1966) found no less than ten different bases for political development in the literature, ranging from mass mobilization to the operation of the state and from the politics of industrial societies to stable and orderly change.

Why does the concept of political development raise difficulties? A useful starting point is what the concept aims to cover: it is concerned with progress, which means change in a 'positive' direction. Change can be described, although there may be problems about its measurement; what causes difficulty is the assessment of what is 'positive' or 'negative' change, as such an assessment depends on having previously determined what makes 'good politics': one cannot speak of political development without having a conception of the 'good society'. The real problem arises at this point: it is not so much that it is difficult to define what the good society is, but that it seems impossible to find a definition with which all will agree. The decision about whether a society is good or not and whether a change is an improvement or not is a value judgment: what is the good society for one individual may not be the good society for another.

If this is the case, should one simply refuse to give a general definition of political development? In modern theorizing this is impractical, since society exists and political activity takes place in society. Whether we define political development or not, society will have to do it; there will be goals and there will be images of what constitutes a good society. There is thus an 'existential' need for an operational

definition of political progress and development, which is valid at least for an immediate future and for a given society. (Arblaster and Lukes, 1971)

It is possible to consider, following Pye, what kinds of definitions of political development have been given and whether there are at least some relatively firm elements. These definitions fall into three distinct categories. The first relates political development to social and economic development by suggesting that political development is concerned with the politics of industrial societies or with a 'multi-dimensional process of social change'. A second group is concerned with what might be called the organization of political system by referring to nation-building and to administrative structures. The third links development to political values, such as mass mobilization, the relationship between mobilization and power, and the movement toward democracy. As we will see in the next section in our discussion about postmodernism, there is no fixed and absolute idea about these three elements characterizing development in modernism, in the ideas of postmodern thinkers. This is what makes the combination of 'political development' and 'postmodernism' paradoxical.

What Is Postmodernism?

Postmodernism as a movement in art and ideas which challenges the aspirations to unity, purpose, and order, emerging first as a rejection of the classical aesthetic principles of modern architecture, is exemplified by the Pompidou Centre at Beaubourg in Paris, which displays all its components and starkly contrasts with its surroundings. Jean François Lyotard, in *La Condition postmoderne* (1979), generalized the idea into a diagnosis of the contemporary fragmentation of systems of knowledge. Postmodernism rapidly became a portmanteau term applied to a wide range of cultural phenomena, especially in art and cinema, but also extending to literature and philosophy. Throughout the 1980s it became a focus for debate in English-speaking intellectual circles, where it was seen, by supporters and opponents alike, as a reflection of and on the apparent success of free-market economics and culture, and the evident disarray of Marxist political and intellectual alternatives. (Ward, 2003)

Postmodernism is not a readily identifiable school of thought in France. It is most usually associated with Lyotard and Baudrillard, but is often felt to include the later writings of Derrida, Deleuze, Kristeva, and Irigaray. A widely shared view was that there was a growing disintegration of the modern grands récits, the Hegelian, Marxist, or Freudian systems, each of which had sought to provide a coherent

intellectual framework with which to understand and change the world. Their failure signaled the futility of any attempt to construct a Master Narrative, and could be construed as liberation from the strait-jacket of totality and authority. The Postmodern posture was therefore to emphasize and enjoy difference (s) without seeking to bring them into unity; to disrupt fixed patterns or hierarchies which might exist or emerge; and to frustrate imperatives or directions which anyone might seek to impose on another. For this reason it is notably resistant to simple summary or definition.

Postmodernism shares many aspects of earlier cultural avant-garde movements, particularly surrealism, anarchism, and situationism, from which its members have drawn many techniques. A striking feature is the prevalence of pastiche in postmodern works, drawing on elements from a variety of sources, which are then juxtaposed, often ironically. Beneix's film *Diva* (1981) exemplifies the approach, using elements of character, plot, setting, and composition from several cinematic genres. As with earlier modernism, these highly allusive works offer a special pleasure to the initiated. Critics of Postmodernism, such as Fredric Jameson and Jürgen Habermas, have suggested that it exacerbates the problems of personal and social disintegration, bewilderment, impotence, and despair which it attempts to portray.

Stanley J. Grenz in his book, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, describes aspects of Postmodernism as follows:

1. The quest for truth is a lost cause. It is a search for a "holy grail" that doesn't exist and never did. Postmodernists argue that objective, universal, knowable truth is mythical; all we have ever found in our agonized search for Truth are "truths" that were compelling only in their own time and culture, but true Truth has never been ours. Furthermore, if we make the mistake of claiming to know the truth, we are deluded at best and dangerous at worst.
2. A person's sense of identity is a composite constructed by the forces of the surrounding culture. Individual consciousness--a vague, "decentered" collection of unconscious and conscious beliefs, knowledge, and intuitions about oneself and the world--is malleable and arrived at through interaction with the surrounding culture. Postmodernism then, in stark contrast to modernism, is about the dissolving of the self. From the postmodernist perspective, we should not think of ourselves as unique, unified, self-conscious, autonomous persons.
3. The languages of our culture (the verbal and visual signs we use to represent the world to ourselves) literally "construct" what we think of as "real" in our everyday

existence. In this sense, reality is a "text" or "composite" of texts, and these texts (rather than the God-created reality) are the only reality we can know. Our sense of self--who we are, how we think of ourselves, as well as how we see and interpret the world and give ourselves meaning in it--is subjectively constructed through language.

4. "Reality" is created by those who have power. One of postmodernism's preeminent theorists, Michel Foucault, combines the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's ideas about how those in power shape the world with a theory of how language is the primary tool for making culture. Foucault argues that whoever dominates or controls the "official" use of language in a society holds the key to social and political power. (Think, for example, of how official political "spin" control of specific words and phrases can alter the public perception of political decisions, policies, and events.) Put simply, Nietzsche said all reality is someone's willful, powerful construction; Foucault says language is the primary tool in that construction.

5. We should neutralize the political power inherent in language by "deconstructing" it. Another leading postmodernist, Jacques Derrida, theorizes that the language we use when we make statements always creates a set of opposite beliefs, a "binary," one of which is "privileged" and the other of which is "marginalized," and the privileged belief is always favored. For example, if one says "Honey is better for you than white sugar," this statement of opinion has "privileged" honey over white sugar. In the arena of morals one might say "Sex should only happen in marriage," in which case the experience of sex in marriage is "privileged" and sex out of wedlock is "marginalized." Derrida argues that all language is made up of these binaries, and they are always socially and politically loaded. "Deconstruction" is the practice of identifying these power-loaded binaries and restructuring them so that the marginalized or "unprivileged" end of the binary can be consciously focused upon and favored. (Grenz, 1996)

Some other writers have summarized postmodernism as:

1. Postmodernism will be defined in terms of its main components: modernism, constructions of reality, deconstruction, semantic aspects, cognitive theory, the context of our times, and so on.

Some of us have lost faith in modern (scientific) thinking and in technology as ways of responding to opportunities and to threats in the social and human aspects of this postmodern age. In the search for more effective ways of responding, some place focused on traditional approaches that appear to have worked for centuries. Others see the world differently and create other (innovate) new, more flexible, approaches

if they have the freedom to do so. There are now many different ways of viewing the political and social realm. These many different realities add to the confusion. People ask: "Whom should I believe?"

Increasingly we hear the questions: "Who is right?" "Who is really telling the truth?" Such questions are especially prevalent in a presidential election year. The past presidential election in US has provided much evidence that political parties and leaders, with help from advertising agencies have created two different realities, a Republican one and a Democratic one. Leaders of both sides have presented too many half truths and appear to have been more interested in winning the election than in honestly informing and educating the public.

To a significant extent, answers to the foregoing questions depend upon learning about the views of others and communicating with the others sufficiently so that one can understand the different perspectives upon which the different realities are founded. This idea leads us to the field of developmental psychology.

2. The stages of psycho-social and moral development that people pass through as they grow from babyhood through adulthood influence how they respond to an increasing variety of realities and the frustrations caused by that variety. As one progresses through these stages of development, they can better appreciate the different perspectives that other persons and organizations take toward important social and human issues.

If the upbringing of young people is not adequate for handling this complexity, the young surround themselves with groups of people who they feel have a workable solution to the problem of responding to complexity. What are these different groupings?

Sociologists have classified responses to uncertainty in ways that differ slightly from those of the developmental psychologist. David Reisman, in his classic book "The Lonely Crowd" defined three social character types: tradition-directed, inner-directed and other-directed persons. (Reisman, 2001)

3. There are limitations in our language and discourse that restrict and distort our perceptions and our thinking about the fair and just ways to respond to persons from different social and/or cultural backgrounds. Our thinking and analyses are prone to suffer from dualistic divisions wherein one is either right or wrong and any middle ground is overlooked. Postmodernists examine these effects in depth from scientific and philosophical approaches. Being aware of these limitations and discussing differences in perception and in how realities develop helps one understand the differences, and also helps one clarify ones own perceptions and views.

Ihab Hasan distinguishes between postmodernism and post modernity. He believes that:

"Postmodernism is to refer to the cultural sphere, especially literature, philosophy, and the various arts, including architecture, while post modernity refers to the geopolitical scheme, less order than disorder, has emerged in the last decades. The latter, sometimes called post colonialism, features globalization and localization, conjoined in erratic, often lethal, ways." (Hassan, 2001)

Hassan adds that this distinction is not the defunct Marxist difference between superstructure and base, since the new economic, political, religious, and technological forces of the world hardly conform to Marxist "laws." Nor does postmodernity equal postcolonialism, though the latter, with its concern for colonial legacies, may be part of the former.

The central characteristics of postmodernism present us with a radically different way of looking at life. At this point, however, we need to remember the proverb that says "If you want to know about water, don't ask a fish!" The postmodernist elements of our culture are to us like water to the fish: we live and breathe in them everyday, but we take them so much for granted that it is very difficult for us to see them.

Perhaps the most general characteristics of postmodernism are fragmentation and pluralism. Our culture is rapidly reaching the point where we no longer think of ourselves in a universe but rather a multi-verse. In the postmodern worldview, transience, flux, and fragmentation describe our growing sense of how things really are. Where do we see this played out around us?

a. Personal Identity

At the level of the individual, there abides a sense of uncertainty about how to understand oneself; most people consciously search for a sense of identity--for who and what they are and for what significance and worth they have. Our media-generated, consumer culture daily offers us a thousand choices for who we should be like, what we should value, and how we can attain worth and significance. And we take these images for what is real. So, for example, tennis pro Andre Agassi can say "Image is everything!" in an advertisement, and we believe him.

The recent, wildly successful sitcom "Seinfeld" vaunts itself as a "show about nothing." Isolated, narcissistic, urban, "thirty-something singles" float through their existences trying to make sense out of what they ultimately perceive to be a meaningless, patchwork world. We laugh as we watch these actors portray individuals with no roots, vague identities, and conscious indifference to morals

outside their self-determined ones. George riotously works out his "pathetic" life "going with" whatever works for him at the moment in jobs, scams, or relationships. The commercial and critical success of this show is attributable not only to the genius of its script, character development, and acting, but also to the way the audience identifies with the fragmented, ludicrous, pastiche of "moments" which make up the characters' lives. Seinfeld is uniquely postmodern in its presentation of groundless, malleable character identities. It is also postmodern--as are most TV sitcoms today--in its radical, up-front play with "moralities" altered at the characters' whim; there is no one morality.

b. Education and Academics

From the modernist perspective, truth was largely relative, but the possibility of universals in knowledge remained conceivable. In the postmodern model, we don't really "know" anything; rather, we "interpret". postmodernist education says "Pick a Worldview", as if only a choice of clothing style were at issue, "and create your interpretations accordingly," since truths are only language constructions put in place by those who have influence and power. The emphasis on multi-cultural education is grounded philosophically in this perspective. After all, says the postmodernist educator, the emphasis in Western education on rationality and the quest for what is ultimately true is only another manifestation of Western "cultural imperialism" motivated by consumer capitalist power.

c. Popular Media

Nowhere are the effects of postmodernism more glaring than in pop culture and its media. Image and fiction are promoted as reality in contemporary music, television, and print media by producers who understand the power of visual image to present a fictional reality that we will accept as reality itself. Dissolving the distinction between fiction and truth is justified by the postmodernist, because truth itself is a fiction; all we ever get are the fictions of our language games.

The quintessential example of postmodern media production is MTV. From its fast, fragmented production editing to its underlying visions (sexual moral relativism, for example), MTV represents the "cutting edge" of postmodernism applied to consumer media. MTV's editors "collage" the shows together into a jumpy, stream-of-consciousness presentation that leaves older viewers baffled by its pace and apparent incoherence. But to the postmodern "generation-X" crowd who make a steady diet of it, MTV's randomness is normal. MTV's twenty-four-hour parade of images, pseudo-

documentaries, hedonistic dating-scenario game shows, music videos, and cutting-edge advertisements relentlessly assault one's visual and auditory senses, leaving viewers feeling fragmented and transient within a decentered plural-reality: the postmodern world.

Chaotic Condition and Micro-politics

If we accept this idea of postmodernism about the uniqueness of phenomena, then we can have many (political) developments none of them the same. Postmodernists like Lyotard do not believe on great plans that shape the world. They prefer a chaotic image about the world and not a progressive one. At this chaotic image, all great ideas are collapsed.

Many of the postmodern thinkers believe that power no longer is imposed from above. But it is distributed among different parts of society. Therefore, instead of having macro- politics, we have micro- politics, practiced in daily life. People are not just suppressed, but they can use and impose their power through the ordinary and small networks. The politics of postmodernism believes that instead of constructing an utopian and non-achievable program, it is better to challenge the power in an ordinary and daily level. Lyotard idea is influenced by the ideas of Michel De Certeau expressed in his book, *Practice of Everyday Life*. (De Certeau, 2002)

De Certeau believes that everyday life has a kind of creativity. When we go shopping; we draw our conceptual maps throughout the city. When we change television channels, we are making collages from what has been delivered by media. When we buy fake brands we are rejecting the elitist system of market. In all of them we are not the passive victim of consumer society. We are choosing and by this choose we are using bricolage method. bricolage is a word coined by Levi Straus to point to daily creativity of people in using accessible materials.

Postmodern Space and Non-placed

Edward Soja as an American geographer argues that we always intend to see history or time as a great force behind culture or society. Marxism believes geography or place acts as a sheet on which we paint. Both ideas are very simplifying. He points out that as we live in abstract constructs like society and time, we also live in concrete environments. He argues that spaces instead of being influenced passively by history actively influence it.

Spaces, and in Soja word, cities have been radically changed. Great changes have occurred in industry, global cities have grown, and people are more and more

concerned with their own security. Identity cards and local monitoring and control have becoming more and more important (Soja, 1989; see also: Benko, 1997; Davis, 1998, 2000).

Marc Auge, French anthropologist, argues that we live in a "Super modern" society which is increasingly under the domination of what he calls "Non-placed". For example we spend more times in supermarkets, entertainment complexes and so on, our daily transactions are through telephone calls, computer and so on and we are born in clinics and die in hospitals. Places are locations that people belong to them and Non-placed are where people spend a short time in them and then pass from them. Auge believes that all these have ruined the particularities: Place, community and identification references have gone away, and a new isolation has been created. These Non-placed in turn can create nostalgia and nationalism. People play some tricks in the art of doing to make some inner culture for themselves. Wall drawings and so on are attempts to give meaning to these places and create a new identity for the people living in Non-placed. (Auge, 1995)

Globalized Identities

Beside non-places and their effect on human society, we witness a society of globalized people with the common art, culture and so on which are becoming more and more similar. These global cultures are made of different culture in a way of bricolage. Global culture is increasingly selecting from different culture what it see appropriate. George Lipsitz, American critic, sees hip hop and rap music as examples of this bricolage. (Lipsitz, <http://members.magnet.at/translocation/d/lipsitz.htm>)

Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism

Fredric Jameson is one of the thinkers who is interested in postmodern culture and praises it. At the same time, in his book, *postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, he is concerned about the fakeness of postmodern culture. He believes that what is constructed as postmodern culture is an empty one. Jameson believes that this culture has a direct relation with the kind of capitalism that exists. In Jameson idea, our society has passed many phases to reach to this capitalism and this culture: market capitalism, monopolized capitalism and multinational capitalism. This last phase is what Jameson calls late capitalism, consuming capitalism or post-industrial capitalism.

Expansion of capitalism has created smaller and smaller groups with special tastes and needs. But what Jameson and other postmodernist thinkers are afraid of is that

all these are governed by a "global generality". Jameson believes that in such a situation, local cultures will fight for survival and meaning. (Jameson, 1992)

Conclusion

Relativism and uncertainty in postmodernism is said to be a virtue for it. This uncertainty at the same time makes it difficult to reach a conclusion about any matter in this subject. Postmodern politics is surrounded with such relativism and uncertainties. Any development in this situation is vague. As some of postmodernists has pointed out there is a globalization beside localization: politicizing of daily life besides globalizing of politics and society with the great powers imposed by new "colonial forces".

Parties and interest groups are products of modernism and in postmodernism we witness other social elements especially social movements: social groups with participators, not members. These elements enhance politics of everyday life and cause the share and the distribution of power between lower and upper parts of society.

In postmodernism, there are many ways to attain political development and even we can say many political developments, even many thinkers can not accept it. In this point of view, we may witness deconstruction of traditional ways of government and popular politics into new forms. Internationalization and globalization do not omit traditional and local ways of life, but sometimes enhance them. This is what some thinkers call glocalization: (Think globally acts locally).

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