

# Philosophy for Revolution

## Session 10: Exiting Postmodernism

Course leader: Kyrill Potapov

Slide 2: New Materialism: Matter comes to matter – Donna Haraway, Karen Barad, Jane Bennett

Postmodernists have challenged science, colonialism and other power structures for their totalizing narratives but isn't this rejection itself totalizing? Donna Haraway argues that if we really want to empower women, we need to engage with the everyday material realities of how women are constituted. Haraway believes that the idea of a cyborg – a human who extends beyond their individual skin to appropriate and meld with their environment- can help challenge what we consider to be natural to women. Karen Barad has critiqued Judith Butler's idea that gender is something that is performed by arguing that such performances cannot be confined to language, they must involve a vast network of prior material relations.

Jane Bennett point to the ways in which humans are intertwined with and constituted through their environment. While postmodernism has been a powerful force in raising awareness of liberal causes like sexism and totalitarianism, New Materialists argue that its focus on the symbolic at the expense of the material holds it back from making real change or empowering women and vulnerable groups. Barad combines critical theory with rigorous engagement with quantum physics, while Elizabeth Grosz takes a similar approach to evolutionary biology.

Slide 3: Object Oriented Ontology – Graham Harman, Timothy Morton, Ian Bogost

Object Oriented Ontology suggests that postmodernism has been too focused on humans and human societies at the expense of animals and the environment. Timothy Morton argues that to grasp issues like climate catastrophe we need to appreciate objects as they really exist apart from human discourses or interactions. The problem is that the climate is made up of objects that are far bigger and more complex than any concepts or narratives we have about them.

Slide 4: Can we just ignore postmodernism? – Continental vs. Analytic Philosophy

Philosophy often gets divided into continental and analytic traditions and participants in one tradition have tended to look down on or ignore participants in the other. Broadly speaking, analytic philosophy is interested in constructing systems while continental philosophy is interested in challenging them and pointing at what can't be captured in them. Influential founding figures in analytic philosophy like Carnap and Neurath were Marxists but for the most part analytic philosophy developed in America as a response against left wing movements in Europe and the Soviet Union. Analytic philosophers have often assumed they can ignore thought from other times and countries, instead focusing in on a narrow range of technical questions often prioritizing accurate language use.

A number of contemporary philosophers have come out of the analytic tradition to criticize this approach. Peter Unger has argued that the focus on language and hypothetical scenarios has meant that the bulk of analytic philosophy has not made a single substantial claim - since their claims literally do not refer to substance, only to things like possible worlds. It doesn't look like either side has obviously won this battle.

There have been a number of debates between analytic philosophers like Chomsky and Searle and continental philosophers like Foucault and Derrida. Analytic philosophers have often pointed out the

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hypocrisy or paradox of claiming that we cannot know truth or that everything is relative while holding this as something which is not itself in doubt. But if you watch these debates on YouTube you'll notice how much both sides are talking past each-other. For a large part of the 20th century it seemed like there is an unbridgeable gap between analytic and continental philosophy.

### Slide 5: Dialectics between suspicion and trust

One thing that we have seen throughout this course is that there is no philosophy that can offer a full picture of the world and we have suggested that the best strategy may be to work through the contradictions. A new generation of philosophers is ignoring the continental / analytic divide and taking what's best from both traditions. Ray Brassier describes this as a dialectic between suspicion and trust. Continental philosophy and critical theory has played a powerful role in challenging the power structures that have reproduced sexism, racism and other forms of prejudice throughout history, but analytic philosophy has also been powerful in building systems that help us to understand our world. What's necessary is a continuous process of critique and construction: taking the best of both traditions.

Brassier shares Mark Fisher's worry that Marxists and anarchists have sabotaged their own ability to articulate how a better world could be possible by aligning themselves with movements that oppose science and modernization - thereby reinforcing the assumption that an end to capitalism would mean an end to progress and enjoyment. Marxists like Wendy Brown express their anxiety about technology and growing social tensions in a desire to go back to a more primitive time without the stresses of modern life. Brassier's response is that if we form an autonomous commune while private companies like Amazon still exist - whatever we do will just be reabsorbed into capitalism. He suggests that analytic philosophy and Enlightenment thinkers like Kant and Hegel can help us to break out of the chains capitalism has placed on our imagination and to rationally engineer an alternative future. This is a Marxism which appropriates science for emancipatory ends while appreciating what is special about humans and their communities.

### Slide 6: Social Practice

Many critics of capitalism and postmodernism have criticised its focus on individuals. So what should we do instead? It sounds a bit vague to say that we should focus on networks or groups. A slightly better answer might be that we should focus on practices. Let's think about what a practice is and what makes a good practice. The ideas of Alasdair MacIntyre might be a helpful springboard here.

You might want to pause the video and read MacIntyre's dense definition. MacIntyre uses the example of chess to explain what he means by an internal good. A child might play chess because his grandad has bribed him with a ten pound note. This would be an external good. As the child becomes better at chess, moves within the game like particular openings will themselves become motivating. Not all labour is a good practice in MacIntyre's sense. In fact most of what we do at work isn't - we are motivated by the external good of pay or the threat of being fired. For a practice to reduce rather than increasing our alienation what is good in the practice needs to be mutually recognizable and changeable by us and those engaging in the practice with us. It used to be possible to recognise a good chair maker. Someone who was a good chair maker could recognise good chairs and other good chair makers. What made a good chair could change with every chair made. Furniture stores like Ikea destroyed this creative capacity. What counts as excellence depends on the judgements of a community but this does not mean that it is relative. Over time different cultures have independently

# Philosophy for Revolution

## Session 10: Exiting Postmodernism

settled on what counts as a good chair based on the material reality of the needs and affordances in their environment. The Marxist conclusion rejected by MacIntyre is that human nature is also reconfigures through human practice.

### Slide 7: Relativism and progress

MacIntyre responds to Thomas Kuhn's influential book "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions". Kuhn has been used to undermine the idea of progress by pointing at the ways in which scientific consensus changes. The consensus or paradigm shifts happen suddenly and unpredictably - rather than in a straight line. But MacIntyre argues that the ingredients for a revolution always exist before it happens. It is possible to see progress from one paradigm to the next because a later paradigm can explain an earlier one but not vice versa. MacIntyre defends the position that it is possible for a culture to make progress. He argues that a culture that has developed paints of certain colours or has a certain number of words for snow can both appropriate their environment in superior ways and that they can show things that would be insightful to a culture which only has a few colours or words for snow. Rather than seeing different cultures as so different that they are severed from each-other in ways that make it impossible for members of one culture to explain their lived experience to one-another, MacIntyre suggests that a painter living in the Amazon basin or in 5th Century Japan could still be introduced into the practices of a painter like Picasso in ways that would let them appreciate what was good about what Picasso was doing. The artist in the Amazon basin could similarly be recognized for her skill and would have things Picasso would appreciate. Aristotle would not be impressed by Quantum Physics but he would be impressed at how we can transport large rocks using cranes. Postmodernists are right that such progress can always be reinterpreted but this does not detract from what MacIntyre is showing about our habits and practices and their relation to our flourishing and freedom.