

Philosophy for Revolution

Session 9: Postmodernism – a fatal attraction

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Slide 2: There is no alternative

After the peaceful collapse of the Soviet Union, Margaret Thatcher famously said “There is no alternative”. Fukuyama suggested it was “The End of History” because historic events like wars and revolutions would not happen again now that Western Liberalism had won. All that was left was for more and more countries to join the liberal project and just tweak the political system here and there.

Slide 3: There are no grand narratives – Jean-Francois Lyotard

This period is often viewed as the peak of “postmodernism”. The term postmodernism was popularized by Jean-Francois Lyotard, who portrayed it as a current in modern cultural thought chiefly characterized by the belief that “There are no Grand Narratives”.

When people in medieval Europe had a swollen foot or a neighbour they suspected was flirting with their husband, they would go to the church for advice and the church would have an answer. Lyotard coined the term “postmodern” to refer to an era in which there would never again be a unified narrative which could explain the different things that matter to us in our lives or which groups of people could unite behind to define progress. Even hard sciences like physics seemed to be offering a range of competing narratives about the fundamental structure of the universe.

Slide 4: Cut off the King’s head – Michel Foucault

If there are no Grand Narratives then the way that teachers, governments, and scientists get people to agree on what is true is through discipline. We all have the will to gain power over others and to keep others from exercising their power over us, so we create categories like “progress” and “crime” and institutions like schools, prisons and labs to sustain our current power structures. Foucault suggested that we should find the centres of power, the “King” and resist it.

Slide 5: Just do it!

According to Baudrillard with the loss of Grand Narratives we have lost the ability to gain knowledge of who we and others are. All that is left to us is to signal who we are through the things we buy. We can choose trainers or breakfast cereal that create an identity for ourselves to perform.

Slide 6: Structures

While the Modernist age could be characterized as revealing underlying structures, whether through Marxism, Psychoanalysis or linguistics, postmodernist thought is characterized by undermining them.

Slide 7: We have never been modern – Bruno Latour

According to Bruno Latour we have never been modern because modernisation is a construct like everything else. Latour argues that King Tutankhamen could not have had arthritis because arthritis had not been created until many years later. According to Gilles Deleuze everything that existed or could exist in our world is an assembly of interweaving machines. A tree is a machine collecting

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sunlight and expelling CO2 and war is another machine involving bombs and exploding limbs. For Latour and Deleuze humans are just more parts of these ultimately meaningless systems.

Slide 8: Deterritorialization

But isn't our world full of structures like fast food places and marriages? Deleuze acknowledges this but suggests that these representations of the world are temporary and incomplete. They are all undergoing a process of "deterritorialization" through which the differences that define them dissipate, much like the smoke and smell from a lit match dissipates in a room. Deleuze connects this effect with the 2nd law of thermodynamics.

Slide 9: Can you be a Big Man now?

Fast food places are already having cashiers replaced by self-service checkouts and extra tables are being removed because Uber deliveries have reduced the need for them. In Papua New Guinea, where wedding guests would bring specially chosen gifts to display that they are a Big Man in a ritual dating back centuries, many are now setting up a contactless debit card machine at the entrance. The ritual is being deterritorialized until there is little difference between it and buying a Big Mac. Deleuze & Guattari of course stress that the main engine behind this deterritorialization is Capitalism. Far right philosopher Nick Land suggests capitalism is in fact an unstoppable artificial intelligence. Land looks forward to the day that capitalism seeps into every crevice of our existence and deterritorializes democracy and humanity itself, letting intelligence "exit" the constraints of human culture to form superior unities.

Slide 10: Simulacra

Within a postmodern society, objects can become so detached from their original meaning and history that we forget it altogether. For example, few of us would think of an actual mouse when we see Micky Mouse ears. Jean Baudrillard calls the Micky Mouse ears a *simulacrum* of the real mouse. Las Vegas is one of the most postmodern places on earth because it is so full of simulacra. It is an imaginary museum of dead things. You see the Eiffel tower next to a Sphinx next to a giant Coke can. We would not ask the architect if she has Egyptian ancestry or what the flashing blue eyes represent. We accept that it is there because it is fun and exciting and works at getting us to go in.

Slide 11: Revolution? No thanks!

This is why Lyotard argues "Grand Narratives" like Marxism will never work. We don't want things that are "better" or "truer" because we are satisfied with the simulacra. Most people know how sausages are made but want the sausage meat anyway. No matter how bad our lives might be, Capitalism has provided us with enough things to satisfy our desires. In fact, we're more likely to fight for these simple pleasures than fight for a revolution after which we might not be able to finish watching our favourite TV series.

Slide 12: A voice for the oppressed – Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

Many people have been attracted to postmodernism because it spoke to their life experiences for example as a gay person or black person living in a cruel and controlling society. The problem, as Spivak has argued is that in handing down their critique authors like Foucault have contributed to the sense of entrapment and alienation rather than helping to fight it.

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Slide 13: Capitalist Realism

Though Baudrillard's critiques of consumerism echo criticisms of Capitalism made by Catholic theologians back in the Enlightenment, something about his account still strongly resonates with us today. Baudrillard seems to capture our experience of modern life in the age of the internet. Baudrillard seemed to anticipate a sort of impasse or blockage forming in our culture. Mark Fisher called this experience Capitalist Realism.

Slide 14: Depressive Hedonia

But what if this feeling of frustration or as Fisher puts it "depressive hedonia" is itself a product of Capitalism? What if Baudrillard's story about our society sounds so appealing because we have ourselves internalized the Capitalist ideology which produced it? Fisher highlights what Marx was already warning us about: the ways in which Capitalism leads to stereotypes in how we act and think. Fisher highlights the ways in which Capitalism limits our imagination of possible alternatives by severing us from others and from basic concepts like public space. We are instead handed the fake freedom of the Uber driver, being given apparent personal choice while really being forced to internalize the regimes of control and accountability that a worker would get from a boss or foreman a century ago. In our own time Adam Curtis can have his documentaries about the ravages of Capitalism aired on the BBC because the only antagonist they can identify is us and our consumerism. As Fisher cites Slavoj Zizek, it is almost like being critical of capitalism at this symbolic level is what's necessary to keep allowing yourself to perpetuate it.

Slide 15: We ought to treat everything from a position of irony – Richard Rorty

Postmodernism can be seen in American analytic philosophy as well as continental philosophy. Richard Rorty argues that epistemology is unnecessary because there is no such thing as truth, there is only agreement which can always be renegotiated. Rorty argues that since truth is relative and contingent, we should take an attitude of ironic detachment towards life - we should not commit to any belief too strongly and should treat others claims to knowledge with doubt. Philosophy for Rorty is really no different from everyday chat. Rorty's philosophy is explicitly motivated by his commitment to bourgeois liberalism. By detaching ourselves from ideologies or foundational vocabularies we can free ourselves for self-creation.

Slide 16: Free from ideology?

Irony without ideology is the style most easily associated with postmodern art and culture. Mark Fisher argues that this cynical denial of ideology is itself the hegemonic ideology of our time. But again, this is not a tragic conclusion. Realising that this is itself an ideology means realising that it is possible to overcome it.