



Post-Modernism: The Social Aspect

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POST–MODERNISM

The Social Aspect

In almost any current literary periodical or magazine, book review or collection of essays, the term "post-modernism" appears. What does this catch-all word mean really mean? In some cases post-modernism is used to define an historical period, in others, it is an aesthetic category or style, still others, a way of life. Critics and artists often use it to categorize all areas of contemporary art. But when did modernism die, and why? Rather, we should think, when did the modern world die if indeed it did? It seems that behind this use of the term "post-modern" is a deep desire to reject the history of the recent past and a need to declare a new era of radical change in art, culture, event, audience. Perhaps post-modernism means more than an anthology definition. Perhaps it is a new consciousness of the individual and his or her relation to the world and self expression. Richard Falk, Emilio Ambasz, and William O. Beeman provide a look at what "post-modernism" can mean today beyond its relevance to the history of an art form in their provocative views of its "social aspect."

RICHARD FALK

Richard Falk is Albert G. Milbank Professor of International Law and Practice at Princeton University. His books include A Study of Future Worlds, This Endangered Planet, and Human Rights and State Sovereignty.

*“ . . . To live in a doomed city,
a doomed nation, a doomed world is
desolating, and we
all, all are desolated . . . ”*

Hayden Carruth, *Marshall Washer*

As someone primarily concerned with the prospects for public space (including politics), the idea of “post-modernism” is neither familiar nor obviously helpful. There is, of course, a potential affinity between “modernism” and “modernization,” the latter a cult as well as a term widely used by Western policy makers and social scientists, especially in the late 1960s, as an alternative image of economic and political development to that offered “backward” (that is, relatively non-industrialized) peoples by the promise of Marxism-Leninism. Modernization was, in other words, the banner of progress, measured in econometric terms of gross national product and rates of economic growth, that embodied “the gift” that the capitalist First World was intent upon giving to the non-Western Third World. In essence, “modernization” as “Free World” proponents perceived things, meant moving from agricultural/rural patterns of social organization to industrial/urban patterns without the geopolitical ruptures that result from class struggle. The modernizing process was deemed inevitable, global in scope, and associated with wider Western notions of evolutionary progress that encompassed dialectical materialism; only the ideological and geopolitical auspices (USA v. USSR) were in doubt.

In this central respect, the partisan promotion of modernization as a specific path to industrialization, was a definite outgrowth of the more general notion of being modern, that is, working out in human experience the full consequences of reason and logic, an embodiment presumed until recently to have mainly positive connotations, the central ground for op-

timism and progress in the mainstream West. Specifically, the payoff of modernization was the continuous improvement of man's material condition, as compared to traditional (or pre-modern) society, moving ever closer to mass abundance and automation thanks to science-based technology. This broader promise of The Enlightenment underlies both Marxist and Capitalist ideologies, the modernizing debate centering on how to harness productive energies for maximum growth and social benefit, in essence, a controversy pitting advocates of market-oriented growth against those who believe in state plans enacted through bureaucratic command. Of course, modernizing tendencies have had their critics since the Industrial Revolution, mainly maverick poets and prophets who attributed the poisoning of body and soul to those dark Satanic mills.

Countercultural gropings in the direction of "voluntary simplicity," libertarian socialism, and holistic religious experience is one developed country-expression of "post-modernism," whereas the resurgence of communalism and a rejection of everything "Western," including especially modernization, dramatically evident in the Iranian Revolution, is quite another way of entering the post-modern world.

The post-modern context is, then, a consequence of the ecological backlash most broadly conceived. Here, the modern dilemma centers on what happens when human destiny dispenses with a religious sense of dependence, projecting for itself autonomy and horizons of boundless growth without any real comprehension of resource, environmental and spiritual limits. Human ingenuity can elude limits for a period of time, but eventually barriers begin to intrude, often in dramatic ways. The dynamic of technological innovation, the engine of modernization, outruns human capacities to exert social control, most spectacularly in relation to nuclear weapons and nuclear power. More prosaically, there is not enough arable land to contain the dynamics of population pressure, nor enough accessible resources to keep on with industrial expansion on a global scale, and not even enough clean water and air, a reality already regionally experienced. Perhaps more profoundly, at some stage, modernization as mythic crux produces cultural havoc, breaking down traditional foundations of dignity and meaning, without finding suitable replacements; the political consequences include vulnerability to extremism of all kinds, including massive withdrawal from public spaces and collective passivity. The specific circumstances of societies at various levels of industrialization shaped the experience of disaffection in a variety of ways.

A world of fast-food chains and freeways could not sustain evolutionary credibility of continuous progress even if the whole population gained, which of course it didn't, and even if there were no barriers to ever deeper penetrations of the modern. Hope gave way to despair, and despair is giving way to revolutionary reactions of all sorts, ranging from the perverse martyrdom of Jonestown to life-affirming experiments at all levels of social organization. Countercultural gropings in the direction of "voluntary simplicity," libertarian socialism, and holistic religious experience is one developed country-expression of "post-modernism," whereas the resurgence of communalism and a rejection of everything "Western," including especially modernization, dramatically evident in the Iranian Revolution, is quite another way of entering the post-modern world. In both kinds of settings, each containing considerable diversity, religious reaffirmation plays a central role.

The post-modernist situation that aptly characterizes public space at the moment in the West is elusive, yet genuine—it involves a renewed quest for meaning at all levels of social organization, as well as an increasingly acknowledged dread about what will happen if current destructive tendencies persist. The structures that spawned modernization remain entrenched and out-of-control, despite their lack of legitimacy. As a consequence, the apocalyptic moment is never far removed from political consciousness. In fact, our most prophetic voices have, symbolically, already endured the apocalypse; as a consequence, their preoccupation is with the post-apocalyptic (Beckett, Doris Lessing, Stockhausen) situation, how and whether to carry on in a condition of almost material, cultural, and spiritual desolation.

Post-modernism in the human sciences should, I think, be primarily associated with this post-apocalyptic context of thought, analysis, and reconstruction. That is, there is no way to save modernity from its self-destruct dynamic; preventive therapies are too late. The patient is terminal and, hence, the only serious question worth probing is what comes next. Here, the positive post-apocalyptic possibility is concerned with the recovery of a healthy connection with nature and some dimension of transcendence and spirituality, starting over, rebuilding from zero, including the reconstruction of language and communication. In Western terms, the future is reborn by way of a new covenant, recalling the imagery of the Noah story, including God's biblical promise never to subject the earth to another such cleansing flood. To this degree, even positive post-apocalyptic thought is clouded with uncertainty that centers on a fear of repetition; that is, is the human experience, as Hindus have long contended, caught within an apocalyptic rhythm of long cycles? The other problem for "modernists" here is with rationality, how, logically, can there be a stage of human evolution that comes after (post-) a final enactment?

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The negative post-apocalyptic expression is caught up in the dismal, static aftermath of the apocalyptic encounter. It is, then, portrayed as a minimalist arena of survival; even the impulse toward renewal is dismissed as romanticism. Beckett's theatre works are perfect expressions of this post-apocalyptic zenith of pessimism where hope is denigrated once and for all, definitively.

This split in the post-apocalyptic comprehension of post-modernism also conveys the radical confusion that pertains to all domains of public space, including those involving cultural performance. At the present, there is no way to designate the period in relation to breakdown or breakthrough. How long this present confusion will persist is not at all evident, but certainly as long as "the bomb" is available to power-wielders, but not yet used in a massive fashion. Being at the brink (ecologically, geopolitically, and epistemologically) is the essence of post-modernism.

I realize that this focus is not entirely congruent with the various senses of post-modernism in the arts, where the term seems to suggest methods of perceiving and presenting, and reactions to earlier schools. For instance, post-modernism is sometimes associated with the kind of "realism" that starts coming back into painting after abstract expression, including a fusing of surrealism and photography. Or in poetry, post-modernism seems to involve for Randall Jarrell and others (see Jerome Mazarro, *Postmodern American Poetry*) the efforts by poets, starting with Auden to react to the overall modern situation in a more direct and positive manner than Eliot and Pound, who are perceived as modernists (being modern in this manner anti-modernism), who mount a rejection front against vulgarity and secular values. In essence, the post-modernist poet, with the help of Freud, Marx, and Darwin, interprets and encounters modernity, even its disagreeable aspects, rather than retreat to a hermeneutic sanctuary à la Eliot and Pound, where the very obscurity of the poem operates as a defensive strategy; in actuality, modernist affirmations are pre-modern in imagery as in Eliot's presentation of Traditional Christianity (*Little Gidding*) or Pound's celebration of the warrior poet figures of the early Italian Renaissance. Mazarro never makes clear whether post-modernist poetry has ended; he concludes his study with the work of Sylvia Plath and Elizabeth Bishop, both poets of encounter who emphasize the virtues of overtness and disclosure without ever seriously questioning the adequacy of language as a bearer of their intentions.

Returning, then, to public (including political) spaces I conclude these remarks by saying that the enemy of post-modernism is repression, secrecy, covert actions, the CIA, mystification, disinformation, cooption, drugs of all kinds, and bland acquiescence. Post-modernist politics is definitely revolutionary in its stance, yet it looks at all varieties of Stalinism, bureaucratic centralism, and state socialism as instances of

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counterrevolution. The post-modernist project is somehow to make a revolution at or even beyond the brink of apocalyptic danger. Whether the post-modernist will crack under the strain of waiting remains to be seen; so far, it seems as though the grim realism of the post-modernist stance is a source of psychic and cultural strength, enabling, at least, perseverance, and perhaps a shimmering of light. It is to be expected that for now the post-modernist vision of the future will be otherworldly, even in a literal sense, as in the recent "fiction" of Doris Lessing, really a new species of exploratory journalism, seeking to discover elsewhere in the universe some post-post-modern possibilities that are life- and spirit-sustaining.

EMILIO AMBASZ

Emilio Ambasz, an architect, is the author of Italy: The New Domestic Landscape and The Taxi Project. He is the former curator of Design at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

There has been a certain concern since the beginning of the century to create a new type of architecture. The ideological premise was that the new man would be the one stepping out of history, a new man emerging out of traditional class relationships. This new man could not look at history. History had been the story of the subjugation of one class by another. In this complete ideological construct there would be a new system of property, of classes, and therefore there would be a new type of architecture. So for fifty years modern architecture has tried not to relate to history at all. Now we realize that it was a complete conceit of the mind. In exchange we have lost a tremendous treasure of architectural experience. Now there is such a longing for ornament, for sensual surfaces, and for certain forms of emotional experiences in architecture, not only the cerebral ones. Professional architects, being as they usually are, uncultured and poorly read, go to the books of architecture for reference. They cut out little doorways, little moldings, and paste them up to express a certain longing for modulated surfaces. The fact is that they are frightened of inventing ornament. They apply it, they don't invent it. They are frightened of inventing ornament because they are frightened of making images.

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Every period has its myths and every myth has its image. The Renaissance had the myth of the Enlightened Man. Man was the center of things, and pictorial and architectural images were created to represent this. Ours is the only period that—instead of creating the appropriate images to represent its myths—has developed methods for generating infinite images. So the image which better represents our period may be that of the method whereby the images may be generated (something like Sol LeWitt's formula for generating images without ever making a statement about a definitive image).

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The formula is there, he can always make another one. Thereby you have architecture being taught as a method for generating architectural images but without ever making a value judgment. No wonder it is hard for people in our culture to make conclusive, irreducible images. It would mean making value statements. Because we have found our values so suspect, you can see people who have resorted to the recovery of images from the past. In a certain way, these recovered images come with a warning: "Use these images, but remember, they are just borrowed to satisfy our craving for moldings. They are brought back from history and thus they may at any moment be returned." When ornament is glued on rather than being a result of the structure, it has a way of falling off whenever the cultural season changes. My contention is that very few architects take the risk of inventing new images or new ornaments. My ornaments come from using natural materials as in the juxtaposition of agriculture with architecture. Disparate elements when juxtaposed create new images, images that are sometimes moving, sometimes ironic, and sometimes perplexing.

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Unlike the now popular search for historic elements engaged in the mere reproduction of columns, porticos and keystones, my work projects conceptual references to anthropology. There is an appeal to our innate yet almost forgotten sense of ritual. I seek an identification with a continuous past based on instinct rather than the visually obvious. There is in all of us a deep need for ritual, for ceremony, for procession, for garments, and for magical gestures. I think it is an archetypal search in which we all partake. The so-called Post Modern architects are, in most cases, very academic people. They crave references where the footnote is evident and the scholastic method is flawless. They make a gate by using architectural historical pieces that have always been seen as a gate. I also make gates, but I make them by framing a passage with earth berms. Perhaps the two of us are searching for the same thing, but the way we announce it is very different.

Professional architects, being as they usually are, uncultured and poorly read go to the books of architecture for reference. They cut out little doorways, little moldings, and paste them up to express a certain longing for modulated surfaces.

To put it in a larger frame of reference, one could say that every age has manifested the same immense desire to create an abode, and within the same immense desire of having the roof "disappear," to have it become a very benign sky where it is always sunny, delightful, and sensually pleasant. The Baroques painted trompe-l'oeil clouds on the ceiling and the Persians made magnificent lapis lazuli skies. I open up the roof by completely opening the center of the house. There are architects now engaged in recovery. I am interested in discovery. In recovery, they return to the source of history and utilize elements that make sense to each other. However, they end up talking a tremendously hermetic language where most of the references can only be understood by those initiated into the cult. You can exist in this way if you want to remain inside a convent. But if you are really going to deal with real problems, such as housing, they cannot be solved by pasting up little fragments of history. I am not against seeking to maintain a continuum with history nor am I against a search for ornament. On the contrary, I am all for ornament; my heart beats for scrambled egg on the walls. But I don't believe in ornament that results from buying history by the foot. I believe in inventing ornament where it is intrinsic to the structure of the thing made. My objection is that in many cases, this quest is a very culturally tired search. I pretend that I am far more vital. But I must be lucid and acknowledge that I am still a product of my culture. I should confess, therefore, that I sometimes fancy myself to be the last man of the present culture and look longingly to designing the house for the first man of a culture which has not yet arrived.

WILLIAM O. BEEMAN

William O. Beeman, who writes frequently on political affairs for major U.S. periodicals, is Professor of Anthropology at Brown University.

Although the term "post-modern" is most often thought of as applicable to artistic expression. it is equally relevant as a concept for social science.

As social scientists attempt to gain increasingly sophisticated understanding of the human experience, it has become necessary to rethink, as we enter the last quarter of the twentieth century, the whole bag of analytic tricks that have served students of society for the last hundred and fifty years.

The “modern” period in social science can be thought of as the period dominated by structuralist thinking. The French sociologists Emile Durkheim and Marcell Mauss were discovered and adopted during the 1920s, and the feeling that society consisted of an integrated whole, which was more than the sum of its parts, became almost a tenet for two generations of social scientists. This sent armies of graduate students in fervent search of methods for investigating the individual “parts” and their relationship with the other units that made up the whole of society.

The notion of “social class,” already prefigured in nineteenth-century thinking, became a tangible, statistically measurable thing; reified into sub-units which were viewed as inter-relating with each other. Individuals were seen as moving from one class to another, and thousands worried over whether they personally were upper-middle, lower-upper or middle-middle.

New social creatures were invented as systems proliferated. The world was introduced to Economic Man, Political Man and the asystemic Existential Man. Each was thought to occupy some kind of compartmentalized world which was the special view of Economists, Political Scientists, and Theologians.

The individual psyche was not left out of this schema. Freud was, after all, one of the greatest of structuralist thinkers. The mind was carefully compartmentalized into ego, id and libido. Moreover, motivations that could not be dealt with consciously were compartmentalized in the great residual structure, the unconscious—perhaps Freud’s greatest intellectual invention.

Thus in the twentieth-century modern period it was possible to have a middle-class man exhibiting economic behavior exploitative of lower class people, but feeling pangs in his super-ego about doing so—feelings which he promptly relegated to his unconscious. The resulting guilt might later become manifested in his political behavior (making him vote, one presumes, for liberal politicians). The conflict between his economic and political behavior might lead to considerable mental discomfort, which he might describe to his middle class peers as existential angst.

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Naturally, the ability to divide society into smaller and smaller conceptual sub-units led to feelings that these units could be acted upon, studied, and prodded in isolation from other units. At best the interaction between units was expressed in terms of equilibrium or disequilibrium. More social categories were identified, so that middle-class Hispanics, lower-class Orientals and upper-class Native Americans all became distinct theoretical possibilities in the American Panorama. Abroad, the second through fifth worlds were discovered, and one could pontificate about such topics as the political behavior of the lower class in fourth-world nations with total impunity in any forum on the globe.

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The post-modern period in social science has begun with the malaise that comes from the realization that all of one's analytic frameworks do very little to explain anything that is relevant to what is taking place in the world. The world of the last quarter of the twentieth century is a world of volatile change. The static frames of structural categorization cannot explain OPEC, terrorism, worldwide inflation, international tourism, world interdependence, the breakdown of the great world ideological systems, or the rise of religion as a motivating force for the masses of the world. More importantly, structural categorization cannot explain the failure of economics, sociology, and political science to develop even the slightest modicum of predictive power.

The desire of President Reagan to stop all funding in the area of social science may finally wake many up to the fact that the mass public in the United States has long since grown tired of this inability to produce correct or useful results.

So the watchword in this infant post-modern period is "retrenchment." A headlong flight has been underway for nearly a decade back to the roots of the study of society. Phenomenology—the basis of all human cognition—is applied increasingly not just to explain how man behaves, but also how the scientist can possibly know what he knows. Descartes and Hume have become popular once again, along with the great American thinker, Charles Peirce, who dared to describe his intellectual activity as, "the philosophy of logic." The challenge of Gregory Bateson to consider that all categorization may be a huge trick that we play on ourselves in order to make maneuvering in this world a possibility, begins to throw social science into the realm of Zen Buddhism. Neo-Marxist thinking demands a more rigorous hermeneutics forcing observers into more and greater contextualization of the phenomena they wish to analyze.

Above all, the quantificational imperative which reduced human experience

to cold categorical figures is increasingly being countered by a desire to deal with human phenomena in a qualitative manner. In its early stages this search for quality is simple-minded. Sometimes it means simply defining the difference between “self” and “observed.” Other times, it means making gross distinctions between good and bad; moral and immoral—exercises which were strictly forbidden in “modern” social science.

Thus, for the time being the post-modern period is a time for groping, moaning, and feeling the anomie of a complex system which has failed. As the new paradigms for social science are constructed, much painful rethinking is taking place—but fleeing from the dazzling light of the “modern” system implies a headlong plunge into the darkness that comes before a new dawn.