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Introduction to Postmodern French thinkers

Spring 2021



Stockholms
universitet



Joseph Beuys, « I like America and America likes me » (1974)
, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TIU0Sx6ijhE>

The definitions of postmodernity

- Is it the historical period after the end of modernity?
- Is it an acceleration of modernity (hypermodernity)?
- Is it equivalent to the crisis of modernity?
- In fact, the notion of postmodernity is deeply associated with the questioning of a unique and hegemonic truth. In other words, the postmodernity is characterized by a resurgence of philosophies of the subject.
- This is why there is an epistemological attempt to redefine the relation between the subject and the knowledge.
- Questioning of a « meta-narrative » which is often associated with beliefs in a primitive perception of the organization of the world (Metaphysics)

Some key-notions about postmodernism

- The postmodernist thought emerged in the sixties (aesthetics, literature, philosophy, sociology) during the Cold war where there was a protest against the collision of two meta-narratives.
- Narrative: principle (to tell a story about....). Story / perspective / concepts
- To know / to tell
- Specific attention paid to the order of discourse. Discourse: fragments of utterance that circulate, that is echoed and that many speakers use/reuse.
- Strong influence on the development of discourse analysis.

Several senses of Postmodern

- Epochs (early modern times....), forms of society
- Cultural / artistic movements (modernism / postmodernism)
- Philosophical signification (the questioning of a unique truth in a form of metanarrative, which means a ground narrative that provides a meaning of life)
- Rejection of metanarratives and the rejection of ultimate truths
- Most of the Postmodern French thinkers come from a context where Marxism was important (Postmodern theories gained more and more visibility after the Cold war).
- Many critics perceive the success of these Postmodern thinkers as a form of resurgence of a cultural Marxism. Derrida, *The Specters of Marx*. The revenants are here and they are still haunting the world. (Derrida 1994).

Dealing with the Specters

- « What is a ghost? What is the effectivity or the presence of a specter, that is, of what seems to remain as ineffective, virtual, insubstantial as a simulacrum? Is there, between the thing itself and its **simulacrum**, an opposition that holds up? **Repetition and first time**, but also repetition and last time, since the singularity of any first time, makes of it also a last time. Each time it is the event itself, a first time is a last time. Altogether other. Staging for the **end of history**. Let us call it a **hauntology**. This logic of haunting would not be merely larger and more powerful than an ontology or a thinking of Being (of the 'to be', assuming that it is a matter of Being in the 'to be or not to be', but nothing is less certain » (Derrida 1994: 10).

Postmodern French thinkers

- Circulation of theories from Postmodern French thinkers in the 1970s
- May 1968 in France (crisis of authority). Questioning of the existing norms. A debate on the meaning of this revolution in France where there was a solidarity between workers and students.
- Neoconservative critics on May 1968 (May 1968 was a liquidation of political and social authority).
- For other thinkers, May 1968: one of the last events where social norms could be questioned (Castoriadis, Lefort, Morin 1988).

Postmodern French thinkers

- Common features
- Most of them are **philosophers**
- Interest for **psychoanalysis** (sometimes with some critics like Deleuze)
- Diffusion of the **French theory** (Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida) or the ***French Studies***
- **Thinkers** who found an echo after May 1968
- Influence of **Marx, Nietzsche, Freud** and **Heidegger**
- Some of these authors would not like to be classified as Postmodern thinkers as the word « Postmodern » is quite negative
- New style (critical theories) in philosophy.

The definitions of modernity

- A sense of the instant (fluidity, fragility). Baudelaire, *The painter of modern life*.
- « And so away he goes, hurrying, searching. But searching for what? Be very sure that this man, such as I have depicted him – this solitary, gifted with an active imagination, ceaselessly journeying across the great human desert – has an aim loftier than that of a mere *flâneur*, an aim more general, something other than the fugitive pleasure of circumstance » (Baudelaire 1989: 12). **Transitory, fugitive element**
- « By 'modernity' I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable. Every old master has had his own modernity; the great majority of fine portraits that have come down to us from former generations are clothed in the costume of their own period » (Baudelaire 1989: 13).

The definitions of modernity

- Heidegger, the early modern period / the late modern period
- The early modern period (The scientific Revolution to the Industrial Revolution) and the late modern period (after the industrial Revolution).
- The crisis of modernity for Heidegger: the culmination of an excessive form of reason that calculates everything. *Computatio*
- Heidegger gave a name to the excess of this reason: the enframing (*Ge-stell*)
- *The question concerning technology*
- The enframing : all the modes of *stellen* (*vor-stellen, her-stellen...*). A deep attitude that questions the existence of the things from a pure rational/technological point of view. Positionality of the enframing (the way the Beings appear and the way they are reduced). The Beings are replacable in this context.

The critics of modernity

- The enframing: an illustration of all the modes that use the objects as tools
- The thesis of Heidegger is quite paradoxical: the essence of technique is not technique.
- *Nihil sine ratione* (Leibniz). Every thing in the world has a rational cause of its existence. For Heidegger, the end of philosophy coincides with the end of this western metaphysics which is challenged by the enframing of everything.
- Preconceived format of experience
- The French postmodern thinkers are very influenced by the critics of modernity
- Baudrillard did not like the word « postmodern » but he defined it as a form of archaic drive re-emerging in the modernity.

Fight against positivism

- Rejection of a unique science model
- Consequence of the rejection of the « enframing »: no absolute scientific measurement. Opposes essentialism, binary thinking
- Critics of the Western metanarrative
- Support for sub-altern identities (marginalized people). The Other
- Postmodern alternative: **indeterminacy**, diversity, difference, **complexity**, uniqueness. (Morin, 2005). The complex thought
- Tendency to abuse of the metaphors of fluidity (Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*)
- Social science as subjective, humble, interpretive
- Strong influence on the development of social sciences and literary theory

Postmodernism

- « In any case, postmodernism would seem to mean that one was 'modernist' and that after modernism there was still something. Thus one is still caught in a linear meaning of things. There is linearity which is after all postmodern. For me postmodernism would be something of a **regression**, a retroversion of history. There is, rather, a return towards the past. There is no beyond in the sense of the future but rather a curvature towards... » (Baudrillard, Gane 1993: 22).
- Resurgence, repetition of something?
- Cf Marx, the history always have a form of repetition in a comical way. Do we have an acceleration of modernity in a postmodern era?

Postmodernism

- Baudrillard (1929-2007) wrote a book on the consumer society in 1969 showing that people do not buy **goods** but rather **signs**.
- Consumer society: people consume signs (brands..) and simulacres (virtual reflects of the reality).
- For Baudrillard, the characteristics of our society: disappearance of the reality. The reality disappears behind the simulacrum. Focus on signs that become more and more autonomous. The real is virtual. Radicality of the conceptions.
- The Gulf war did not take place (hyper-reality) for Baudrillard. For Baudrillard, the signs. Simulacre: simulations (masks of the absence of reality)
- Role of the cinema (Example of the Vietnam war – The US lost the war but some cinematographic productions do as if the US won the war). Movie *Matrix*

Postmodernism

Signifier (Things that give meaning – word / image)

- Sign = _____
Signified (What is evoked in the mind – mental concept)

Sign (anything that conveys meaning)

Autonomy of the signifier (liberation of the imaginary)

Critics of postmodern theories

- Reactions against the use of concepts by these thinkers
- « Postmodern » has a strong negative connotation (term of derision). People often categorize these thinkers as Neo-marxist thinkers
- Some scientists denounced the use of an imposture for these thinkers.

(Alan Sokal in 1996). Sokal had published a fake article to see if the journal had reviewed his article with the help of external peer-reviewers.

Reactions of the hard sciences against postmodernism which is seen as an ideological residuum.

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