

Lecture on postmodernity

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THiC, Boston University, May 3, 2011

1. Introduction

WE are going to be giving a lecture on postmodernism. If modernity is hard to define (and I suspect you may think so), postmodernity is ever harder to define. In fact, postmodernity would reject the notion that there is just one definition of postmodernity. We are going to talk about some features of postmodernity as they impact theology, philosophy, and culture, but if you don't feel like you completely understand postmodernity by the end of class, that's ok if not even encouraged.

I said, "We are going to be giving a lecture," and I do mean all of us. This lecture is going to be participatory. I have passed out note cards. These notecards have things written on them. During the appropriate section, if you have a notecard corresponding to that section, read it loudly and clearly to the rest of the class. A number of people will have notecards for each section, but it doesn't matter in what order they are read. It just matters that they are read. So go in whatever order you would like.

First, a brief history of postmodernity. Surprisingly, the term originally comes from architecture, where it referred to a style of architecture that rejected modernist architecture. From there, it spread to literary theory and philosophy, where it also denoted a rejection of (at least certain features of) modernity. And thence from there to religion, politics, and culture.

Postmodernity is a reaction against modernity. In that way, it seeks to be post in that there are aspects of modernity that it critiques and rejects. But in another way, it's not really past or separate from modernity in that its agenda is still determined by the agenda of modernity.

We're going to talk about postmodernism in three sections: what it rejects, what it believes about the world, and what it embraces.

2. Things about modernism that postmodernism rejects:

[Write each paragraph on a 3x5 card and pass out the cards to students.]

Postmodernism rejects historical progress. The idea that history is making progress is important to modernism. Postmodernism rejects this idea, mainly because it is based on a metanarrative, and post-modernism rejects metanarratives, as someone else is talking about. Postmodernism would ask, "How do we know where history is going? Even if we knew, who is to say whether that direction is progress or not?"

Postmodernism rejects metanarratives. Metanarratives are the big stories people tell to make sense of everything. This class has told a metanarrative about modernity. Postmodernity rejects metanarratives for two reasons. First, metanarratives are seen as ignoring context and unaware of their own origins in and limitations by a particular context. Second, metanarratives are seen as a tool by which those who are telling the metanarratives assert power over others.

Postmodernity rejects modernity's optimism about people. It's not that postmoderns think people are all bad. Postmoderns do recognize that humans are often motivated by the will to power and other base desires. Mostly, though, they just reject the idea that modernity has that people can be perfected. People are humans, and humans are inherently imperfect. To pretend otherwise can be dangerous.

Postmodernity rejects rationality. At its most extreme, this is a complete rejection of rationality and even an embrace of irrationality. In a more moderate and common form, it is a critique of rationality – human rationality isn't universal, it can't always be trusted, it hides assertions of power, and, even if it was trustworthy and universal, it still couldn't answer all of the important or interesting questions about the world.

Postmodernity rejects objectivity. According to postmodernism, there is no one privileged frame of reference through which we can view the world objectively. Instead, all we have are our own subjective views of the world. This belief is connected to postmodernism's rejection of the notion of absolute truth.

Postmodernity rejects universality. Modernism sought to establish what was common for all people in all times and places. Postmodernism instead focuses not on universality but contextuality – what is unique to specific individuals and/or social locations. Postmoderns would also charge that the universals of modernity are just specific contexts pretending to be universal, often to others' detriment.

Postmodernity rejects absolute Truth. Often, this means an acceptance to some degree or another of relativism. It can also take the form of an emphasis on the contextual nature of all truth, part of postmodernity's rejection of universals. Of course, if your experience of postmodernity has been different than mine, I don't want to tell you that you have to believe postmodernity rejects absolute truth.

Postmodernity rejects the idea of a center. There are no intrinsic centers to things, and any attempt to establish a center is just an attempt to assert power over whatever is not defined as the center. As part of critiquing the use of power, postmodernism seeks to be a de-centering process. [Two copies of this card should be made.]

Postmodernity rejects inherent meaning. Instead of seeing meaning as intrinsic to the world, our experience, or a text, postmoderns focus on the ways in which individuals and communities construct their own sense of meaning through their encounter with the world or a text. So if what I just said means something to you, that's because you gave it meaning, not because I did.

4. What postmodernism believes the world is like:

[Write each paragraph on a 3x5 card and pass out the cards to students.]

The postmodern world is built on individual preferences. Although community is important in postmodernity, the modern emphasis on the individual doesn't disappear. But instead of focusing on the individual quest for knowledge through reason, postmodernity focuses on the expression of individual preference, a process which is played out in the bricolage construction of identity and belief and in the workings of consumerist capitalism.

The postmodern world is eclectic. Individuals in the postmodern world draw on a number of disparate sources when fashioning their beliefs, values, knowledge, and sense of self-identity. Pieces are chosen or rejected as they are encountered according to personal preference. This process is sometimes referred to as bricolage.

The postmodern world is limited, partial, and fragmented. Or at least our experience of it is, since as humans we are limited – limited in our rationality, limited by our contexts, limited in our experience – and therefore partial in our knowledge with a partial experience of an increasingly complex and fragmented world. This means that

The postmodern world is globalized. Even though postmodernity emphasizes individual experience and context, there is an increasing sense that one important part of our context is

global. Global doesn't mean universal. It does mean that through the process of globalization, individuals are exposed to goods, ideas, beliefs, people, etc. from around the world. These pieces from around the world are used in the process of personal bricolage.

In the postmodern world, power is everywhere and everywhere problematic. Postmoderns are always quick to point out the power inequalities in any situation and behind any concept, even concepts like goodness and beauty. Furthermore, postmoderns see these power inequalities as inherently problematic and disturbing, the source of injustice and oppression. There is no just exercise of power for a postmodern. Here, postmodernism draws on the work of Michael Foucault.

The postmodern world is built by language. According to postmodernity, language is the sine qua non for existence. We cannot experience the world without language. Language also captures a lot of the *je ne sais quoi* of postmodernity – its focus on intersubjectivity, the hermeneutical process, the construction of meaning, playfulness, limitations and incompleteness, how understanding arises in situ. Such a view may cause angst for those seeking a firmer *raison d'être*.

In the postmodern world, everything is a text. That means that everything, from theology texts to burrito menus to rituals, can be subjected to a hermeneutical process. Often, this process is for a postmodern a process of deconstruction, drawing on the work of Jacques Derrida. This process is not destruction, but attention to how a text is constructed for the sake of discovering the tensions, instabilities, and conflicts contained in a text.

The postmodern world is fluid. Postmoderns expect change. Because postmodernism rejects essentialism and absolute truth and instead focuses on contexts, the postmodern experience changes just as fast as those contexts change, and they change fast. Just think – are

you the same person you were when I started reading this card, or has hearing my words changed you in some way?

The postmodern world is phenomenological. Because postmodernism is skeptical about human ability to understand the essence or reality of a situation (if such essence or reality even exists), rather than focus its intellectual energies on trying to access that essence, postmodernism instead seeks to explicate our experience by phenomenological exploration of our awareness of the world.

6. Things postmodernism affirms instead:

[Write each paragraph on a 3x5 card and pass out the cards to students.]

Postmodernity embraces community. This emphasis on community stands in tension with postmodernity's belief in individual meaning-making and preference. Nevertheless, postmoderns would remind us that we're not just individuals – we're also members of communities. And these communities are important in forming us, shaping our values, even determining what we accept as true or reality. I know this because I read it on Wikipedia.

Postmodernity embraces images over texts. Sing: Video killed the radio star; Video killed the radio star. Pictures came and broke your heart, So put the blame on VCR. Say: If anyone caught that on video, can you post it to YouTube so I can become a star?

Postmodernism embraces storytelling. Once upon a time, there was a man named Brian McLaren. Brian was a leader in the emerging church movement, a postmodern religious movement. Even though Brian was a pastor and spiritual leader, he had never been to seminary. Instead, he had studied literature. Perhaps this was the reason that Brian preferred to think of

theology in terms of storytelling instead of propositional arguments. Whatever the reason, Brian was just one example of narrative theology. The end.

Postmodernism embraces things that seem out of place, like ducks. At first this might seem like being weird for the sake of being weird. But it's a part of postmodern rejection of rationality, attempts at de-centering, and embrace of playfulness.

Postmodernism embraces humor and play. For a postmodern, there is just no other way. // For someone to say what they want to say. // Being too serious is not good. // So use a little humor if you could. // At least a postmodern would say you should.

Postmodernism embraces holism and organicism. Postmoderns see modernity as trying to dissect and divide the various realms of life, knowledge, and personhood. Postmoderns strive instead for a holistic approach in which these disparate aspects are inter-related. They also favor an organic approach, in which knowledge and sense of self develop naturally out of real situations.

Postmodernism embraces aesthetics and experience. Rather than seeking to understand the world for the sake of controlling it, a postmodern might instead seek to experience the world for the sake of appreciating it, often on an aesthetic level. Take a moment to be present in this classroom and really experience it. What is beautiful about this moment, this place, these people?

Postmodernism embraces new technology. Although the roots of postmodernity go back before the Internet revolution, many postmoderns have fully embraced the Internet, video, and other forms of new media as a way of trying to move beyond modernity not just in terms of the message, but also in terms of the medium, favoring more democratic means of communication.

Postmodernism embraces spirituality. In the postmodern world, which is no longer ruled by the principle of rationality, there is once again more space for embracing spirituality and even the supernatural. This return to spirituality may involve the re-appropriation of some traditional elements, but usually removed from their traditional framework and combined with other elements in a process of spiritual bricolage.