

Post-Modernity or Late-Modernity, Challenges and Opportunities

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It is impossible to define modernity or postmodernity from the postmodernist perspective, because there is no one shared postmodernist perspective. According to postmodern discourses, everyone has his or her own definition and no one's definition is inherently more authentic than others. Postmodernism has been a stream of thought predominantly in the arts, literature and philosophy. Apparently, it has had some impacts on theologians and biblical scholars, but relatively little on scientists. Most social scientists, just like natural scientists, do not believe in postmodernism. In its extreme forms, postmodernism constitutes a profound repudiation of the entire Western philosophical tradition, and it represents a form of extreme skepticism about human ability to carry on scientific endeavor. In this article, I will not dwell on postmodernist epistemology. As a sociologist, I focus on the social phenomena, upon which postmodernists claim to base their rejection of modernism or modernity.

Modernization and Modernity

Let us begin with the concept of modernization. Modernization is a grand process of changing from the traditional life to the modern life. It includes changes in almost every aspect of human life, including rationalization, democratization, industrialization, urbanization, etc. In all of these changes, modernity emerges as the antithesis of pre-modernity.

I. Rationalization

In the realm of thinking and knowing, pre-modern society authority comes from the tradition and religion, or habits and beliefs. In modern times, rationality becomes the only foundation for authority. French philosopher René Descartes declares that "*Cogito, ergo sum*" — I think, therefore I am. No truth is valid without careful examination by rationality, and no knowledge is sound without following the logic of reasoning. Another French thinker Auguste Comte asserts that human knowledge has evolved through three stages, from the theological or fictitious, to the metaphysical or abstract, and finally now to the scientific or positivistic. Modern science is based on reasoning and empirical evidence, through observations and experiments. The power of rationality is believed to be unlimited. There are things that science has not yet known, but there is nothing that science cannot know. According to such early modernists, religion is the pre-modern way of thinking, whereas science belongs to the modern. They believe that the triumph of science will render religion useless, thus religion will decline and eventually disappear as science progresses and scientific education becomes universal. Some modernists argue that religion should decline and disappear because it has become an obstacle of scientific progress and social evolution.

II. Democratization

Pre-modern society normally has theocratic political system. Theocracy is not really rule by god, but in reality it is rule by the representative(s) of god, who are kings or lords enthroned by religious priests. Modern politics is based on social contract and democracy. Democracy is rule by people, often through electing representatives. Elected leaders hold power within limited terms. According to early modernists, democratic politics also means the majority rule, i.e., the will of the majority will be carried out, whereas the minority has to relent. Moreover, rule of law means bureaucratization. In a bureaucracy, there are positions and roles that qualified people fill, and rules that everyone should follow. Bureaucratization is not just limited in politics, but dominates other sectors of society as well.

III. Industrialization

Industry replaces agriculture as the dominant form of economic production. Industrialization means mass production, which requires strict discipline on the part of workers. For the purpose of efficiency and productivity, division of labor is essential, and inequality is inevitable. Possessing capital is more important than possessing land or estates. Productivity is more important than accumulation of gold and silver. Productivity even becomes the measure of human value or worthiness.

IV. Urbanization

Along with the development of industrialization, population concentrates in cities. Their proximity of residence is efficient for the industrial economic system. In the typical pre-modern village life, everyone knows everyone in the community. In the modern city, however, neighbors may not know each other. Traditional collectivism is being replaced by individualism. In the urban setting, people have to learn new roles, new relations, new norms, and new values. The traditional multiple functions of the family are taken over by various professional agencies. Meanwhile, ethnic and religious people must assimilate to the larger society. The universal trend is toward homogenization of the world.

These are the major social changes that mark a breakup with the traditional life. Moreover, modernism believes that such changes are good, progressive, liberating, and universal, whereas the pre-modern is backward and repressive. There have been resistances and rejections since the very beginning of modernization, but modernization is believed to be inevitable.

Modern Problems and Postmodernist Protests

Modernization has led to tremendous material development as well as scientific and technological progress. However, modernization is also accompanied with injustices and disasters, including exploitation of the working class, poverty amid prosperity, urban crimes, racism, nationalism, colonialism, imperialism, fascism, communism, world wars, environmental destructions, and cultural obliteration. By the 1960s, these modern problems became the target of social protests, cultural revolts, and intellectual reflections. Almost simultaneously, another round of radical transformations began to reshape the society, replacing or displacing the modern changes.

I. Post-Industrialization

In the 1960s, the United States and some other Western countries began to move from industrial to postindustrial society. The number of white-collar workers exceeded the number of blue-collar workers. Postindustrial society is also a "service society," where the service and managerial sectors are larger than the industrial production sector. If the modern is characterized by mass production, the postmodern is by mass consumption. It is also called the "information era," when possessing information is more important than possessing capital. The development of personal computers since the 1980s and the Internet since the 1990s further increase the importance of information and management. Advancement of communication and transportation technologies carries the world into the "globalization era." The world is shrinking into a global village. In the global village, a small incident in a remote corner of the world may have instant and dramatic

impacts on other parts of the world. Capital and information flow around the globe with little regard to nation-state borders.

II. Suburbanization

Urbanization gives way to suburbanization. Urbanization represented the modernist social engineering, but it failed to improve the social conditions for the urban dwellers, because the inner city often became the center of poverty and crime. Suburbanization means the development of mammoth metropolises. In a metropolis, the downtown is the commercial center and suburbs scattered around it are the residential areas. Suburbanization restores the intimate human relations, but suburbs are not pre-modern villages. Actually, the postmodern communities are not based on neighborhood boundaries. They are voluntary associations of like-minded people who may or may not live as neighbors, or voluntary communities by shared cultural and religious identities. Suburbanization also means many different cultural communities coexist and share common geographic spaces. Indeed, cosmopolitanism becomes a norm. Next-door neighbors are often people of different national origins, different religions, and different cultural orientations. Paradoxically, however, cosmopolitanism does not mean giving up particularities for commonalities. Rather, people are expected to be different and distinct. In order to preserve distinctness, cultural and religious groups must assert their absolute claims within their group boundaries. This is one of the reasons why all kinds of old and new religious groups thrive in the postmodern era.

III. New Understandings of Democracy

In early modern times, democracy was understood as the majority rule. In the postmodern era, however, the emphasis is on protecting the rights of social minorities: the civil rights and human rights of racial minorities, ethnic minorities, women, children, religious minorities, and homosexuals. The rights of these minorities are protected not because they are politically powerful, or economically powerful, or culturally powerful, not because most people agree with the particular values of any minority group, but because the ideal now is to protect the equal rights of all people, especially those who lack political power in the existing social structure. To certain extent, it becomes even fashionable to claim a minority status, be it racial, ethnic, religious, cultural, or sexual orientation.

IV. New Understandings of Science

The dominance of science and scientism has collapsed. First of all, now we realize that science does not equate truth. Indeed, scientific theories are full of errors and scientific explorations are beset with mistakes. Science develops by shifting theoretical paradigms. Yesterday's scientific theories have been replaced or displaced by new theories, and today's scientific conclusions may be revised by future findings. Science is an unfinished process, evolving and improving, but

does not have the final words of the truth. Secondly, science is no longer the only authority of knowledge. Alternative means of knowing and thinking are thought to have equal validity. The most advanced modern physics and the most ancient Eastern mysticisms are found to share common principles. Thirdly, who holds the truth, either in science or in religion? Postmodernists insist that no human persons hold the truth because every human person has his/her limits. Some extreme postmodernists further deny the very existence of the absolute truth. Even if there is the ultimate truth, it is beyond the human capacity to know. Finally, scientific development is not always progressive, for it may bring catastrophes to the mankind, such as in a nuclear war. The existing nuclear weapons are enough to destroy the whole earth many times. Meanwhile, even if without a nuclear war, economic development is exhausting natural resources on earth. Uncontrolled exploitation of natural resources has led to ecological destructions. For the benefits of all living beings on earth, humans must make peace with and protect other species on earth.

V. New Understandings of Ideology

Following World War II, the West and the East fought a long Cold War, in which the conflict was between the communist and capitalist ideologies. However, once a nuclear war became a real possibility, and once people realized that a nuclear war will leave no winner or survivor but lead to the complete destruction of the whole world, ideological differences became less a threat. Instead of right or wrong according to any particular ideology, we all share the same earth and the same destiny. What is important is to learn how to live in peace with those who hold different ideologies. However, things have changed since the end of the Cold War, especially since September 11, 2001. After the Cold War, now the world is heading toward, or rather undergoing, the clash of civilizations, mostly between the Christian West and the Muslim world. During the Cold War, the People's Republic of China's neutralization was decisive for the eventual result. During the new civilization war, where China stands can be similarly decisive again.

Overall, the new era is characterized by continuous scientific development, technological innovation, knowledge explosion, cultural pluralism, and philosophical relativism. Postmodernists regard the major changes comprising of a breakup with modernity. However, many others insist that while these changes are important, they are not a breakup, but continuation of early modern developments. After all, we still maintain production, live and work in urban-suburban areas, highly value science, democracy, and individual freedom, although we have come to different and probably better understandings of these all. Therefore, instead of post-modernity, it is probably more appropriate to call it late-modernity. Late-modernity is not a breakup with early modernity, but a revision and improvement of early modernity.

Religion in Modern and Postmodern Times

Post-modern or late-modern developments provide both challenges and opportunities for Christians. Early modern philosophers, social scientists, and other thinkers almost uniformly criticized and rejected religion. Although modernists believe in "truth," they believe that "truth" can only be found in science, not in religion. Scientism became the major competing worldview against religion.

On the other hand, however, post-modernity or late-modernity is against scientism and is open to spirituality — indeed, all kinds of spirituality. It tends to regard truth not as a singular, but a plural — no one religion holds the absolute truth, rather all religions share some truth. Meanwhile, spirituality increasingly becomes a matter of individual choice and taste. Instead of holding onto the religion one was born with, it is considered acceptable and normal for individuals to make their own spiritual choices. The emphasis on making one's own spiritual choices opens up possibilities for conversion to a non-traditional religion, such as Chinese conversion to Christianity. However, the emphasis on individualistic spirituality challenges denominational traditions, hierarchical authority, and creedal covenants. People tend to accentuate individualized beliefs, egalitarian relations, and emotional bonds among those who share the same beliefs, values, and tastes instead.

Christians have responded to the modernist and postmodernist challenges in three major ways:

I. Liberalism tries to accommodate to modernity by giving up unscientific, irrational, and non-progressive elements in the belief system. This includes the liberation theology, the feminist theology, even the death-of-God theology, etc. In the post-modern era, some ecumenists try to find the minimum common denominators among all religions.

II. Fundamentalism resolutely rejects modernity and post-modernity: some resign from the world by completely focusing on spirituality and ignoring the world as much as possible; some withdraw from the world by physical separation from the surrounding society; and some engage the world in political and even military battles.

III. Between these extremes is Evangelicalism. Evangelicalism shares the fundamental beliefs with Fundamentalism, and yet tries to engage the world in constructive ways. It selectively accommodates and adapts to modern and postmodern aspects of life, while challenges worldly cultures and offers hope, love, and faith to those who are willing to hear.

Early modernists believe that pluralism will lead to the decline of faith. They perceive that cultural or philosophical relativism will necessarily corrode faith and belief in the absolute truth. In contrast, late modernists find that pluralism

leads not to religious decline, but to free competition of religious groups and overall religious revitalization. The unprecedented freedom of individuals is fertile soil for individual salvation. The cultural space for plural communities in metropolitan settings makes it possible to preserve distinct group identity and collective beliefs. Amid geographically overlapping cultural and religious pluralisms, nothing can be taken for granted. Religious groups must try hard to get the message out and compete for the younger generations as well as outsiders. Early modernists prefer theological and organizational uniformity, whereas late-modernists appreciate diversity as well as unity, or unity in diversity. Homogenization is neither possible nor desirable.

Lastly, it is important to realize that Chinese societies (Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macau, Singapore, and overseas Chinese communities in various countries) started the modernization process late. Actually, in many Chinese societies and communities the modernization and post-modernization processes happened simultaneously and intertwined. This makes it difficult to sort out different (pre-modern, modern, or post-modern) types of discomforts and discontents. More importantly, what is considered post-modern in the West may not be post-modern for the Chinese. For example, some post-modern religious phenomena in the West include the spread of Chan/Zen Buddhism, New Age, and Paganism. However, Chan/Zen Buddhism has been a major traditional Chinese religion. Fengshui and qigong are "Old Age" practices with a long history. And shamanism and witchcraft have been continuously practiced for thousands of years. These are pre-modern religious phenomena among the Chinese, which are boosted up by Western postmodernism.

The challenges are indeed multiple and complex, but the opportunities are also unprecedented. The twenty-first century can be a century of another great conversion, one that is comparable to the conversion of the Roman Empire. This is the conversion of the Chinese people to Christianity.

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