

POST-MODERNISM TODAY

A Brief Introduction

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I.

FORWARD

Post-modernism or post-structuralism, a powerful wave of anti-rational, anti-commonsensical, anti-Renaissance, anti-Marxist thoughts stormed into the academic, intellectual, and political circles at the end of the last century. Emanating from Europe, it burgeoned into a devastating trend challenging the concept of truth, any scope of emancipation of mankind from the existing order, and also the struggles of the dominated and the exploited towards a new order of things. The birth and growth of such benumbing thoughts worshipping passivity, or at best small-scale protests, coincided with the decay in the socialist states, frustration of the new generation, the retreat of the radical Left, and the theoretical puzzlement induced by brands of accommodative Marxism. The world capitalist system, despite waves of crisis, could menacingly appear internationally with the mantra of globalization. This objective situation also helped do the spadework for the rise of the new breed of intellectuals who preferred intellectual exercise in pessimism or exclusively narrow-based thinking like identity, politics, etc. instead of the consideration of a bouncing-back with a global perspective for dislodging the international chains of the capitalist system. Such politics of this new trend against radical politics and philosophy obviously provides some soothing balm to the war-weary imperialists.

Marxism is resurging on the international arena, protests roaring in the heart of the imperialist states and the discontent of various sections brewing for an explosion. This small book is an endeavor to critically show the irrational and harmful philosophy and politics of post-modernism/post-structuralism. This critique is also an espousal of the cause of the dominated and the exploited fighting for a new order.

Post-modernism/post-structuralism in its insistence on difference and the fragmented nature of reality and knowledge shows intense insensitivity to history. Structures and causes are dismissed by overstress on fragments and contingencies. Such a romantic idealist trend bids adieu to Enlightenment concepts of progress or making history.

The bankruptcy of the petty-bourgeois philosophers is eminently evident when they reject any program to cope with the system of capitalism. In the name of “difference” they concentrate on varied particular identities like race, gender, ethnicity, various particular and separate oppressions, but reject the scope and possibility of collective action based on common social identity like class and common interests.

Post-modernist/post-structuralist philosophers and writers are deliberately complicated in their approach, self-consciously difficult in style, and refuse to follow any clarity in presentation of their views. Burdened with numerous jargons, their writings prove to be inaccessible to general readers.

The most influential post-modernist, Foucault, an avowed disciple of Nietzsche, was concerned with power and knowledge. He saw knowledge-generation-power constituting people as subjects and then governing these subjects with knowledge. Power and power in every aspect of life is what he saw negating its class content; and, in his view, people have no escape route from the multiple sources of power. He also dismisses the view of overhauling the system of domination.

The entire body of post-modernist/post-structuralist literature is anti-rational, openly anti-emancipatory, and chooses to raise so many questions without presenting any rational and radical program. Such trends can at best befog the thinking process by its strange and bizarre logic of confusion. It spreads a linguistic net to destroy the basis of all rational understanding and all experiences attained over centuries by mankind and arrogantly declares that we and our thoughts are the creations of language. This idealism is a dangerous trend requiring critical study and a powerful attack at its roots.

The emergence of the post-modern/post-structural trend is, in one sense, a rebuff against the prevalent Western thought of imparting centrality to the subject by the post-Cartesian philosophy culminating in instrumental rationality, systematically reducing the world to the raw material of subjective needs. It was also a critique of Husserlian phenomenology and the Sartrean effort at marrying Marxism and phenomenology.

Structuralism, emanating from Saussure's structural linguistics, conceiving language as a structure of differences, accorded at best a secondary position to the subject in the production of meaning. Derrida drew on Saussure's theory of language, particularly the conceptions of language as a system of differences involving an anti-realist theory of meaning. Saussure emphasized more of the distinction between the signifier (word) and the signified (concept) than of the distinction between the word and the object. This also involved the primacy of signifiers over signifieds so that meaning became a matter of interrelations of words.

Derrida and other post-structuralists straightened this theory by denying any systemacity to language. Derrida found the inherent contradictions in the Saussurian language theory, which contains, in his words, "the metaphysics of presence" according direct reality to the subject. Derrida pointed that the endless play of signifiers in Saussure's theory of language must involve postulating a "transcendental signified," which is somehow accepted as prevailing in consciousness without any mediation of language.

This raises the question about the language itself. Such consciousness, accepted as given, reduces the role of signification to merely a convenient aid to memory or economy of thought. Even Derrida found in this Saussurian view the proposition of impurity in significations as befogging our vision. What is to be noted here is the vulnerable points, or weakness, in Saussure's concept of the linguistic structure conceding

words in relation to other words to give meaning, not by primarily referring to objects. And it was Derrida who, in an atmosphere of dismissal of the notion of Husserl's acting subject, went too far in quest of a ground of transcendental consciousness.

Now the subject is subordinated to an endless play of difference moving beyond history. Derrida starts his journey with the avowed claim to escape from the metaphysics of the presence taking recourse to "difference." It is a play of words involving both the disruption of presence as well as substitution of the presence through deferment towards an endless game where one never reaches the unknowable point. The practice of deconstruction, contesting the metaphysics of presence on its own terrain, in reality finds no escape route.

This takes us towards the Kantian unknowable thing-in-itself. It should be stated here that if Derridean textualism does not deny the existence of extra-discursive objects, it does deny our ability to know it. Derrida's endless play of signifiers provides us with the intimation of difference, though no more than that, because of the necessarily metaphysical nature of language, writes Alex Callinicos. The Kantian unknowable thing-itself comes back to the scene through Derridean "deconstruction."

Marxism is a scientific theory that grasps the laws of the development of society and bases itself on practice for making history. Post-modernist/post-structuralist thoughts stand against this, and any rational thinking.

They created fleeting ripples in an atmosphere of temporary retreat of radical Marxism. They got extra fodder due to the setback in communism in Russia and China, resulting in a growth of revisionism. Revisionism, seen (posing) as Marxism, is a vulgarization of the original, depriving it of its scientific essence, and making it, therefore, unattractive to those who desire change. Quite naturally, post-modernism appeared relatively more attractive to the intellectual. But, waves of powerful enriched Marxism and revolutionary practice are now coming back like a whirlwind that will provide befitting answers to petty-bourgeois idealist thoughts of the post-modernist/post-structuralist thinkers.

Ours is a preliminary small effort with no claim to successfully grappling with the whole range of post-modernist/post-structuralist thinking. And this note is basically meant for the activist and people aspiring a radical change in the existing order. We promise to make a deeper study of the post-modernist view on literature, physics, etc., and also go into greater depth on its impact on the protest movement in India. We will update this note with such critical studies. We have tried our best to offer a lucid presentation of complex things, yet we admit to our weakness in doing so. Friendly criticism is invited from our readers.

— Siraj

Note: The word “logo-centrism” is used by the post-modernists/post-structuralists to denote any universalizing concept like truth, progress, beautiful, etc.

II.

INTRODUCTION

Marxism had to wade through the maze of multifarious socio-political and philosophical obstacles in the last century, particularly after World War II. Many of such theoretical obfuscations were directly sponsored and nurtured by American multi-millionaires. What is ironic is that most of these theories, which raised some short-lived ripples in Western universities, soon gathered dust for no takers. The two decades after World War II were dominated by Talcott Parsons' grand synthesis of Weber, Durkheim, Pareto, Marshall and subsequently Freud. Parson, in collaboration with some other people, developed the theory of structural functionalism to celebrate the virtues of American Society and fight communism. The U.S. Government and academic institutions glorified the anti-Marxist "Behavioral Approach" as an enemy of empiricism and a historical approach, preferring to study the "behavioral world." This "Behavioral Approach" was openly sponsored by various foundations funded by Carnegie, Rockefeller, and the Ford foundations. It was followed by "Post-Behaviorism."

The System Theory, studying the so-called open-and-closed systems, focused on the stability, instability, equilibrium, and break-down of a system. This so-called system theory led to structural-functional and