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## **COLLATERAL POSTMODERNISM**

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### **Headspace**

What is a critical social theorist to make of the events surrounding the US-led war against Iraq? Alternatively, what is a critical social theorist to make of critical theory itself in the current international environment? As post-structuralists, post colonialists, critical realists and others return to their keyboards to reflect on recent events it has become increasingly clear that the world of 'International relations' has been turned on its head. Along with the fragmentation of the 'western alliance', and the emergence of the US as 'globocop', we have witnessed the spectacle of millions of people across the world demonstrating against the war in Iraq (well before it started).

Leaders of three western countries, the US, Britain and Australia, decided to go to war against Iraq in the face of mass opposition in their own countries and against the expressed wishes of the United Nations. Understandably, the unmasking of US intentions as it pursues its interests in the Persian Gulf and beyond has given rise to widespread public concern. Such developments stand like huge monoliths on the landscape of social and political thought. They await analysis, understanding and interpretation. But how and what might be delivered in terms of critical social theory? And what relevance might this have to the construction of 'a new world order' based on the 'Bush doctrine' of militarism and economic domination?

### **Enduring modernism**

Already shaken by the modernism's apparent reluctance to disappear in the wake of repeated ecological threats, risks and crises (like the BSE outbreak, petrol shortages, concerns over the ozone layer etc.), and the renaissance of science through the Genome project and other bio-technological innovations, much critical social theory – especially in the 'postmodernist' camp - appears transfixed in the full blaze of current world events. As George Myerson points out in *Ecology and the End of Postmodernity* (2002), postmodernism has vastly underestimated the resilience, transformative power and enduring qualities of modernism as it re-legitimises and reasserts its faith in science and progress. Modernism continues to consume all, even that which claims to be its antithesis.

Modernity consumes the subversion and heresy of post modernity and transforms it – rather like Punk was transformed – into a junk consumer commodity, or a pre-packed intellectual aesthetic, stripped of its apparently 'radical' and 'critical' message.

Modernist capitalism is a nasty grinding process that can only remain alive by consuming and growing. Postmodernism is in many ways, and despite its apparent subversive tendencies, an integral part of this growth. Indeed, as Naomi Klein ( 2000, p 104 ) has so eloquently pointed out, while the first, second and third waves of postmodernists were busily deconstructing meta narratives, debunking Marxism, questioning claims to 'truth', identifying multiple realities and endless differences, unpacking the meanings of social identity, sexuality, gender, class and so forth, the tentacles of corporate capitalism continued to tighten around an increasingly 'globalised' world. At least modernity held some sort of fictive promise.

Postmodernism did not. Modernity was the seductive promise of things to come while postmodernism described the 'condition' of the present, or became a self referenced and often elitist theory-cum-aesthetic purporting to be 'critical' and 'radical'.

Inevitably, the temptation here is to rally to the defence of post-modernism, particularly as a radical way of thinking about the world, and/or to celebrate its potential for political change through the process of deconstruction and the exposition of the imminent relation between knowledge and power. Few would argue with the influence that this project has had on exposing the complexities of power and the intricacies of 'government' in the contemporary era. The deconstructivist project, however, was hardly new. Indeed, sociologists had been 'debunking', 'unmasking' and 'laying bare' 'deep structures', 'power relations' and 'sub-texts' over the course of the past century or so. Postmodernism was not so much a 'shock of the new' as a complex theoretical and aesthetic repackaging of many views and arguments that had been around for a very long time. Yet while postmodernist thought contributed to confronting the assumptive and powerful world it also proved a great political demobiliser, often making it difficult to go beyond relativistic interpretations of 'discursive categories'. Perhaps the central irony of much post modern thought is its tendency to simultaneous practices of radicalism and deep conservatism – the latter resulting from its failure to engage many of the overarching poetical 'realities' of the day.

The challenge facing all critical social theorists is acute. And the stakes are high: no less than the survival of entire civilizations as bio-terrorism meets the reactive military scientism of the US. The fact that the US spends around \$360 billion per year on 'defence' - more than the rest of the world combined - and that it places such unbridled faith in the power of techno-militarism to defeat the 'forces of evil' is testament to the omnipresence of radical modernism in the current era. By 'radical' we refer to the forceful, corporate-governmental articulation of science as a means of overcoming the perceived presence of threat and risk in the social body. Radical modernism is concerned with achieving a certain sort of social order in the face of rapidly changing global relations.

And more often than not, the attempt to impose such order runs against the tide of 'public opinion'. A case in point is the war against Iraq, conducted without the approval of the United Nations, against the will of citizens and former allies, and

without a clearly articulated pretext or 'smoking gun'. This has given rise to perhaps the most significant 'crisis of legitimacy' since the end of the Second World War.

### **Theory overboard**

Talk of fragmentation, multiple realities, difference and diversity, representation, image, signification and concerns over identity – while apposite in terms of the nuances of contemporary socio-political discourse - suddenly, or perhaps not so suddenly, appears helplessly at sea when faced with explanatory necessity and political relevance. The discursive aesthetics of much postmodernist thought, its tendency towards relativism, its political naivety, and its assumption that modernism is a 'thing of the past', all come to nought in the light of current events.

When tens of thousands of Iraqi men, women and children die as a result of a techno-scientific 'awe war' (saturation bombing, laser-guided aerial attacks, 'smart bombs' etc.), and when the body bags of US, Australian and British troops are flown back to their respective countries for burial, and when the US project of violently imposed 'peace and stability' in the 'Middle East' become an unfolding reality, only then will the abstractionism and political inertia of much contemporary social theory be fully exposed. Why? Because what the war against has revealed, perhaps above all else, is the clash of age-old modernist dialogues involving those who see progress in alternatives to techno-capitalism-militarism and those who see science and militarism as the pincers of power that surrounds all opposition – or in the words of George W. Bush, 'you're either with us or against us'!

After the Gulf War in 1991, radical postmodernists like Jean Baudrillard questioned whether the war ever took place - even when independent observers presented verifiable evidence of dead bodies and widespread destruction. Instead, the war was represented as an elaborate 'wag the dog' exercise in which the US government, along with its corporate media stenographers, trotted out a fictional and commodified version of 'reality'.

In our view, such analysis reflected a colossal form of self-delusion: aesthetically and analytically brilliant and verbally florid, but without any understanding or real appreciation of unfolding world events. The failings of postmodernism have been well documented in books like *Postmodernism: Critical Interrogations* by Best and Kellner. They point to the ceaseless relativism and de-centring associated with postmodern analyses of power, as well as the conservatism that emanates from a body of theory which, though its various deconstructivist projects, became absorbed into a form of self-referential aestheticism. No wonder that many postmodern discourses tended to disappear into obtuse and impenetrable expressions of language that effectively marginalised all those without 'the knowledge'.

### **Meanwhile, under our noses...**

Meanwhile, the conditions that might generate terrorism and war persist and worsen. Economic and cultural globalisation, militarism, water shortages, hunger, disease,

mass poverty and environmental destruction are ever-present realities for tens of millions of people, especially in the poorer nations.

In *The West and the Rest: Globalisation and the Terrorist Threat*, Roger Scrutton (2002) identifies the complex interconnections that exist between globalisation and terrorism. He notes that these relations illustrate the economic and political conditions that underpin current geo-political relations around the world. Scrutton also notes, as do numerous others like Noam Chomsky (2003), John Pliker (2002), Naomi Klein (2002), Howard Zinn (2002), Tariq Ali (2002), Michael Parenti (2002) to name but a few, how the actions of the west have contributed directly to the radicalisation of millions of Muslims in opposition to what they see as the economic and cultural imperialism of countries like America. Yet despite the marginalisation of critical opinion, the centrifugal nature of mainstream western political discourse, and the skewed representations of the world 'out there', the mass demonstrations opposed to the war in Iraq, the social movements organised around peace and the environment indicate not the fragmentation of experience but rather its shared and collectivised expression and resistance to power.

Many western leaders and media commentators greeted the international anti-war protests with consternation and fear. Some thought that such events were a thing of the past, a last vestige as it were of collectivised modernist dissent. Yet anti globalisation, anti war and other large scale and sustained protests illustrate the continuing power of collective action and shared experience.

### **Endnote**

By the time this article is published the war against Iraq may well be over. But as the dust settles and the bodies are removed, and as the US begins its latest exercise in spreading 'peace and democracy', the world will be a very different place. The task facing scholars in the current climate is surely to analyse and interpret events in a way that connects with what might be going on, and which allows us to move beyond descriptive accounts of representation. The relative silence of postmodernists on the terrorist acts of September 11 as well as the war against Iraq says something rather significant about the ability of this body of theory to engage developments in the contemporary world.

To be sure, the postmodernist project has offered many challenging reminders to any comfortable claim to 'truth'. The deep irony though, is that aspects of postmodernist thought are as 'right thinking' as any other mode of metanarrative, from which it has so desperately tried to free itself. And yet the acknowledge of difference and diversity, and its resistance to logocentrism of any sort, is confounded by its own claim to a certain sort of 'truth' – principally its self referenced sense of intellectual correctness. Indeed, in some areas of social policy analysis – to which this journal is a significant contributor – postmodernism is often distinguished by its preoccupation with dismantling of accepted wisdoms through the process of deconstruction. Again, however, postmodernism is significant not for what it has effectually deconstructed and linked to questions of power, but rather what it has *not* commented upon.

To return to our original question: What is a critical social theorist to make of the events surrounding the US-led war against Iraq? Depending on your theoretical allegiances, it might be to recognise that modernist traditions are in fact be alive and well and are manifested in various hopes and expressions of order and progress. It may also be to consider which body of theory has the most resonance in a world that is rapidly and violently changing. As we have suggested, postmodernist thought, both as a description of the contemporary era and as a body of explanatory theory, contains within it the ironic counters of radicalism and conservatism. It seems to speak to an ontology that reflects the complexities of identity and day-to-day existence; it subverts ideas of truth and externalised power, it questions orthodoxies, assumptions and claims to knowledge, and it links knowledge inextricably to power. It recognises fragmentations, difference, subjectivities and multiple realities. Yet, faced with September 11, Bali, Iraq and perhaps next Iran and Syria, and confronted by the presence of modernist beliefs and imperatives and the brute power of militarism and economic expansionism, what can postmodernism offer as a political as well as theoretical-aesthetic interpretation of the current era? This question – and the question of where postmodernism as a condition exist at all – is undoubtedly the subject for further discussion. Perhaps a good way of ending this article is to convey the thoughts of one its authors who, in reflection of how he has experienced the reading of postmodernist theory, wrote the following:

When I first started reading and digesting postmodernist texts there was a ‘ding’ in me that said ‘yes’ - this resonates with much that I experience. I loved the postmodernist legitimization of my delegitimation of the simple crap explanations of progress, or the promise of Heaven over the horizon metanarratives. I felt comforted that an ‘ism’ could OK the feelings of fragmentation that I often felt. My self and my experiences are disconnected in bits and pieces all over the globe. I loved the internalisation, the allowance of the psyche into the equations, the negotiability of notions of ‘truth’ and of ‘self’, and of the languages that we use to create the stories that frame, represent and create and experience our realities... But there is a sense of hopelessness in the stores of postmodernism. How to escape the maze, the labyrinthine, into a position of clarity and action. How to transform and hold the subtlety of this mode of perception back into the political world?

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