

**Political Ideologies Context, Ideas, And Practices.
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Lec 30 Postmodernism: Challenge To And Contrast With Modernism; Wide Impact.
Postmodern Theory. Criticisms. The Sokal Hoax. 38:50**

Well, we're going to continue with our topic, Poststructuralism and Postmodernism. We've looked at poststructuralism in, as it's been expressed by, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault; we're going to look at postmodernism, itself a very substantial topic indeed, and postmodernism has had a much wider impact on society than poststructuralism. Poststructuralism, insofar as it amounts to an ideology, has largely been a feature of the academic humanities. But postmodernism has been expressed in architecture, in the visual arts, in music, the theatre, many other areas of life. Indeed there's a case for saying that postmodernism has been as much a part of contemporary life, as it has been a way of thinking in the academic humanities.

Postmodernism may therefore be more accessible, through architecture and the arts, through the examples we've got of it; it may be more accessible than, than it would be through its philosophic proponents. If anything, those philosophic proponents can be even harder to read than Derrida and Foucault. But in architecture, postmodernism has often been cited as a direct counter to modernism. In modernist architecture, form or shape was supposed to follow function. Modernism is associated with the idea, with the use of new materials, such as reinforced concrete, steel, plate glass, and forms such as, forms and shapes such as right angles and austere, severe flat surfaces. Some modernist architects set out to create buildings in accordance with the functions of modern industrial society. They designed skyscrapers, giant factory spaces, concrete apartment blocks, and so on.

One example is the work of the Bauhaus School, which flourished between the two world wars, based in Weimar, in Germany. Now the Bauhaus School is perhaps the most famous example of this kind of approach. And among the, the main modernist architects was Le Corbusier, whose real name was Charles-Édouard Jeanneret-Gris, Mies van der Rohe, Frank Lloyd Wright, Oscar Niemeyer. Le Corbusier designed the centre of the Haryana state capital, Chandigarh, in the 1950s. Niemeyer designed the Brazilian national capital, Brasilia.

Now Le Corbusier for his part pioneered the use of stilts or pilotis as supports for apartment blocks. And he once said a house was a machine for living in. Well we're not at all unfamiliar with stilts in cities all over the world today. Apartment blocks are built on stilts so that the areas

below them can be used for car parking, sometimes for other purposes, but usually for car parking. But Corbusier was the pioneer in this, and he himself once said, a house is a machine for living in.

Well, what about visual arts, what about modernism in the visual arts? Here, modernism is associated with, for example, Cubism. In Cubism, objects and living beings are represented by cubes of different sizes and in different colours. Georges Braque, the French painter, was known for this. Abstract modernists often used severe right angled shapes and different colours, and they sometimes separated these by black borders of varying widths - perhaps the outstanding example of that is the work of Piet Mondriaan, who later spelt his name Mondrian with one A, not two As. He changed it from the Dutch spelling, because he settled in the United States, I think in New York, late in the 1930s. Now, with Mondrian, a very strong element of technique was involved, as it was with most other modernist painters. Pablo Picasso, for example, went through several different phases and used a great range of artistic techniques over his very long working life and sculptors themselves often adopted new steelworking technologies. Some of the artists involved and their architect colleagues had explicitly socialist commitments, for example, one was the Russian constructivist sculptor Vladimir Tatlin, and his most famous work is a steel frame, supporting a revolving cylinder, cube and cone; they're all made from glass. The work is nearly seven metres in height and it was a monument to the Third International, the Third International Socialist Association. During the 1920s, many of the constructivists conducted sessions for workers in the factories of the then-new Soviet Union. The aim was to take both education and the arts into the factories for workers. Among the Bauhaus architects, Hannes Meyer had, had his, he had part of his upbringing in an orphanage, and he had served an apprenticeship as a stonemason. He was openly socialistic.

Now modernism also appeared in the theatre and in music. In the 1920s, Arnold Schönberg reintroduced atonality by discarding the idea of harmonic keys, which I mentioned earlier, and instead, he used all 12 notes in the western scale in any composition. Schönberg was of course not by any means the first to use atonality in western music and authoritative musicians have sometimes said that Mozart uses atonal passages in some, in one, at least one of his later symphonies, I think the 41st.

But in our own time, plays by Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco are notable for starkness and minimalism in their settings and their language, and their narratives. James Joyce's novel *Ulysses*, a much bigger work, is often regarded as a major modernist creation. Now modernism,

therefore, is identifiable, visible, and has had very considerable impact, not only in the arts, but in the shape, nature, shape and nature of our physical spaces, the buildings we live in, the way roads are laid out, the construction of giant factories, and so on.

Now, a challenge to this way of doing things and to thinking - theories about this way of doing things - came from postmodernism. What was this challenge? It challenged these forms of creation, and it challenged in particular the idea that form has to follow function. So postmodernism relied on the idea that, or expressed primarily, the idea that form does not have to follow function. The shape of something does not have to be determined by its purpose. In architecture, a movement developed which made, for example, structural elements open to view. Many contemporary airport buildings are examples of this. In the arts, the idea of systematic or coherent creation was replaced by the juxtaposition, the placing together, the placing alongside one another, of elements from different styles and contexts.

The theory is intellectually as difficult as poststructuralist theory, but postmodernism has been much more explicitly located in the political and historical context of the late 20th century. The term 'postmodern' seems to have been used first by the French philosopher, Jean-François Lyotard in the title of his 1979 book *The Postmodern Condition*, and the word 'postmodernism' may well have attained its intellectual status as a result of the American culture critic Fredric Jameson's book, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.

That was published in 1991, and it became almost a defining commentary on post modernism. It is certainly immensely authoritative. Now according to Jameson, modernism shows, modernism shows a confidence in technical knowledge to improve the quality of society and of people's lives. And we've have seen that, with the sciences, with the applied sciences, with advances in medicine, with changes in diet, changes in the ways we organize societies and lives and so on. So modernism shows immense confidence in technical knowledge to improve the quality of society and of people's lives.

Now, despite the fact that many modernists were egalitarians, critics of modernism saw modernism as inherently élitist and arrogant, because of its reliance on technical or other experts to decide the layout and appearance of towns, cities and houses, and also to tell us about diet, about patterns of exercise, the ways we should live our lives and so on.

In literary studies, the New Criticism, which I've mentioned earlier, was also called élitist for excluding those who had not the educational background to engage in very close analysis of

literary texts with no reference to anything but the texts. In addition, much modernist work is hard to engage with. The artwork is often totally abstract, the music often seems accessible only to trained musicians, and so on.

Now despite that, abstract sculptures and paintings have become progressively more familiar in everyday life especially in public spaces. Nevertheless, high modernism came to be associated with a wide gap between high culture and popular or mass culture.

Now postmodernism, especially from the late 1980s onwards, posed several challenges to the dominance of modernism, but the movements in art that initiated the theoretical challenges may well have dated from 1962, when the term - in 1962, the term 'pop art' was coined to describe the use of images and materials from everyday life, from advertising, from popular consumption and culture, and so on.

And these uses, these uses meant taking such images and materials from everyday life, advertising, popular consumption and culture, and using them as artistic creations and artistic objects. Andy Warhol's work may well have been the most famous example of this kind of practice. And the critic Clement Greenberg thought the decline in modernist confidence started at that time, in the early 1960s.

Practitioners and followers rejected, in particular, the distinction between high culture and popular culture, and also rejected the idea that works of art had to be created within rules and conventions of perspective, harmony, proportion, and the like. Once again, architecture provided the most visible or obvious rejection of modernism, and that's not entirely surprising. We actually see buildings, some of them are very large indeed - many architects abandoned any link between form and function, and many of them stopped concealing key structural elements of their buildings.

Now the new approaches were not confined to single buildings or complexes. Giant transnational corporations started to set up very large offices in provincial towns, probably because land or rents were cheaper there, and in the world of work, old class divisions seemed to disappear as old industries vanished, and were replaced by new forms of employment and business. These processes also started to undermine ideas of locality and neighbourhood, and the global spread of television - more recently, the phonecam and the internet as well - created a new currency of the image, with the attended risk that everything will just become an image or a simulacrum. I take that from Jameson.

Well, what it might be a simulacrum of, however becomes more and more of a problem. Examples might well be found in the apparently universal availability of fast food or the endless reproducibility of musical and other performances, and so on. These are often, certainly music and other performances are often reproducible in multimedia formats. So is this lecture - I draw upon a written text in a book, I look at it on a screen as a kind of teleprompter, and it goes out on a website and on YouTube as a video of some kind.

Now, what the image is a simulacrum of is more and more of a problem, given the range of media in which we can work and the apparent, the infinite reproducibility or copiability of even physical things such as different types of food, different types of dishes, different types of clothes, and so on.

Now Jameson is very clear, Frederic Jameson is very clear about the ideological demands and difficulties which we face as a result. Analysts of the political left and right have both inveighed, railed against, postmodernism. But railing against postmodernism for undermining the apparent high seriousness of other explanations caused its own problems. In particular, we would then fail to see a sufficiently, to create, a sufficiently serious response to postmodernism, because we would fail to see its historical location as a phenomenon which often reinforces and intensifies the processes of late capitalism.

We would be at risk, we would also be at risk, of failing to pay sufficient attention to the very aesthetic creations which might be understood as postmodern or even postmodernist. Marx, as Jameson reminds us here, took capitalism very seriously indeed. We've already seen that Marx recognises the way capitalism transformed entire societies very quickly, including the fact that it put an end to feudal authority and severely weakened the authority of institutionalized religions. And that was authority over us, feudal authority and the hold of institutionalized religions on us.

But that does not put an end - locating post modernism as a significant phenomenon in late capitalism - if you like, the aesthetic language, and cultural language of late capitalism, as Fredric Jameson says and argues it is, locating postmodernism as this kind of history, in this kind of historical period, and identifying it as a historical phenomenon will be made the more difficult because many postmodernist theorists or postmodern theorists reject or attempt to undermine the idea of historical location itself. Location itself disappears or is simply not reliable as a definitive concept in postmodern thinking. Much of postmodern architecture, for example, has a virtually unmediated relationship with business, now that's a challenge to postmodernism.

Well, why? Because it was set up in respect of commissions and land values and so on, cheaper to put mighty new skyscrapers for transnational corporations in provincial towns rather than in the great capital cities.

But that, yes, undoubtedly land values and other issues meant it was cheaper to do that and we could recognise that as a factor in the decisions made by controllers of capital to place their, their major buildings there, in such places. But the point is that the idea of historical location itself challenges our sense of how to explain major phenomena in society - history, the arts, economics, and so on.

So, let's look again at postmodern, postmodernist architecture or postmodern architecture. Despite the theorists, despite postmodernist attempts to undermine location historical or economic or national, postmodern architecture is heavily dependent, intimately tied up with, multinational and transnational business. In addition, the collapse of the distinction between high culture and mass culture conceals the fact that today's mass culture itself involves the instant commodification of aesthetic production.

It potentially involves the instant commodification of all artistic creations through instant reproduction. The system of production, therefore, or production relations, therefore, requires all creators, all artists of all kinds, to produce more and more apparently new works from books through movies to fashion, cars and the smallest of lifestyle accessories.

Jameson points out that this has to be done at ever greater rates of turnover. In addition, institutional support in the form of foundations, grants, and corporate sponsorship is increasingly available for works produced in this system, but only in their system, and especially for successful artistic creators or at least those who have gained popularity for any reason at all. I draw that from Jameson.

Now, it is certainly true that post modernism, in its many manifestations, has accompanied or been accompanied by a flourishing range or variety of artistic activities and creations. But when artistic creation is propagated by the major mass-communication agencies, such as the increasingly conglomerate-owned mass media and media conglomerates themselves, it just becomes another commodity.

Then this commodification of artistic production, and the apparent abdication by major architects of any public purpose, together combine with claims of aggregate economic growth to create

what Jameson calls a very smooth slick of language and images. We have already seen in the chapter on liberalism that the financialization of the world's economy has created notional holdings 'worth', I put that word in inverted commas, 'worth' a dozen times the total output, the world's total output, physical output. The term 'the real economy' has been used to refer to activities which produce things - food for example, and so on.

Now this condition, this condition of being beguiled by, by the slickness of contemporary language, not only of arts but of economics and politics, well, is extremely seductive. Jean Baudrillard sees the whole world as nothing but representations. According to him, we started with realism and we moved to distorted representation. Then our representations came to conceal emptiness and we ended up with signs which relate to no reality at all. Everything becomes virtual reality. Baudrillard famously, or notoriously, said that the Gulf War of 1991 never happened, and was only a series of television images. Well, the slick, that surface slick, the slickness of images and the transmission of language increasingly, persuasive and seductive, but increasingly according to critics of post modernism, that slick conceals a much uglier state of affairs.

The figures themselves about our condition are themselves simulacra. But they're not simulacra of nothing and the images themselves, well, it is not clear what they're simulacra of, but the figures, the figures themselves, are claims about aggregate growth, about the aggregate growth of economies, employment figures, and so on. And they conceal the fact that the growth has largely been driven by enormous rises in the purported value of non-productive assets, such as land, stocks and shares, gold and so on. Secondly, claims about employment figures too often avoid, conceal, the fact that the purportedly industrial economies have seen huge rises in the numbers of low-paid, dead-end, casualized jobs of the kind done by hundreds of millions around the world.

Other unpleasant facts still stand too. At the time I wrote the set book 2016 or thereabouts, India ranked 135th out of 187 countries on the UN Human Development Index, and at that time had - documentedly - about 700 million permanently malnourished people. A more recent figure on which I have drawn, for work that has gone in for publication, is that India has about 400 million chronically or permanently malnourished people, 450 million or so.

But - we have to be aware that the definitions of what it is to be permanently malnourished may have changed. Now is that a postmodern form of documentation? It's something we need to bear in mind all the time.

Well, our global economic relations and their systems have been severely undermined by much of the global, by the global financial crash of 2007-9, from which we're yet to recover. It has seen entire economies go to the wall under the shibboleths of the current financial orthodoxy.

Now that crash has undermined much of the system of economic relations, we can't really call them production relations any more, or can we? But that system has very greatly intensified postmodernism in our time. Yet poststructuralism and postmodernism, no matter what the economic crises around us, have posed serious challenges; and in their own way, they may have helped us towards a clearer understanding of our condition.

For example, it is not a disaster that Derrida undermines the idea that there is such a thing as a transcendental signified, or one meaning that holds the others all the others in place, be that God, reason, truth, or the laws of nature. I draw that point from Catherine Belsey's analysis of poststructuralism.

Instead, if we take meaning to be the effect of language and not its cause, then these foundational concepts lose their transcendental status, even if it is not clear what it would mean to take meaning to be, rather than to show the ways in which we mean things in our lives and language. Even if that is not clear, the poststructuralist challenge has enabled us, has enabled us to think afresh about things we might otherwise have taken for granted.

In addition, the corporate systems which underlie the postmodern, postmodern commodification of production and consumption - indeed, of whole lifestyles - can be thrown into chaos by political events of a very recognizable, if often terrible, character. Following the illegal United States-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, McDonald's lost enormous amounts of trade in the Middle East and North Africa, because their globally and instantly recognizable logo, their motif, and their globally inescapable advertising had all but turned them into the national symbol of the United States.

We might sympathize with the bald eagle, which has been a, been the official symbol of the United States for two and a half centuries. But for postmodernism, it might not be at all implausible for McDonald's to be the U.S. government and for its logo to be the representative

symbol thereof. Well, events threw that into chaos, and McDonald's not only lost enormous amounts of trade, they certainly seem to have got much quieter and much less strident even though they're just as energetic in their marketing and sales as they always were.

But this shows yet another problem with postmodernism and poststructuralism. What would it mean to take their rejections of systems of knowledge seriously? What does it mean to reject a system of knowledge and to reject the whole idea of systems of knowledge? A postmodernist anaesthetist - for example - might not bother to measure our weight and consider our age when deciding how much anesthetic to give us before an operation. They might just say, 'Oh, we think that's about enough', and stick the needle into us. The ground crew who refuel aircraft might also reject the power-seeking apparatus of enlightenment-derived science and stop the refuelling whenever they felt like it. And if our plane ran out of fuel, an hour into the flight or whenever or halfway across the ocean, well, too bad. We have rejected enlightenment rationality in the act of, in performing the act of, fuelling up the aircraft.

Now those from whom we buy fruit and vegetables might abandon the idea of using their scales, their weighing scales, for the feel of the weight of whatever they sell us. Oh, I think that's about 500 grams. That's a pound and a half, that's 8 ounces, right? No thanks, put that on the scales, right? No, no, I reject enlightenment rationality and its calculative power-driven logic. Our banks, of course, could cease to do any arithmetic in respect of our accounts and simply estimate the figures.

Those are some of the, those may seem to be, I may seem to be ridiculing the implications of postmodernism and of poststructuralist challenges to explanatory systems and to systems of reasoning. But perhaps too many of those who advocate either poststructuralism or postmodernism have simply overreached themselves.

These kinds of claims have in fact been made, the kind of claims that I have caricatured here have in fact been made and are often clear implications of poststructuralist and postmodernist works. Not I should add aesthetic works, but what is said about them in postmodernist, literary and artistic criticism.

In addition, furthermore, one of the least tenable claims of post modernism is that it is new. Even as modernism was rapidly becoming something of a dominant ethos in the arts, artists of the period were doing things which we might call postmodernist and that is in the late 19th century and early 20th centuries. Artists at that time were experimenting with the juxtaposition of

high culture and mass culture, they were abandoning the rules of musical composition, they were abandoning perspective and almost everything else in artistic creation. In addition, postmodernism has been severely criticized for colluding with, or even being an expression of, neoliberalism, in which individual preference is the sole principle of action; and even more dangerously, postmodernism has been criticised for opening the door to fascism - because it removes the very idea of reasons for our actions, and therefore of accountability for our actions or for the requirement that we justify our actions.

It has to see all, postmodernism has to see, all moral and political positions as equivalent, and has to eliminate or reject the possibility of any kind of reasoned decision and reasoned argument between them. I draw that from an argument put by Crowder in 2004. Now the point is, the point here, is that we, we may be and we very often are, confused about what a state of affairs is, about how things stand, and about what to do about them, what to do about them if they present a problem. We frequently ask, nothing unusual about that, including really gigantic questions, our environmental condition. What I always say and have said for a long time now is the catastrophe, the environmental catastrophe in which we live, what are we to do, what is it, what is our condition? What are we to do about it? How are we to go about it? And so on. How are we go to about, doing anything about our environmental catastrophe?

Now as a result, we may question the stories we've been told. We may question entire societies and systems of thought, but that does not mean we must stop trying to make sense of our world. Similarly, it is not an answer to a badly designed or badly run or corruptly run system, or even an entire state or society, to say that all actions or systems are no more than expressions of and vehicles for power.

For example, in late December 1981, Jacques Derrida was arrested as he was about to board a flight out of Prague. In Prague, he had been lecturing to members of an internationally known artistic, and academic dissident group, artists and academics had come together. If I am not mistaken, this was the Charter 77 group, which had quite a lot of international standing for a time. Czechoslovakia was still a communist country with a, and it had a notably more rigid government, than those of certain other communist countries.

Now Derrida was charged with drug trafficking. What seemed to be drugs had been planted in his bag, he was interrogated for eight hours, and he was held in a cell in prison. He had been framed by an over-eager security official who wanted to do something dramatic against the

dissident group - and who had no idea that arresting Derrida, of whom he'd never heard, would cause an international outcry.

I understand it took the intervention of the French President, I think it was François Mitterrand, to ensure that Derrida was released by the Czech government. He was released, but the episode shocked him so much that he began to see that there might be some point to the very idea of the rule of law, that that was not an abstraction.

Well, one question arising from all this is that of how postmodernism achieved the status it did. Its currency may have owed much, Jameson shows this, the currency of postmodernism might have owed much, much to the fact that it is a genuine ideology, a range of ideas which themselves systematically mislead us. Ironically, postmodernism itself excludes the possibility of systematic explanations.

Secondly, both poststructuralism and postmodernism may be right to challenge dominant systems of ideas, but their rejection of the possibility of reasoning inquiry and reasoning judgment neglects the fact that making judgments, and knowing and deciding what things mean and what to do, may need no Archimedean point or fulcrum. It is something we learn to do as we learn language in human life. Without it, our lives would probably be unintelligible as human lives. That is the risk that postmodernism and poststructuralism, taken seriously, do present us with.

Well, the two are far less current today except in, generally, in the teaching of students, although we do still use a great deal of postmodern and postmodernist language in characterising works of art, and that is an area where postmodernism has brought tremendous energy in artistic creation, in the analysis, in the criticism and evaluation of artistic creation, and therefore by implication of a great deal in our lives.

But the theorizing of postmodernism has been a major problem, and it has for, it did for a time, seem to hold a great deal - particularly in the English-speaking humanities - a great deal of the humanities, particularly in English-speaking cultures, in some kind of grip, which, of course, was always so slippery that it in a way could not be broken, there almost wasn't an enemy to criticise.

That is not quite true, and some very fine critical work was written about postmodernism and poststructuralism at the time. I have already mentioned Christopher Norris, writing in the early

90s, and Peter Dews, writing in the late 80s - a very fine book called *Logics of Disintegration*. But something led to, led to the freeing of the grip of postmodernism on, certainly on English-speaking intellectual life. Its impact extended to things like postmodernist theories of psychotherapy, postmodernist theories of ethnography and anthropology, and every social science, postmodernist ways, were even, if I'm not mistaken, suggested in aspects of the sciences.

But the - one key development seems to have been a paper written by Alan Sokal, a physicist if I am not mistaken, in 1996. It's called 'Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity'. The title is nonsense, it is intentionally nonsense. And it was written by Sokal quite deliberately, the paper was a hoax. He sent it to *Social Text* to see if something simply put together, pasted, cut and pasted and glued together from jargonistic, postmodernist and poststructuralist literary and philosophic analyses, would be accepted in the major, one of the major journals of post or postmodern and poststructuralist academic work.

It was, it was, I don't know if it quite won a prize, but it was highly, widely acclaimed. Sokal then pointed out the entire thing was a hoax. He did have an argument, a point to prove, which was that the idea of evidenced and rational investigation was obliterated by postmodernism and by postmodernist literary criticism. He is not against the arts, he is not against, talking about the arts. He's made that very clear since then. But this event seems to have taken a lot of the wind out of postmodernism's sails. And I must make it clear, that has to do with, that refers to postmodernist commitments, if that is intelligible, in the humanities and social sciences. Postmodernist creation and creation that we would call postmodernist continues apace in the arts and rightly so, we must really make no attempt to curb that, but we must learn about where it comes from, what informs it, what shapes it, and so on. Now, whether those are postmodernist, whether postmodernism can accept doing that, is another matter.

Okay, we'll stop there, we've concluded our exposition of poststructuralism and postmodernism. We'll go on to a worked exercise in our in our next lecture, and there's some very fine material there, we can send you the, we shall of course send you the PowerPoint showing you the titles to look up. We'll talk through those, we'll work through them in our next lecture.