

Postmodernism – by David M. Boje (2007) To appear in Yiannis Gabriel’s Thesaurus, London: Oxford University Press, forthcoming

It is agreed widely that all postmodern strands lead to Nietzsche, who rejected the Enlightenment of **modernity**. Enlightenment-modernity banished premodern spiritual ecology, the idea of humans in living dialogue with animals, mountains, rivers, trees, ancestors, and other entities. Modern **science** and **technology** were promising a new world order beyond the premodern. Dating the transition from premodern to modern is impossible. It is not one date, but recurs with the Reformation, the Renaissance, the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, Mechanization, Automation, World Wars I and II, etc. What is clear is that with the spread of modern **capitalism**, the human, natural, and spiritual ecologies of the Third World are ravaged, the world is still embroiled in war after war while experiencing over-population, global warming and species extinction at alarming rates.

On the way to postmodern, the struggle to reform modern capitalism’s dark side, fragmented into a thousand strands. An era approach is rejected – dating the arrival of postmodernism is impossible as is the construction of a linear episodic narrative, moving from the premodern to the modern and then to postmodern. Instead postmodern methods, theories, and worldviews proliferate, as do modern and premodern ones. There are numerous postmodern approaches ranging from naive postmodernism (McPostmodernism) that hails the arrival of postindustrial and complex/adaptive **organizations**, Baudrillard’s and Lyotard’s versions of radical breaks from modernity, to others seeking more integration with **critical theory**. Some claim to have moved beyond postmodern to something called post-postmodern that would include hybrids (postmodern variants with modern and premodern), language ‘heteroglossia’ (the coexistence of many **voices** at the same time in tension with each other), and various ‘dark side postmoderns’ looking at global reterritorialization, postmodern war, **postcolonialism** and the ills of capitalism.

Several strands of postmodernism grew out of the latest French revolution. During the 1968 revolt, when students joined by workers brought France to a standstill, several postmodernists claimed to see an end to **modernity**. Debord {, 1977 #2667} thought the ‘Society of the Spectacle’ had arrived, so that Marx’s production economy needed to be reimagined as a **consumption** economy. Baudrillard {, 1968/1988 #34;, 1970/1988 #35} and Lyotard {, 1984/1991 #1372} proposed radical postmodern projects. Baudrillard pushed Debord’s **spectacle** to its lime, claiming unilaterally that all of society had become a simulation (or simulacrum). Lyotard’s radical project to reform education, was to be incredulous of all modern **narratives**, including **system** theory, universal **ethics**, and essentialist psychologies. But, in aftermath of 1968, when French people went back to school and work, ‘modern’ capitalism reclaimed its grip on society.

Derrida {, 1976 #1194} and Foucault {, 1966/1970 #1239;, 1969/1972 #1240} are often classed as or accused of being postmodernists but it would more accurate to view them as **post-structuralists** (rejecting structuralism). Postmodernists often adopt Derrida’s **deconstruction** style, and Foucault’s archaeology of knowledge, or his genealogical method to unravel **grand narratives**. Habermas decided to reject them all, debating each of them in his books or on TV. Habermas {, 1984 #3674;, 1990 #3083} held out the possibility that modernity was an unfinished project, and that with the help of a communicative **rationality**, the process of consensus dialogue could revitalize the public sphere. Latour {, 1990 #1626}, for his part, claimed that instead of modern being succeeded by postmodern, we need to recognize ‘we have never been modern.’ Premodern, modern, and postmodern ways of Being and of Knowing co-exist in different hybrid combinations. Jameson {, 1984 #1648} argued that capitalism was in its late modern manifestation. Every time there is a postmodern move to succeed it, modernism appropriates the move, tames it, and turns it into yet another **commodity**. McDonald’s appropriates the simulation, by serving simulated (highly artificial) food. Nike rejects universal ethics, spinning virtual stories of its athletes’ successes, and **stories** of turning sweatshops into exemplary workplaces. Wal-Mart, imports 85% of its products from China,

but waves the Made In America flag. Las Vegas specializes in spectacles of postmodern architecture to attract more families to gamble. McDonald's, Wal-Mart, and Las Vegas are both modern and postmodern. In short, the postmodern has some very dark sides.

One of these dark sides is what Best and Kellner {, 1991 #3952} call postmodern warfare. Unlike World War I, World War II or even the Vietnam War, in the two Gulf Wars launched by the two Bush presidents rely extensively on media simulations. Animations are presented instead of showing the blood of soldiers and civilians on battlefields. Bush stops the media from showing flag-draped coffins of fallen veterans; instead, his Top Gun landing on U.S.S. Lincoln becomes sign of victory, irrespective of the realities on the ground.

There are many other postmodern stands. As early as 1957, Peter Drucker {, 1959 #3953} claimed management had become postmodern when it ceased to rely on Cartesian thinking. Bergquist {, 1993 #56}, ignoring social **power** differences, argued that one is on the way to the Valhalla of postmodernis when one engages in complexity, instead of old-fashioned system thinking. Gergen {, 1994 #1823} asserts that everything is a **social construction**, without a material connection. New Age postmodernists argue that CEOs focusing on spirituality will take us beyond the ills of late modern capitalism. I must confess I once thought there was hope that some kind of postmodern organization would emerge shorn of its dark sides. My current view is that one needs to be highly skeptical of postmodern thinking. Baudrillard and Lyotard are too radical. Not everything is a simulacrum. Over half the world's population does not have a computer, cell phone, or iPod. Some grand narratives, such as distributive ethics, spiritual ecology and world peace are worth pursuing. When **power** and hegemony are ignored in highly affirmative or naïve postmodern strands, guard your wallet and your home.

In organization studies, there are many strands. Clegg {, 1990 #120} argued that the survival of traditional French bread making indicates that modern organization faces premodern survival. Burrell {, 1997 #1088}, in *Pandemonium*, argues that we can juxtapose modern organization narratives with premodern ones. Calás and Smircich {, 1999 #2812} think it is time for postmodern to be surpassed, and propose **postcolonial** theory as the new post-postmodern contender.

On their way towards the postmodern, postmodernists could not agree on what was wrong with the modern, or on how to go to about reinventing it. So the modern quickly appropriated every postmodern idea, turning it into one more **consumption spectacle**. 'Managerialism' appropriated the postmodern moves distilling them into the darkest side of the postmodern and married them off to modernity's Frankenstein bride. It thus claimed language games and social construction and made false sightings of the liberation of workers and modernity from McDonaldization, Wal-Martization, Las Vegasation and Empire. What has remained most valuable in postmodern strands is all the theory and methods to question modern and (post) postmodern moves.

Suggested Readings

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