

MODERN AND POSTMODERN PHILOSOPHICAL QUEST A METHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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The term modern comes from *modo* in Latin. *Modo* is the same as 'mode' or 'function'. What is in 'mode' now is 'modern'. Modern means something which is not traditional. It offers a critique of existing feudal superstructure (political, moral, religious and legal systems). It tries to defend and develop scientific explanation of everything, and to explain reality not only objectively but also as experienced by the subject "To be modern is to break with the past and to search for new self-conscious expressive forms."¹ Modernity breaks with the endless reiteration of traditional (classical) themes, topics and myths; and postmodernity operates at the places of closure in modernity, at the margins of what proclaims itself to be new and a break with tradition.

To be modern means to search for new self-conscious expressive forms. To be postmodern is to marginalize, delimit, disseminate and decenter the primary and often secondary works of modernist inscriptions. It implies that the line of demarcation between modernity and postmodernity remains a matter of uncertainty because it is never well defined. The basic question is -in that respect can it be said that modernist thinking when enframended establishes the condition for a postmodern thinking? If it can be said, as I will try to establish, that postmodernist thinking circumscribes and delimits modernist thinking, what exactly is the place where modernist thinking comes to an end? This closure does not occur at many places except one, i.e. METHODOLOGY. Between modernity and postmodernity, there is a fundamental methodological gap. Things, ideas and relationship viewed from one method may not be same if they are viewed from a different method. the uncertainty regarding the origin of postmodernity does not occur at many places and certainly not in very many ways except one that is *methodology*. The

demarcation line between modernity and postmodernity could be understood only in terms of methodology alone.

As soon as the enquiry concerning methodology develops, a technical terminology becomes a *sine qua non* of fruitful exposition. For a technical term is simply a term whose meaning is known exactly ; and hence not to bother to use technical term is not to bother to think with precision. One can easily trace such situations in chemistry or geometry. Chemistry could develop on the basis of exact conceptions of alcohol, of acid, or ether ; or in geometry, of circles, of triangles or of planes. The situation in philosophy is not different. Hence at the point where one ceases to be superficial, there, technical terms far from making for unintelligibility, on the contrary, are the only means of being intelligible.

It is from the point of view of methodology that we can make the comparison and contrast between modernity and postmodernity on the following issues :

In modern philosophy, with Descartes's dualism, there emerges two schools of thought; namely, idealism and materialism with no meeting transitions between them. Reality, things and relationship are viewed either idealistically or materialistically. In postmodern philosophy, reality follows diverse models which are rich in conflicts. In modern philosophy, there is a unified world-order and a philosophical confidence in our ability to know the world as it really is. In postmodern philosophy, unity and totality are shattered; in other words, there is a radical negation of totalitarian thinking. Man is left without quality. In modern philosophy, human subjectivity, rationality, freedom, scientific knowledge, morality, etc. are the central issues. In the postmodern philosophy, there is pluralism, fragmentation, and irrationalism (which means attitude towards rationality through fragmentation). In modern philosophy, history is viewed as a process of development from the ideological point of view and there is a negation of negation. In postmodern philosophy, history is viewed from ruptures and mutation; in other words, determinism and continuity are broken. In short, in modernism, there is foundationalism, essentialism and teleology ; where as postmodernism is anti-foundationalism, anti-essentialism and anti-teleology.

The beginning of modernity can be traced back to the period of transition from feudalism to capitalism and the intellectual fervor that spread in Europe

during 17th century. The *Glorious Revolution* of 1688 and the *French Revolution* of 1789 was the high point in the spread of this intellectual - spiritual as well as political-economic-social ferment in western society. "The process lasted from the mid 18th to mid 19th century, and is still spreading geographically, encompassing all cultures which adopt the urban-technological - industrial system, with its capitalist mode of production, Calvinist - individualist value system, culture, medicine, communication system, educational system and political-economic institutions are all based on human sovereignty and autonomy."² We have a long list of philosophers who are modernist; such as; Bacon, Descartes, Galileo, Newton, Hume, Kant, Hegel, Mill, Comte, Marx, and so on. The basic philosophical quests in modernism are that 'man can be an interpreter of the world' (Bacon), 'an observer of the universe through an instrument such as a telescope and the mathematical foundation of the physical world' (Cartesian-Galilean mechanics), 'universal law of gravitation and the laws of motion' (Newton), 'understanding makes nature' (Kant), 'what is rational is actual and what is actual is rational' (Hegel), 'the point, however, is to change the world' (Marx)- so rationalism, empiricism, transcendentalism, utilitarianism, positivism, dialecticism are all 'modern' philosophers. In a nut shell, the shift from RELIGION/REVELATION to SCIENCE/REASON is what inaugurates the modern world-view. Notwithstanding the mutual differences between one school and another, there are CENTRAL and MARGINAL issues in modernism. At the Centre of modernity, there are such issues as rationality, scientific knowledge, human subjectivity, unified world-view, ideology, morality, freedom, and above all, *foundationalism, essentialism, teleology and logocentrism*. At the same time, at the Margins of modernity, there are such issues as irrationality, fragmentation, deception, demon, madness, fantasy, sin, etc.

It is the margins of modernity, at the places of closure or the limits of modernist productions that we find beginning of postmodernity. It is the central issues of modernity that postmodernity tries to enframe, circumscribe and delimit. In this sense postmodern does not mean anti-modern. As Jean-Francois Lyotard puts it, "The whole idea of Post- modernity is perhaps better rethought under the rubric of rewriting modernity."³ "Postmodernity enframes modernism without identity or unity. It is fragmented, discontinuous, multiple and dispersed. Where modernism asserts centering, focusing, continuity -once break with the tradition

has taken place -, postmodernism decenters, enframes discontinues and fragments the prevalence of modernist ideas."⁴ Postmodernism thus has no special place of origin. "...postmodernism does not open up a new field of artistic, philosophical, cultural, or even institutional activities. Its very significance is to marginalise, delimit, disseminate and decenter the primary (and often secondary) works of modernist inscriptions."⁵

This means that the line of demarcation, as I have said above, between modernity and postmodernity remains a matter of uncertainty because postmodernity operates at the edge of modernity. There is a long list of philosophers who are postmodernists ; such as, irrationalism of Nietzsche, structuralism of anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, the cultural semiologist Ronald Barthes, the psychoanalytic Jacques Derrida, the critical theorists Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Jurgen Habermas, besides Richard Rorty, Lyotard, Levinas and others.

In 1979, Jean-Francois Lyotard was assigned by the Canadian Government to compile, assess and critically evaluate the intellectual climate in the most advanced countries of the Western Europe and U.S.A. There Lyotard, as a point of departure, uses the term 'postmodern' to describe that climate. In *Driftworks*, for example, Lyotard inveighs against modernist reason as the main instrument of repression and stresses the freeplay of both language and action that leads to 'plurality of singularities'⁶. 'He proceeds to analyse the changes and transformations that took place since the end of the 19th century in the fields of philosophy, science, literature, politics, art, etc. This he terms as 'the crisis of narratives'. These narratives are the reflections of the modernist conceptual framework in which a criterion or a standard or a legitimation with reference to its own system is designed. This could be an appeal to a Grand Narrative such as the Dialectic of Spirit (Hegel), Emancipation of the Rational Subject (Enlightenment Rationality to Kant) or the working Subject (Marx). As against this Lyotard defines postmodern as 'incredulity towards metanarratives'. Any statement of conclusion needs to be placed in the context of validation criterion. Postmodernity is an end of the validation criterion. In *The Postmodern Condition : A Report on Knowledge*, Lyotard has emphasised on similar concern on developments in modern science, catastrophe theory, chaos theory and so on, all of which display, he thinks, the bankruptcy of traditional

forms of epistemology.

I would like to dwell little more on the question of what is the relation of postmodernity to modernity? No postmodernist will say that postmodernity is a denial of modernity. They say, it is a reconstruction, a reinterpretation, an attempt to give a new meaning to modernity could be defined as an 'attitude' or a 'mood' or a 'Movement'. Modernity could be defined as an 'ism'; i.e., 'a clear set of ideas' and a programme of action based on it. Postmodernity is not a systematic thing where you can develop concepts and relationships, precisely that is what the postmodernists' are against. In modernity, everything is a system like 'foundationalism', 'essentialism', 'teleology', 'rationalism', 'freedom', 'logocentrism' and so on. Behind that drive there lies an absolute confidence in the capacity of unaided and autonomous human reason to solve all puzzles and remove the veil of mystery from reality. Reason alone can make the objective reality under human control through science and technology.

The postmodernity, on the other hand, wants to ignore even the present, in order to make a creative leap into the future untamed by laws, norms and institutions which are dominating the modernist society. Postmodernity is certainly not anti-modern in the sense of being backward looking. It does not want to reinstate the norms of religion and tradition which modernism repudiated. Nor does it want to abide by the norms of modernity-especially the emphasis on system-prone thinking and logical rationality.

What is held to be common to the disparate thinkers of postmodernity is a belief, though it is expressed in various ways, that in the present-day intellectual climate, we are observing a general crisis of 'philosophy'. In other words, we are facing "a series of crises... in which older modes of defining, appropriating and recomposing the objects of artistic, philosophical, literary and social scientific languages are no longer credible and in which one common aspect is the dissolution of the very boundary between the language and its object".⁷ Stepher White has suggested that what he calls 'postmodern problematic' consists of four interrelated phenomena: "the increasing incredulity towards metanarratives, the growing awareness of new problems wrought by societal rationalism, the explosion of new informational technologies and the

emergence of new social movements".⁸ Richard Rorty has brought out the postmodern claim about knowledge, language and the world like this - the modernist assumption was that we had a 'glassy essence' that could be rationally perceived and interpreted through particular techniques and through which we could perceive the world but postmodernism smashes that glass.

Given the above, postmodernity is, of its very nature, 'philosophical'. Let us take, for example, one of the key areas of postmodern discourse regarding philosophy - the notion of subjectivity. The postmoderns view modernity as having developed a particular view of this idea, beginning with (according to taste) Machiavelli, Descartes and /or Hobbes (I regard Descartes as the father of modernist subjectivity). As White has put it, "[in modernity] the individual subject is conceived of as an isolated mind and will... the modern world, says Derrida, stands under the imperative of giving a rational account of everything; or as Foucault more ominously puts it, of interrogating everything... it manifests itself finally in the twentieth century as a 'will to planetary order' [White is here citing Lyotard]".⁹

It is now obvious that between postmodernity and modernity, there is a methodological gap. Things viewed from one method are not the same if they are viewed from a different method. For instance, Hegel's method of appreciating history of philosophy is dialectical in which earlier systems are not annihilated but assimilated in the later, "... the relation of the earlier to the later systems of philosophy is much like the relation of the corresponding stages of the Logical Idea ; in other words, the earlier systems are preserved in the later,..."¹⁰ But Derrida, however, says, "...the relationship between the ancient and the modern is not simply that of the implicit and the explicit... My own conviction is that we must maintain two contradictory affirmations at the same time. On the one hand, we affirm the existence of ruptures in history, and on the other, we affirm that these ruptures produce gaps or fault (*failles*) in which the most hidden and forgotten archives can emerge and constantly recur and work through history..."¹¹ Derrida retains the horizontal character of Hegel's dialectic without its teleology. For Derrida, writing always leads to more writing, and more, and still more; just as history does lead to Final Struggle but to more history, and more, and still more. This is the episodic nature of history which Derrida is advocating.

Derrida's way of explaining history in terms of 'rupture' and 'mutation' falls widely apart from Hegel's way of analysing history in terms of 'continuity' and 'negation of negation'. Derrida's account of history rests on the contention that reality follows diverse models which are mutually exclusive and are rich in conflicts. Consequently, totality or unity or rationality is shattered; and, pluralism, fragmentation, discontinuity and irrationalism are affirmed. But Hegel emphasizes on Logocentric notions with unified world order, rationality and human freedom.

In the conclusion, we can say that Postmodernity rejects the norms of strict logic and rationality which characterize modernity. It attempts to transcend the contours of a system-prone thinking. At the *centre* of modernity are Foundationalism, Essentialism and Teleology which includes such issues as human subjectivity (the *cogito*, the transcendental consciousness and *Geist*), rationality, unity, science, morality, freedom and so on; whereas at the *margins* of modernity are such issues as madness, fantasy, demon, sexuality, pluralism, discontinuity, irrationality and fragmentation. Postmodernity underestimates the Central issues of modernity and overestimates the *Marginal* issues. In postmodernity, reality follows diverse models which are rich in conflicts, history is viewed from ruptures and mutations, and there is a radical negation of totalitarian thinking. In marginalizing, delimiting, disseminating and descentering the *Central* works of modernist inscriptions, the postmodernists, I feel, have expanded the horizons of modernity. This is the modest claim in a way that no postmodernist will reject.

NOTES

- 1 Silverman, H.J., *Continental Philosophy III Postmodernism - Philosophy and Arts* (New York & London, Routledge, 1998), p.1.
- 2 Gregorios, Paulos Mar, Foreword to *Philosophy :Modern and Postmodern* by R.P.Singh (Intellectual Publishing House, New Delhi, 1997),p.v.
- 3 Lyotard, "Reecrire la Modernite" in *L' Inhumain* (Galilee, Paris, 1988) pp.33-34.
- 4 Kearney, Richard, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers, the*

- Phenomenological Heritage* (Manchester, MUP, 1984) pp. 112-113.
- 5 Silverman, H.J., *Continental Philosophy III* (New York & London, Routledge, 1990), p.1.
 - 6 Lyotard, Jean -Froncois, *Driftworks* (New York, Semiotext, 1982) p.15.
 - 7 Boyne, R. & Rattansi A (eds.) *Postmodernism and Society* (London, MacMillan, 1990), p.12.
 - 8 White, S.K., *Political Theory and Postmodernism* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.12.
 - 9 *Ibid.* , pp.2-3 (in brackets, mine).
 - 10 Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, quotation from David Macgregor, *The Communist Ideal in Hegel and Marx* (London, George Allen & Unwin, 1984), pp. 134-135.
 - 11 Kearney, Richard, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers : The Phenomenological Heritage* (Manchester University Press, 1984), pp. 112-113.