Postmodernism

Postmodernism is a late twentieth century intellectual and artistic movement that is associated with a range of conflicting interpretations. No doubt, much of the complexity stems from the fact that it has been linked with a variety of intellectual, social and artistic trends. In the late 1950s, postmodernism was used to refer to the work of artists who challenged ideas and concepts taken for granted, especially those promoted under the modernist paradigm (e.g. ‘progress’, lack of ornament). Since then, various disciplines have deployed postmodernism, perceiving it as a movement whose objective was to topple ideas central to modernism. The foundations of postmodernism are thus located in the philosophical currents of anti-foundationalism, anti-essentialism, anti-representationalism, and anti-dualism. Scepticism underlines much of postmodernist thought in that the validity of the roots of discourse is challenged.

Postmodernism’s own roots are said to lie in the work of philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger. Famous postmodern thinkers include poststructuralists such as Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva, but also thinkers not directly aligned with this movement, including Gayatri Spivak, Gilles Deleuze, and Judith Butler. When deployed by thinkers in the postcolonial world, postmodernism has aided in the application of a critical gaze to the way that ‘knowledge’ is constructed within the ‘modern’ milieu. Postmodernism has also engendered an intellectual current of eschewing colonial essentialist understandings of individuals’ experiences and the rigid universalist truth claims of positivism. At the same time, it has provided new tools such as ‘strategic essentialism’ (Spivak), which temporarily suspends difference for social action.
Postmodernism has been criticised for its vagueness, nihilism and over-reliance on referencing. Theorists working within a postmodern strain of thought have not unquestioningly embraced poststructuralists’ relativism. Stuart Hall (1993), for example, struck a middling position between the extreme relativism of a poststructuralist-influenced postmodernism on the one hand, and the rigid universalist truth claims of positivism on the other. Hall’s (quoted in Osborne and Segal 1997) notion of “loosening the moorings” (33) expresses the view that in the deconstruction of concepts, we do not have to expunge them. Rather, the “subject is reconceptualised” (Procter 2004, 80).

Essential Readings:


Further Readings:

York: Routledge.


**Questions:**

Does the extreme relativism of postmodernism (‘anything goes’) disqualify it as a meaningful approach to the study of social life?

With regard to the ways in which individuals construct identity, how can postmodernism’s questioning of accepted social representations be useful?

Since postmodernism rejects ‘truth’ claims, can it be viewed as a ‘liberatory’ framework for understanding individuals’ experiences and for wider social and political phenomena?

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