

Leading into the Future VII: Constructivism and Postmodernism

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I have already introduced the term “postmodernism” when beginning to describe the challenges associated with “leading into the future.” Now is the time to step back a bit and examine what exactly is “postmodernism” – in its various forms. I begin this exploration by offering a quotation from David Harvey in his notable book concerning *The Condition of Postmodernity*ⁱ

I cannot remember exactly when I first encountered the term postmodernism. I probably reacted to it in much the same way as I did to the various other “isms” that have come and gone over the past couple of decades, hoping that it would disappear under the weight of its own incoherence or simply lose its allure as a fashionable set of ‘new ideas.’ But it seemed as if the clamour of postmodernist arguments increased rather than diminished with time. Once connected with poststructuralism, postindustrialism, and a whole arsenal of other ‘new ideas,’ postmodernism appeared more and more as a powerful configuration of new sentiments and thoughts.

Postmodernism as an Elusive Perspective

In a book I wrote in the early 1990s (Bergquist, 1993), I declared that the postmodern world was in the midst of being born. It did not yet have clear definition, other than its origins in and difference from the modern era. Hence the name *postmodern*. It is still being defined with reference to its mother (*modernism*) rather than having broken off as a free and independent movement or set of ideas and images with its own distinctive name. In many ways, postmodernism is a fad and is at the same time about fads. If nothing else, it offers an elusive perspective on contemporary life and societies. Nevertheless, even though postmodernism is filled with superficial, facile and often internally contradictory analyses, it must not be dismissed, for these analyses offer insightful and valuable (even essential) perspectives and critiques regarding our 21st Century life:ⁱⁱ

The postmodern moment has arrived and perplexed intellectuals, artists, and cultural entrepreneurs wondered whether they should get on the bandwagon and join the carnival, or sit on the side-lines until the new fad disappeared into the whirl of cultural fashion. Yet

postmodernism refused to go away. . . . At first, there was no clear sense as to what constituted postmodernism, when it arrived, what it meant, and what effects it was having and would be likely to have in the future. Eventually, more systematic and sustained discussion took place . . .

In the postmodern camp there is neither the interest in the systematic building of theory, through what Thomas Kuhn calls *normal science*, nor the interest in a warfare between competing paradigms, through what Kuhn calls *scientific revolutions*.ⁱⁱⁱ Rather everything is *pre-paradigmatic*. Tom Peters acknowledges that in the early 1980s he knew something about how organizations achieved excellence.^{iv} By the late 1980s, he discovered that he was mistaken. Many of the excellent organizations of the early 1980s became troubled institutions by the late 1980s. Other theorists and social observers have been similarly humbled by the extraordinary events of the 1980s and 1990s. They simply haven't been as forthcoming (or opportunistic) as Tom Peters. "Postmodernism at its deepest level," notes Andreas Huyssen, "represents not just another crisis within the perpetual cycle of boom and bust, exhaustion and renewal, which has characterized the trajectory of modernist culture."^v Rather, the postmodern condition "represents a new type of crisis of that modernist culture itself." Many futurists (especially those that focus on the environment) similarly speak of a *crisis-of-crises*.

If postmodernism is to contribute to the formulation of a new theory of organizations and provide a guide for leaders as they lean into the future, then it must move beyond the state of fad and find roots in the soil of history and precedence. The origins of postmodernism can be traced to many different sources, ranging from the Marxist-based analyses of Frederick Jameson^{vi} to the more conservative observations and predictions of Peter Drucker.^{vii} From Cristo's art-as-event performances to Peter Vaill's^{viii} spiritual leadership. To trace the origins of postmodernism is to review the cultural history of Twentieth Century America and the emerging global culture of the Twenty First Century.

Since this task is impossible, given the focus of this set of essays on leadership, I will focus briefly on four different sources of postmodernism We must understand something of what is being said by the postmodernists if we are to gain an appreciation for postmodernism as a revolution in contemporary thought rather than merely a fad and if we are to more fully appreciate the challenges faced by 21st Century leaders..

Concepts of a postmodern world come from four sources. A first source is the intellectual debates and dialogues in Europe (primarily France) regarding structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, post-capitalism, critical theory and feminism. This work is very difficult to understand, let alone summarize or typify. Some say it is difficult because the ideas are subtle, elusive or complex. Others say it is difficult because the authors purposefully make their points in an obscure or convoluted manner.

The second source of postmodern thought is the much more accessible—some would say “popularized”—critique of contemporary art forms (particularly architecture, literature and painting) and contemporary life styles (for example, advertising, fashion, and the colloquial use of language). This, in turn, relates to many of the critiques offered by the first source—in particular those involving deconstructionist and feminist reinterpretations of cultural history. Some of the clearest, but most controversial, writers in this feminist tradition are those who study and write about alternative versions of world (and especially Western) history (for example, Eisler^x) and alternative ways of knowing in the world (for example, Gilligan,^x Belenky and Associates^{xi}).

A third source is the social analysis of the work place and economy, as represented by the work of Daniel Bell (who first coined the phrase *post-industrial era*), Kenneth Boulding (who wrote prophetically of the emergence of the *intersect organization*), and Peter Drucker (who first spoke of the *privatization* of public functions). Popular books written by Nesbitt and, at an earlier time, Toffler^{xii} also have contributed, as has Thomas Peters (who accurately portrays the inadequacies of modern management responses to postmodern conditions). Finally, post-modernism is beholding, in an indirect manner, to work in the physical sciences that is usually labeled *chaos* or *complexity* theory. This work has been made accessible to the lay public through the journalistic writings of Gleick and Waltrup and the more technical, but nevertheless fascinating, writings of Ilya Prigogine and Stuart Kauffman

In this essay and several of the following essays, I briefly summarize the contributions to be made by each of these four sources, thereby setting the stage for the application of these ideas and others to our subsequent discussion regarding leadership. I specifically focus on four themes that are often associated with postmodernism and briefly indicate how one or more of the four postmodern sources have contributed to the elucidation of this theme. I focus in this issue on the theme of constructivism and its relationship to postmodernism.

Objectivism versus Constructivism

Two different perspectives in the postmodern era are prevalent. They may be as important in the postmodern world as the liberal versus conservative distinction has been in the modern world. These two perspectives, in fact, are often inaccurately equated with the liberal/conservative differences. One of these perspectives might best be called *objectivism*. The advocates for this perspective assume that there is a reality out there that we can know and articulate. There are universal truths or at least universal principles that can be applied to the improvement of the human condition, resolution of human conflicts, restoration of human rights, or even construction of a global order and community.

Constructivism offers a quite different perspective. Advocates for this perspective believe that we construct our own social realities, based in large part on the traditions and needs of the culture and social-economic context in which we find ourselves. There are no universal truths or principles, nor are there any global models of justice or order that can be applied in all settings, at all times, with all people. There are rather specific communities that espouse their own unique ways of knowing. Furthermore, these ways of knowing may themselves change over time and in differing situations.

These two perspectives do not simply involve different belief systems. They encompass different notions about the very nature of a belief system, and in this sense are profoundly different from one another. While the objectivist perspective was prevalent during the modern era, the constructivist perspective is an emerging postmodern phenomenon. The emergence of the constructivist perspective represents a revolutionary change in the true sense of the term. Mark Edmundson addresses this revolution in his analysis of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*:^{xiii}

One might think of postmodernism—in its negative or demystifying phase—as trying to get done what its practitioners sensed modernism had failed to do; that is, to purge the world of superstition in every form. Major modern thinkers such as Marx and Freud strove to come up with ways of conceiving of life as lived in the West that would be genuinely post-religious. Both of them practiced and promoted what Paul Ricoeur has called “the hermeneutics of suspicion.” Nothing, their work taught, could be taken at face value. Readers of Marx and Freud became attuned to the masking of class conflict and the suppression of erotic desires. “Civilization” had much to hide. In fact, civilization

sometimes seemed to be nothing more than a series of linked strategies for concealment. The analysis of Marx and Freud—and of those whose writings have been informed by their thought—struck through the pasteboard mask of civilization to find a universe of suppressed truths.

Edmundson notes that the modernist thinkers and critics still left the door open for a new secular transcendent order:^{xiv}

But the problem with this modern tendency to disenchant the world was that it turned the old religious drive upside down. The traditional man of faith seeks transcendence. He wants contact with God, the One, the Truth. The modern thinker, inspired by Marx and Freud, found truth in repressed or hidden impulses, but he FOUND TRUTH nonetheless. Similarly, modern artists and critics found organic cohesion, autonomy—a form of truth, perhaps—in the grand works, works like Joyce’s “Ulysses” or Eliot’s “The Waste Land.”

Thus, according to Edmundson, the central challenge for a postmodernist is to retain a healthy skepticism about all purported truths—including the “truths” offered by the postmodernists themselves:

The postmodern man sees religious residues in ANY way of thinking that affirms the Truth. He reads the modern period as the time when transcendentalism gave way, yes, but to a kind of thinking that sought to penetrate the depths, there to find bedrock reality. The spirit of the . . . post-modern movement in the arts, literary criticism, and philosophy might, assuming one were determined to shrink it to bumper-sticker size, be expressed like this: "If you want to be genuinely secular, then give up on transcendence in every form." Or, if your bumper’s too small for that: “Accept no substitutes—for God.” In other words, don’t replace the deity with some other idol, like scientific truth, the self, the destiny of America, or what have you. And (front bumper) “Don’t turn your postmodernism into a faith. Don’t get pious about your impiety.”

As a result of this postmodern commitment to the shattering of epistemological icons, the traditional distinction between liberal and conservative breaks down. While the capitalist and communist offer quite different versions about what the world is like and should be like, they both begin with the assumption that there is a “reality” that they can describe and assess. They both assume that there are stable standards and

values against which one can test alternative futures. The constructivists are critical of both political stances. They suggest instead that one must construct models of social reality and social value that are fluid. These models must be flexible and open to new data and to social conditions that change in rapid and unpredictable fashion.

The postmodernist (and neo-Marxist) Frederic Jameson disagrees with Daniel Bell's assessment that ideology (and in particular, liberal ideology) is dead because of improved social conditions in society, but does agree that postmodernism has brought about the *end of ideology*:^{xv}

As with so much else, it is an old 1950s acquaintance, "the end of ideology," which has in the postmodern returned with a new and unexpected kind of plausibility. But ideology is now over, not because class struggle has ended and no one has anything class-ideological to fight about, but rather because the fate of "ideology" in this particular sense can be understood to mean that conscious ideologies and political opinions, particular thought systems along with the official philosophical ones which laid claim to a greater universality—the whole realm of consciousness, argument, and the very appearance of persuasion itself (or of reasoned dissent)—has ceased to be functional in perpetuating and reproducing the system.

The social psychologist, Milton Rokeach has been one source of insight regarding this new way of thinking about social and political models of society.^{xvi} Rokeach pointed out in *The Open and Closed Mind* that in certain important ways, the far left and the far right tend to think alike. They search for absolutes and tend to portray their adversaries in what William Perry later described as a "dualistic" framework: either you agree with me or you disagree with me.^{xvii} Either you are right or I am right. Which is it? Both the liberals and conservatives often believe that their own models of social justice and governance can be applied throughout the world (with a few adjustments for culture). They are both missionary in their zeal for dissemination of the truths that they hold.

The dualistic frames of both conservatives and liberals no longer hold up—the world is changing to a more constructive perspective. Many shifts in the basic values and perspectives of our society often are first conveyed either in the games and inventions of children or in the products of poets, philosophers and fools.

In the case of the social construction of reality, the highly regarded American poet, Wallace Stevens wrote about the importance of social fictions many years ago:

The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly.

The social philosopher Ernest Becker wrote similarly of the fragile nature of man's fictions—specifically regarding freedom:^{xviii}

Man's freedom is a fabricated freedom and he pays a price for it. He must at all times defend the utter fragility of his delicately constituted fiction, deny its artificiality. . . . Man's fictions are not superfluous creations that could be "put aside" so that the "more serious" business of life could continue.

The new, constructivist perspective has been accelerated by several other contemporary social scientists who have written about *the social construction of reality*—notably Berger and Luckmann^{xix}—and by feminists who have written about unique ways in which many women and some men become knowledgeable about their world.^{xx} The new constructivism has also been aided by the emergence of a critical perspective on absolute knowledge in the physical sciences, this culminating in the establishment of chaos and complexity theory.

One of the earliest and most articulate scientific spokesmen for this constructivist perspective was Michael Polanyi who wrote of the problem associated with the act of *attending to* and *attending from* any phenomenon.^{xxi} We can never attend to that from which we are attending. The base of our perception must always remain hidden from our perception. For instance, the traditional psychoanalyst would have us believe that each of us is likely to perceive people we are attracted to partially through the lenses of our past relationship with parenting figures. The analysts would suggest that we must attend back to our experiences, feelings and attitudes regarding our parents if we are to understand our current intimate relationships. Polanyi would suggest that this introspection might be of value, but he would note that we must attend to our parental relationships through yet another set of lenses. These lenses might have been crafted by the culture in which we live or perhaps even (as Jung suggested) by collectively held and unconscious archetypes. Then we must ask about the lenses we are using to attend to these cultural or archetypal phenomena.

In other words, we always perceive one set of lenses or perspectives from yet another set of lenses. Thus, there is the danger of infinite regression among the social constructivists. The relativistic social construction of reality might itself be a social construction, revealing something about the disrupting times in which we now live. Thomas Kuhn's observation about paradigms might itself be a social scientific paradigm of history that will soon be overturned by yet another paradigm; Michael Foucault's critique regarding the social/political origins of knowledge must itself be placed in a social/political context.

Conclusions

The Polanyi dilemma becomes particularly poignant when considering, as the French psychoanalyst Lacon did, the act of self-reflection. When one is attending to oneself in a mirror, one is attending back (in Polanyi's terms) to that from which one attends. Similarly, the subject is observing himself in the mirror when any organization attempts to study and understand itself—whether it be by means of management information, program evaluations or organization development initiatives. Yet, the base from which one is attending can never be the subject of analysis, unless the base itself is changed. If the base is changed, then the new base will still remain elusive and incapable of simultaneous review. Thus, an organization that brings in an outside consultant to study its culture will be subject to the particular perspectives (including distortions) of the consultant's own culture.

To turn around and study the consultant's culture in order to gain a better perspective on the consultant's report regarding one's own culture would require the hiring of yet another consultant to study the first consultant, or would require that the client organization study the consultant's culture. The first alternative would lead to infinite external regression (a consultant for the consultant for the consultant, ad infinitum); the second would lead to a never-ending internal regression (like looking at mirror images of mirror images of mirror images, ad infinitum). Hence, according to the constructivists, one can never obtain an "objective" assessment of an institution, even with the help of a skilled and honest external consultant.

ⁱ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989, p. iix)

ⁱⁱ Kellner, 1989, p. 2.

ⁱⁱⁱ Thomas Kuhn (1962)

^{iv} Peters and Waterman, 1982.

^v Andreas Huyssen (1987, p. 217).

^{vi} Frederick Jameson (1991)

^{vii} Peter Drucker (1989).

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- viii Peter Vaill (1989)
ix Eisler, 1987
x Gilligan, 1982;
xi Belenky, et al, 1986).
xii Toffler (1971, 1980)
xiii Mark Edmundson (1989, p. 63)
xiv Edmundson (1989, p. 63)
xv Frederic Jameson (1991, p. 198)
xvi Milton Rokeach (1960)
xvii William Perry (1970)
xviii Ernest Becker (1971, p. 139)
xix Berger and Luckmann (1967)
xx (Gilligan,1982; Belenky, et al,1986).
xxi Michael Polanyi (1967)