



Lesson: Traditions in Political Theory: Postmodernism

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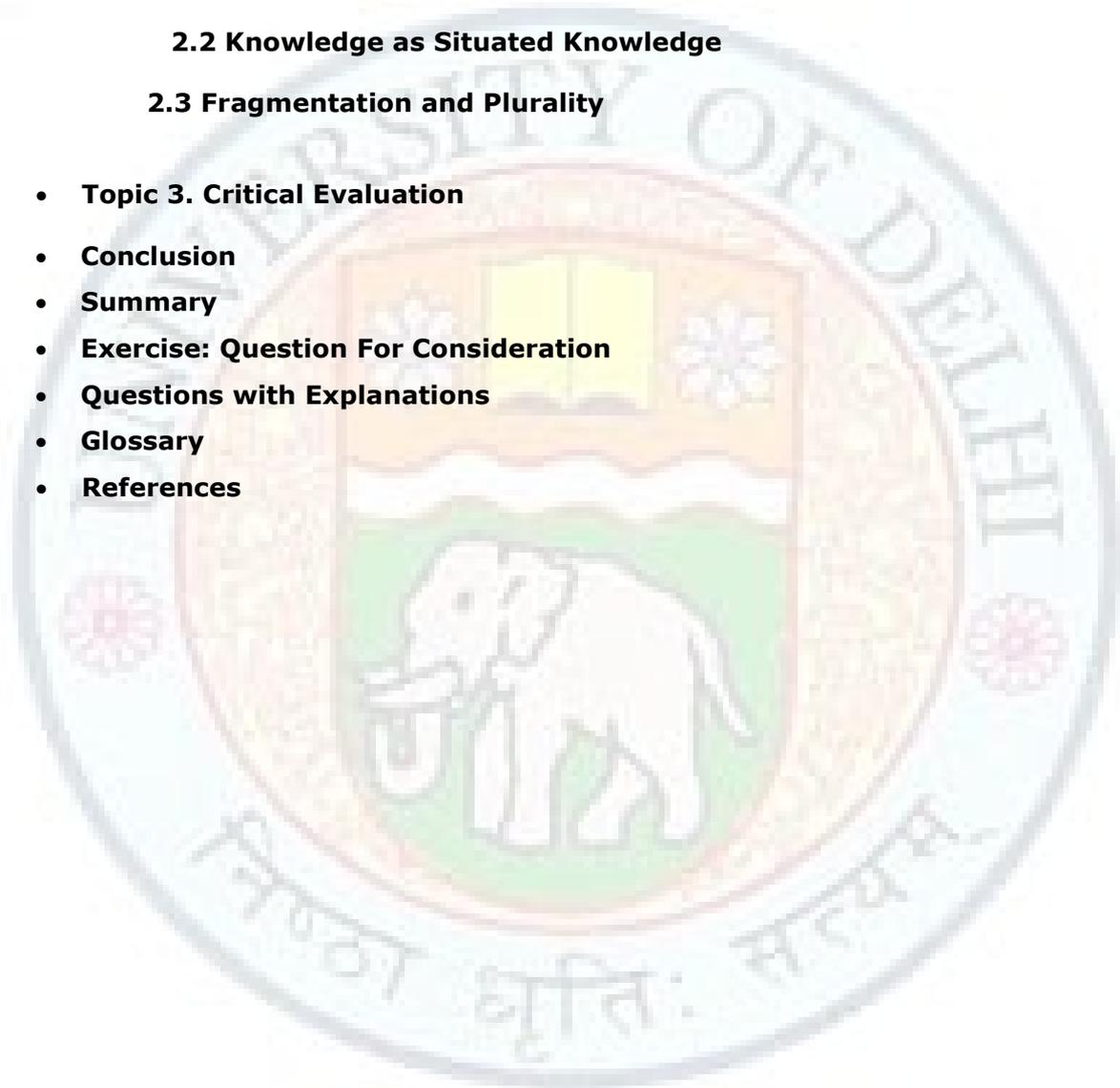
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Traditions in Political Theory: Postmodernism

Introduction

Post modernism like feminism can be seen as a historic moment in its capacity to challenge the hegemony of the Eurocentric and modernist discourses thereby yielding space to inclusion of numerous experiences, interpretations and understandings coming from different quarters. It stands for varied understanding of its own context. To arrive at unanimous and agreeable definition of postmodernism is very difficult. Scholars engaged in this field themselves deny the possibility of attaining any clear meaning and definition. In fact there is some sort of confusion and slipperiness associated with the term.¹ However, generally postmodernism signifies some kind of shift from the dominant rationalist modernist empirical universal model to more localised fragmented and decentralised understanding of the world. Popularised in 1970, it took the shape of a movement affecting literally all faculties of knowledge and creativity. Visible influence can be noticed in architecture and arts in form of negation of rational functionalism and emphasis on unfamiliar. Similarly there are notable difference in the approach and orientation of postmodern scholars² compared to their predecessors in other disciplines like philosophy, political science, anthropology, feminist studies, literature etc. So on the one hand, there is repudiation of hegemonising universal projects; on the other hand there is recognition of diversity and plurality. In recent decades categories like human nature, universal reason and rational autonomous subjects have increasingly put into question.³

Value Addition: Did You Know

It is important to understand modernity in order to infer the critique that it leads us to. Modernity generally refers to the developments related to science, technology, industrial production etc. in the 17th, 18th and 19th century. It correspond to simultaneous changes in the society, culture, way of living etc. that were based on ideas of enlightenment such as rationalism, individualism, humanism, liberal democracy and secular culture. Modernism is often evaluated in contrast to earlier state of the world and society. It was seen as heralding a new age of reason and scientific progress.

According to Jane Bennett the usage of postmodernism can be summarised under three headings:

¹ Alvesson, Mats (2006) Postmodernism, Open University Press.

² Many of the scholars that we label as postmodernist have themselves rejected their categorization as so.

³ Mouffe Chantal(1996) "Democracy, Power, and the "Political" in *Democracy and Difference; Contesting the boundaries of the political* edited by Seyla Benhabib, Princeton university Press, Princeton, New Jersey, p. 245.

(1) as a sociological designation for an epochal shift in the way collective life is organised (from centralised and hierarchal control towards a network structure);

(2) as an aesthetic genre (literature that experiments with non-linear narration, a playful architecture of mixed style

(3) as a set of philosophical critiques of teleological and/or rationalist conceptions of nature, history, power, freedom and subjectivity.⁴

Topic 1. Modernism and Postmodernism

Modernity denotes the transformed time and society succeeding the feudal agrarian medieval history. The precursor or the catalyser has been the Enlightenment Movement (c.1650-1800) and Renaissance. Modernity caused the alteration of then existing traditional, superstitious society to an industrial, innovative and a secular one. This nascent age rode on the newly created wave of science and reason, therefore bringing in industrial revolution and capitalism. New discoveries and inventions were made in the field of Science and new paradigms of knowledge were discovered in social sciences. For example, Ptolemaic view of universe was replaced by the one advocated by Copernican, reason and science started interrogating the literal truth in the bible, revolutions happened thus expanding the suffrage rights marking a major shift in all most all aspect of that time society.

All the tenets of modernity have become foundational in the creation on the new age society and its institutions. For example, it is with this particular phase that the ideas of universal objective truth, universal principles guiding our life, search for homogeneity etc were established. Democracy became the political ideology to sanctify the project of modernity. Underpinnings of modernism have projected western culture as the hallmark of reason and rationality. Reason is universalized; progress is conceived as a linear process, claims of infallibility are maintained. This freedom from orthodoxy-or the freedom to question, ad explore new ideas- is indeed a great achievement of modernity. Modernity opens up the world and brings intense dynamism, arouses tremendous vertical/horizontal mobility, and gives us a wide-ranging exposure.⁵ Modernist political theorists like Machiavelli, Montesquieu, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Voltaire and many others charted a revolutionary new beginning marked by representative democracy, rational pre-eminence, formal equality etc. Immanuel Kant's assertion of autonomy of individual beings strengthened the emancipatory quest of modernity. These are some of the ways in which modernist or rationalist discourses have superimposed their power and maintained themselves.

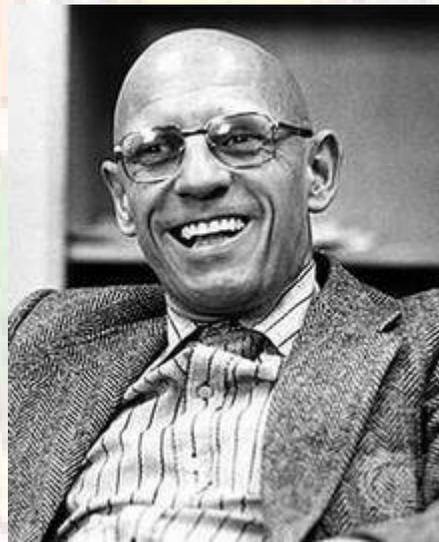
However, gradually the paradoxes, pre-eminence and universality of this consignment have been questioned. Scholars all over the world have increasingly defied the empty promise of modernity of delivering emancipation. One of the acute critique of modernity, Alasdair Macintyre (though not a postmodernist), in his book *After Virtue* states that it is in the later seventeenth and eighteenth century that Northern European culture adopted the Enlighten assignment projecting the modernity as unquestioned discourse. Modernity did not come to all parts of the world in amiable way. For example, the experience of colonial modernity- because of its innate violence, asymmetry and

⁴ Bennett, Jane (2004) "Post Modern Approaches to Political Theory" in *Handbook of Political Theory*, edited by Gerald F. Gaus and Chandran Kukathas, Sage Publications, London, California, New Delhi.

⁵ Pathak Avijit(2006) *Modernity, Globalization and Identity*, Aakar Books, Delhi, p.13.

exploitiveness, and its arrogance and scepticism towards our own cultural practices—was often traumatic.⁶ Consequently, the project of modernity has increasingly become a site of rigorous intellectual debate and has been interrogated with considerable amount of suspicion. No doubt, therefore most of the core ideas of modernity like science, development, nationalism etc are in question. Modernity is extremely centralising in the sense, it sets certain ideas as desirable and set them as parameters leaving no room for the fragments and differences. It overemphasised machinery, market, technology in order to achieve the control of outer world with the misconception that everything is winnable. It loads the entire project of modernity with utmost arrogance for itself and despicable ignorance for those who do not fit its schema.

It is against such Eurocentric and patriarchal claims of modernism that discourse of postmodernism has stood up and exposed their falsity. Post modernist scholars diligently display the banality of such claims. Some of the examples are writings of Michael Foucault, Herbert Marcuse, Francois Lyotard, Luce Irigaray, Jacques Derrida, Richard Rorty etc.



Michael Foucault,

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michel_Foucault

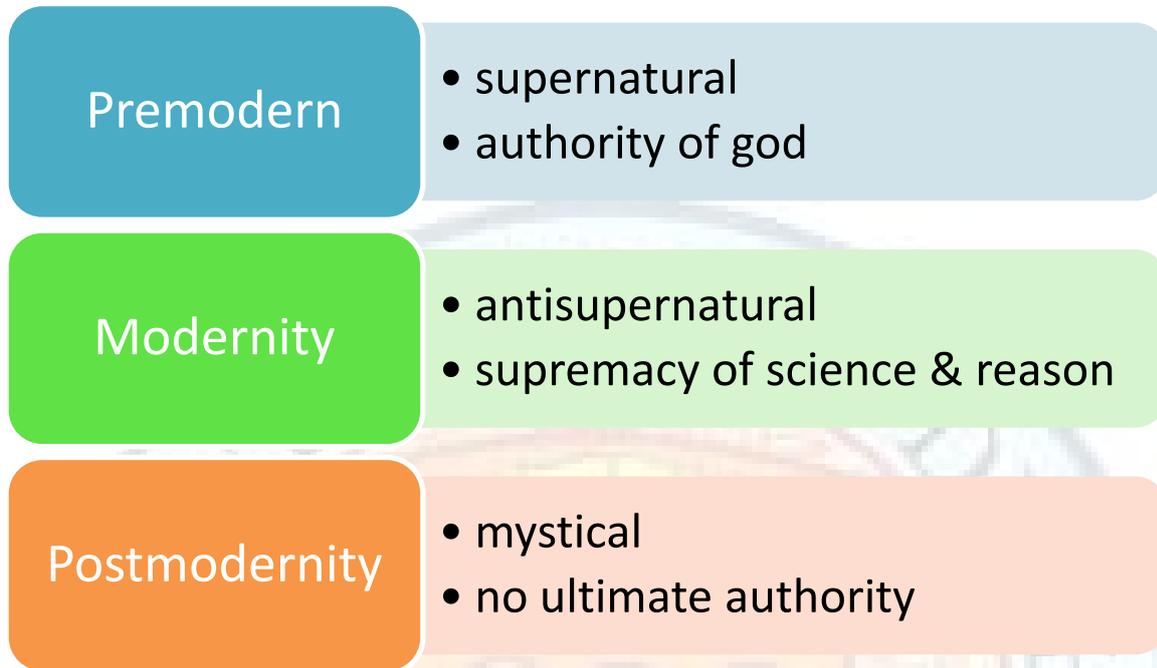
Friedrich Nietzsche's near refutation of Enlightenment ideas most closely exemplifies much of what is meant by postmodernism.⁷ His works project him as the first proponent of postmodernism.⁸ His ideas on the death of morality, the illusion of progress, the

⁶ Ibid, p.11.

⁷ Brown, Stephen, (2002) "Postmodernism" in *Contemporary Political Concepts A Critical Introduction* (Eds). Georgina Blakeley and Valerie Bryson. Pluto Press, London, Sterling P. 56

⁸ Nietzsche's writings is seen as epitome of all ideas represented by postmodernism, important of them are—*Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), *The Genealogy of Morality*, (1887), *The Will to Power*, *The birth of a Tragedy*, (1872) *The Gay Science* (1882).

impossibility of the truth and objectivity and the inconceivability of universal rationality makes him inaugurate the age of postmodernism.⁹



Source: self creation; Pushpa Kumari

Topic 2. Prominent Themes in Postmodernism:

There are some prominent ideas that can be found woven in the postmodern thoughts: denunciation of metanarratives or grand theories, knowledge as situated knowledge (the discussion on truth, objectivity and contingency), fragmentation, diversity and pluralism, the concept of rhizomatic politics etc. However all these themes are overlapping and follow each other.

Topic 2. 1 Metanarratives

Metanarratives stands for a definitive interpretation of events in history that shows a happy ending with progress. It can be defined as an overarching theory about the way world operates, a story about the fundamental character of the natural-social universe.¹⁰ As a universal theory, it tells about the basic character of the natural world. Most of our classical treatises by Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hobbes, including Marx have been oriented to outline these foundational features. They try to explain the world in terms of a coherent existence that is made intelligible to us when understood with help of the some foundational theories as proposed by such philosophers. Meta narratives are of crucial importance as they are examined with the greatest suspicion by the postmodern

⁹ Brown, Stephen, (2002) "Postmodernism" in *Contemporary Political Concepts A Critical Introduction* (Eds). Georgina Blakeley and Valerie Bryson. Pluto Press, London, Sterling, P. 56.

¹⁰ Bennett, Jane (2004) "Postmodern Approaches to Political Theory" in *Handbook of Political Theory* edited by Gerald F. Gaus and Chandran Kukathas, Sage Publication Ltd. London, California, New Delhi. P. 48.

scholarship. From the time human beings gained consciousness, people have been using some big stories to create an order and maintain their interests in the society. Interestingly, it has been the powerful who have recited these stories over and over again so that the status quo can be maintained and at the same time these arrangements should look natural also! Within political theory, metanarratives have been used to help legitimate a theory's claim about authority, the state, citizenship, freedom, rights, etc.¹¹

Postmodernists defy this perception of universalism stating there can be no universal answer to the question of how should we live and make sense of our world. No theory carries the transcendental truth that can alone make sense of the world. In other words there can be no singular and simpler way of interpreting the historical process. Also, the perception that the world is moving towards some kind of progress governed by some kind of absolute reason under the mastery of human beings is false. In fact, scholars like Foucault saw history as series of discontinuities, with no hint of true progress. Complexities are inherent in the world and the societies we live in. People perceive their world based on their experiences and as the world is plural, there has to be various ways and modes of understanding the world. Deleuze and Guatarri refer to the concept of 'deterritorialization' to explain this fluidity and unsettled nature of human subjectivity in contemporary times.

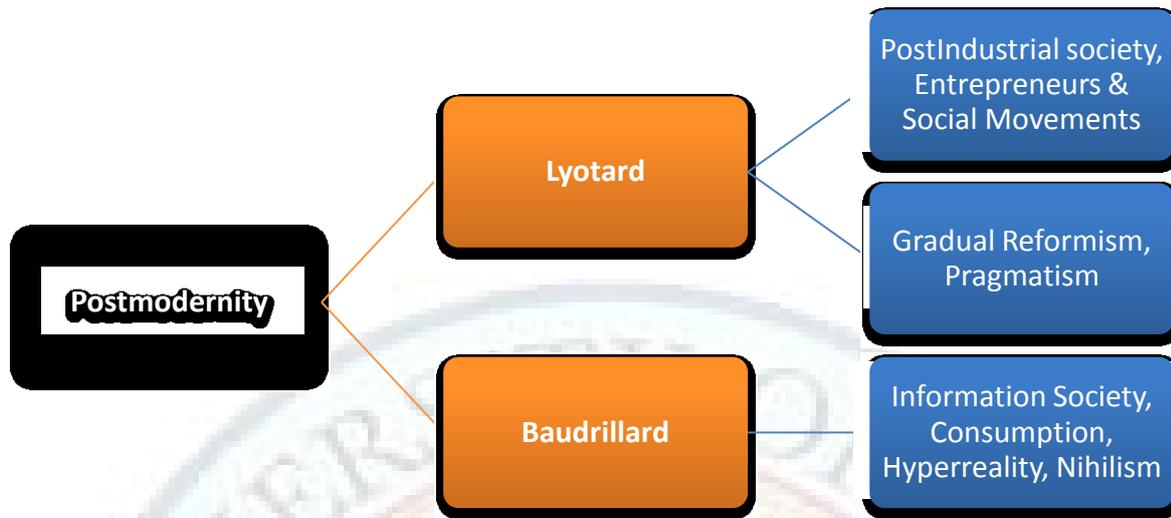
In fact, so diverse is the world that we can never fully comprehend it. Human being along with the other elements of this cosmos is part of the ongoing transitions between being and becoming. As Derrida points out that though humanity is a wondrous material manifestation, yet it cannot be fully in charge of these transitions. In fact, it will be foolish to even attempt to do so. The presumption that human beings control what is perceived as development in world is mistaken. On the other hand, human beings are just the vehicles or witnesses of unregulated unpredictable manifestations around us. Derrida differentiates between being and becoming. Becoming is what makes possible any progress or improvement towards an ideal in political life.¹² The nature is fertile with newer possibilities and compositions, forces and energy so forth unknown or unthought-of. And even with its entire potential, enlightened human mind, aided with the technological sophistication, yet cannot tame it and nor should it attempt to do so. Order is not the natural state of being, rather, the chaos is. Randomness is in the very nature of everything that constitutes the cosmos. The world is in flux, constantly moving, reshaping itself. The philosophers of science such as Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers depict the nature as gestating limitless creativity and novelty. They believe that even in the most complex and indeterminate states, the nature retains a kind of intelligibility and has room for both, the law of nature and novelty and creativity.¹³ Therefore eloquent theories with its grand claims of knowing and mastering the world may not help, as nothing is stable. At the best we can make certain observation or conjectures. This proves the subjective or contingent nature of knowledge itself.

¹¹ Bennett Jane, (2004) "Postmodern Approaches to Political Theory" in Gaus, Gerald F. and Chandran Kukathas Handbook of Political Theory Sage, London, Thousand Oaks, Newdelhi.pp.46.

¹¹ Ibid, pp.48.

¹² Ibid. p.50.

¹³ Quoted in Bennett Jane, (2004) "Postmodern Approaches to Political Theory" in Gaus, Gerald F. and Chandran Kukathas Handbook of Political Theory Sage, London, Thousand Oaks, and Newdelhi. p.50.



Understanding of post modernity by two important thinkers of this brigade

Source: Self creation: Pushpa Kumari

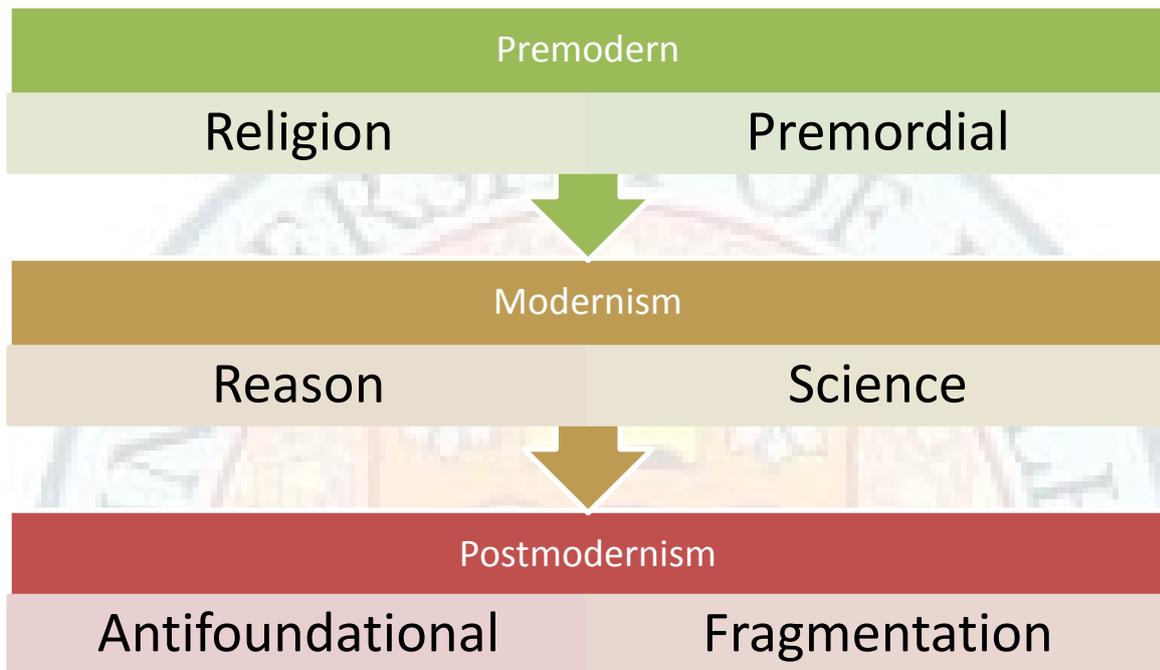
In his book, *The Post Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) Jean-Francois Lyotard rejects all grand narratives and the claims of enlightenment such as the knowability of the science, the progress of the world and the possibility of absolute freedom. Interestingly, Lyotard identifies the postmodern condition with incredulity towards metanarratives. It also symbolises rejection of idealism. Lyotard calls for more alertness to our difference, diversity and multiplicity of goals and desires. Postmodernism is characterised by three ambivalences by Lyotard;

- a). ambivalence in the sense that its products offer both good and evil, (the nuclear technology also brings with itself the danger of devastating nuclear bomb)
- b). ambivalence in terms of high culture and popular culture,
- c). third ambivalence is around the term itself as post modernism does not signify end of modernism but a new type of thinking in relation of modernism.

Richard Rorty stands for anti foundationalism, therefore rendering all those theories explaining essentialist nature of human beings and the world in which they live as futile exercise. Instead, he pleads for adopting of those ideas or values that have a larger cause to serve with practical reasons. For example, Rorty says, while invoking causes such as human rights we should not fall back to the debates about origin of human rights in the nature of human being. On the contrary, we should accept and propagate such idea for their pragmatic benefit. In this regard, he also proposed 'human rights culture' that negates all talks of foundationalism but takes on a practice because of its utility for larger masses.

Ethics, religion, metaphysics, morality, Marxism that classify as metanarratives has been rebuked by postmodernists. Any attempt towards a universal theory or a particular view of the human subject has been outwardly rejected. Such faculties of knowledge were

identified as oppressive and exclusionary as they portrayed the dominant voices only. Other marginal voices were always lost in anonymity and unrecognition. In that sense, history is also the history of the powerful and mighty. In fact language, postmodernists say, is used as a tool to dominate and control. This view is also in the centrality of the subaltern school of thought that tries to reread history from the perspective of the excluded and those who were rendered irrelevant by the makers of history. Boudrillard give us example of our life being manipulated by such force as media that bombard images on us resulting in our abstraction from the reality.



Characterising Features of Pre-modern, Modern and Postmodern Political Thought. Source: Self Creation; Pushpa Kumari.



Herbert Marcuse, Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Marcuse

Topic 2.2 Knowledge as situated Knowledge

All forms of postmodernist assertion challenge the objective attempt to explain the reality. There is rejection of the quest for an objective truth behind subjective

experiences.¹⁴ The readings of history indicate the trajectory of human progress mostly as monolithic and linear. Wider perception is that we will be able to move forward by help of scientific knowledge and the objective truth. Postmodernists attack such projections. They claim that there is no universal truth, no objective value or given reality. Instead, there is multiplicity of truth, as there are numerous people with their own contextual realities and values.

People understand and interpret the world from their own vantage point. This implies that the perception of ideas and things of one community may not be the same for another community. Also, no one can prove that any particular perception is exact or absolute as it is mediated by so many things as social, cultural, political context, historical legacy, religious practices, ideological moorings, customs and traditions, geographical location, climate, to mention a few. Most of the scholars engaged in the standpoint theory share this view.

Postmodernism stands as a challenge to many established modes of understanding. In that sense it questions certainty, objectivity, universality and hitherto all knowledge that tells us that we are moving towards some kind of progress, development and coherence. Within political theory critics see postmodernism as a rejection of the quest for an objective truth behind subjective experiences. The reason can be best described by the defining idea of Frederick Nietzsche "Will to Power". It shows that the ideas about truth and objectivity are not innocent concepts but are manifestations of human being's hunger for power and control.¹⁵

Michael Foucault's works have been path breaking in showing how there is intimate relation between power and knowledge. In fact he states, in knowing we control and in controlling we know. Writings of Foucault clearly depicts his scepticism towards the scientific or philosophic truth claims of discovering something objectively true about human world. Foucault identified them as historical reconfigurations of knowledge which have been associated with newer forms of power and domination. In his book *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality* he talks about the emergence of disciplinary and regulatory bio powers. Societies have devised newer ways of excluding some who do not fit their purpose like the poor, sick and insane on the name of knowledge. Modern day institutions like the schools, hospitals, sanatoriums, mental asylum, prisons all deploy disciplinary modes of power to make people fall in line. Also the concept of panoptical is the same that fulfils the desire of state and other institutions to monitor, control and do the surveillance. Panopticon is an architectural structure of modern day disciplinary power that craves to observe and normalise. In this context the concept of freedom has also been redefined by Foucault. It may seem that the pervasiveness of power, both direct and tacit bio power, in Foucaultian genealogies leaves no room for freedom. However, Foucault clarifies that the concept of freedom in postmodern terrain should not be understood in classical sense of Kantian idea of autonomous rational will. Rather it

¹⁴ Bennett, Jane (2004) "Postmodern Approaches to Political Theory" in *Handbook of Political Theory* edited by Gerald F. Gaus and Chandran Kukathas, Sage Publication Ltd. London, California, New Delhi.

¹⁵ Brown, Stephen, (2002) "Postmodernism" in *Contemporary Political Concepts A Critical Introduction* (Eds). Georgina Blakeley and Valerie Bryson. Pluto Press, London, Sterling P. 61.

can be redefined by relocating it in relationship with historically situated rationality and human embodiment in order of self-direction against the system of disciplinary powers.¹⁶

Interesting Facts: Panopticon

The idea of Panopticon was developed by 18th century English philosopher Jeremy Bentham. It is a design or architecture to allow a single watchman to observe the inmates of an institution without inmates being able to tell whether or not they were being watched. It brings hidden and tacit way of controlling the behaviour of the inmates. The inmates are bound to act in ways as they feel that are watched all the time. The uniqueness of such design is that it creates a consciousness of permanent visibility as a form of power.

All modes of knowledge including the natural sciences are not neutral with respect to social issues and social values, but they develop in more intimate interaction with their social and cultural contexts, reflecting particular social and cultural values?¹⁷ The myth of assumed objectivity of science has been challenged in 1960s by eminent savants and historians of science like Thomas S. Kuhn, Paul Feyerband and N. Russel Hanson. They questioned the long nurtured faith in natural science and asserted that scientific observation is always and inevitably influenced by theoretical commitments. Scientific inventions and discovery are also selective and targeted, catering to certain specific motives. In fact many post modern feminist scientists have questioned the so assumed neutrality of sciences, particularly medical sciences where agendas are drawn according to discreet interests, realities are selectively invented to corroborate the viewpoints that we want to propagate in the society. The world as it exists is a product of mediation world. All drawings of inside-outside boundaries in knowledge are theorized as power moves, not moves towards the truth.¹⁸ The course of action in science and medicine is directed to gain the social control.¹⁹ Nelly Oudsoorn critically analyzes the two fold process in which mediated scientific concepts attain the status of natural facts. Scientists create the contexts in which their knowledge claims are accepted as scientific facts and in which their technologies can work and then, they conceal the context from which scientific facts and artefacts arise.²⁰ The task is therefore to question all modules of knowledge, their source and implications.²¹

¹⁶ Quoted in Bennett, Jane (2004) "Postmodern Approaches to Political Theory" in *Handbook of Political Theory* edited by Gerald F. Gaus and Chandran Kukathas, Sage Publication Ltd. London, California, New Delhi. P.52.

¹⁷ Fox Keller, Evelyn and E. Longino, Helen *Feminism and Science Oxford Readings in Feminism* (OUP, 1996).

¹⁸ Haraway, Donna. 'Situated Knowledge: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective' in Fox Keller, Evelyn and E. Longino, Helen (ed.) *Feminism and Science Oxford Readings in Feminism* (OUP, 1996).

¹⁹ Kumari, Pushpa "Feminist Critique of Natural Science: The Question of Objectivity", *Women's Watch*, vol.3, Issue I. p.6.

²⁰ Oudsoorn, Nelly. *Beyond Natural Body an Archaeology of Sex Hormones* (Routledge, London and New York, 1994).

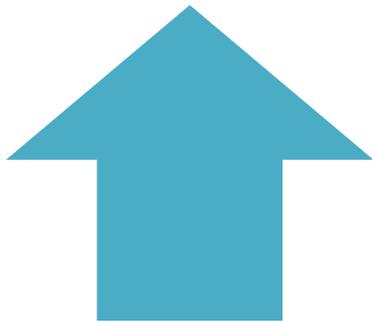
²¹ Kumari, Pushpa "Feminist Critique of Natural Science: The Question of Objectivity", *Women's Watch*, vol.3, Issue I, p.6.

Derrida's idea of deconstruction signifies his approach of challenging the foundations and hierarchies on which the western political tradition and culture have been based. It questions the entire process of accreditation or assigning of meaning to any phenomenon or thing. Deconstruction also exposes how meanings are ascribed subjectively to things that are made to appear like natural, but are not. For example, deconstruction of madness and criminality, feminist and queer studies of gender and sexuality, postcolonial studies of race and nation-these all seek to uncover the human-madness of entities formerly considered natural, universal, or inevitable.²² Derrida developed his understanding of deconstruction in three stage process. The first is to criticise the understanding of the world in terms of binary opposites and rejection of hierarchies of value that we give to such meanings. Second stage is political in nature, where deconstruction is conceptualised as offering the possibility of justice. Third way of engaging with deconstruction is to set it in terms of an impossible but desirable goal like it is impossible to achieve justice but at the same time, it is essential to make justice possible in numerous ways. So popular became the idea of deconstruction as developed by Derrida that, this very method started setting the tone of all philosophical inquiries.

Interesting Facts- Deconstruction

In the schema of Derrida, deconstruction means critically analysing the history of a concept or a theme. It refutes the platonic approach of western philosophical tradition of prescribing the meaning to a concept in terms of binary oppositions positioned in hierarchy (for example the invisible and the intelligible, the soul and the body, the good and the evil etc). It defies the belief that existence is structured in terms of opposites as maintained by Platonism. Also, it refutes the general understanding that these oppositions are hierarchical, where one set of values are projected as worthy where as other set of the binary is devalued.

²² Bennett, Jane (2004) "Postmodern Approaches to Political Theory" in *Handbook of Political Theory* edited by Gerald F. Gaus and Chandran Kukathas, Sage Publication Ltd. London, California, New Delhi. P. 47.



Modern Thought:

Grand narrative,
Universal objective truths
Linear Logic and Reasoning,
Uniformity



Postmodern thought:

Skepticism of grand theories,
Deconstruction,
Decentering of knowledge,
Subjective experience, chaotic
existence

Divergence of Modernism and postmodernism on crucial issues,

Source: self creation; Pushpa Kumari.

Topic 2.3 Fragmentation and Plurality

Fragmentation emerges precisely because of the redundancy of metanarratives paving way to multiplicity of truths, claims and ways of lives. With the explorations in postmodernism, diversity has been started to be seen as something that is worth celebrating. Scholars in this field recognise that everything is constituted by its relation to the other things and hence is plural. Therefore individual and the world surrounding her are also plural. In other words, the human self is not a simple unity, heirarchally composed rather it is a multiplicity of forces or elements.²³ It is in this context that proposition of Chantal Mouffe of the self as 'decentred, detotalised agent' appears very important. ²⁴ In this sense, acknowledging the difference is very important to post-modern understanding. The objective of unanimity and homogeneity is often revealed as fictitious and based on act of exclusion.²⁵ Therefore, recognition of difference must be accorded a positive status.

William Connolly makes very significant intervention in this regard. He visualises politics from the postmodern perspective, naming it 'rhizomatic politics'. It represents that vision of politics which is nonlinear, web like structure, which may not be regulated by an ideal general consensus, but members support common policies, may not all. For Connolly, pluralism signifies pragmatic and partial alliances of social groups with divergent moral

²³ Cahoone, Lawrence (1996) *From Modernism to Postmodernism* Blackwell Publishers Ltd., Cambridge, Oxford. P.15.

²⁴ Brown, Stephen, (2002) "Postmodernism" in *Contemporary Political Concepts A Critical Introduction* (Eds). Georgina Blakeley and Valerie Bryson. Pluto Press, London, Sterling P. 66.

²⁵ Mouffe Chantal(1996) "Democracy, Power, and the "Political" in *Democracy and Difference; Contesting the boundaries of the political* edited by Seyla Benhabib, Princeton university Press, Princeton, New Jersey, p. 246.

traditions and competing ontological convictions. ²⁶Societies are becoming more accepting to the differences and diversity. They are turning more and more multicultural, multiracial, poly-ethnic yet learning to coexist together. Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari also proposed the concept of rhizome in their work *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980) representing non-hierarchical multiple entry point and mutualism in politics.

This penchant for pluralism flows to all realms from politics to arts to architecture. Present time is marked by apparent shift from the stable, unified permanent to the temporary and fluid nature of all categories. The influence in the field of architecture is vivid in the work of Robert Ventury *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966). His architectural style often acknowledged the conflict inherent in the project rather than typical modernist approach of resolving the problem by unifying and homogenising. Heterogeneity and complexity are increasingly being recognised as values and not as aberrations.

Feminists such as Chantal Mouffe believe that the modernist construction and essentialism has resulted in deliberate exclusion of women from the domains of power and visibility. Postmodernism offer us that space where these arrangements can be altered to create a truly democratic world.

Scholars	Books
Friedrich Nietzsche	Beyond Good and Evil (1886), The Genealogy of Morality, (1887), The Will to Power, The birth of a Tragedy, (1872) The Gay Science (1882).
Herbert Marcuse	Eros and Civilization (1955), One Dimensional Man (1964)
Martin Heidegger	Being and Time (1927)
Jean-Francois Lyotard	The Post Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge (1979)
Michael Foucault	
Richard Rorty	Objectivity, Relativism and Truth: Philosophical Papers I, (1991)Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers I(1991)
Jacques Derrida	Of Grammatology (1967), The Post Card: From Socrates, Freud and Beyond (1980).

²⁶ Quoted in Bennett, Jane (2004) "Postmodern Approaches to Political Theory" in *Handbook of Political Theory* edited by Gerald F. Gaus and Chandran Kukathas, Sage Publication Ltd. London, California, New Delhi. P. 53.



MODERNISM

- HIERARCHY
- CENTERING
- CONTROL
- HOMOGENIETY
- OBJECTIVITY



POSTMODERNISM

- ANARCHY
- DISPERSAL
- BREAKING FREE
- DIVERSITY
- SUBJECTIVITY

. Source: self created, Pushpa Kumari

Topic 3. Critical evaluation

Since one can sense an overpowering inclination to dismantle any effort to arrive at conclusions a remote possibility, there have been as many opponents of postmodernism as have been the followers. In doing so, it appears to be relativistic. First of all, even the most adamant critique of modernity would find it difficult to negate the liberating potential of these values. Modernity gives confidence, particularly to the victims of a traditional social order, to rediscover their own possibilities and to create a new world free of fatalism and ascriptive status.²⁷ On the other hand postmodernism dismantle all values and reference points leading to inconclusive relativism. The problem with relativism and anti-foundationalism is that it makes us assume that there is no truth or ideas that may qualify as universal political values for reference. The moment we accept this premise, the entire saga of protests against injustices by the weak and marginalised people fall flat. Resultantly, postmodernism tends to carry with it the inherent danger of being unsupportive to many of the smaller movements that are driven by the values of enlightenment. In that sense, postmodernism is not able to sustain the very same objective of emancipation that it intended to adhere to.

Postmodernism lack coherence and a common understanding that can be shared by all. There seems bleak scope of any affirmative claim arising out of this engagement, as result postmodernist political theory is charged with being anti political and unable to take any ethical stand, except that of resistance, disobedience, refusal of deconstruction's sake.²⁸ For example, many feminists also think that it is not wise to abandon the ideas and ideals of modernity all together so soon, when the women have just started to arrive in the political and public arena.

The de-centred understandings of all categories that make the world meaningful to us make postmodernist discourse appear as incomprehensive and ambiguous. Therefore it

²⁷ Pathak Avijit(2006) Modernity, Globalization ad Identity, Aakar Books, Delhi, p.17.

²⁸ Bennett Jane, (2004) "Postmodern Approaches to Political Theory" in Gaus, Gerald F. and Chandran Kukathas Handbook of Political Theory Sage, London, Thousand Oaks, Newdelhi.p.46.

is not surprising that postmodernism is routinely denounced as nihilistic, immoral or politically irresponsible.²⁹ Post modern literatures have also been criticised for deliberating using elusive rhetoric to avoid self contradiction. Communitarians are also wary of unsettled vacuum that postmodernism creates by shunning stable, local ways of life which is then filled by the global capital and commodified culture.³⁰ The endless task of renegotiation meaning becomes burdensome and one is left lurking in the abyss of relativism. Nothing concrete seems likely to emerge, and a general consensus becomes farfetched! At the same time, the ambivalence of postmodernism is that it also harbours liberating potential by constantly troubling the given.

Within the discourse of postmodernism there are many who do not prescribe the absolute cynicism towards modernity. Many see it as a sort of continuation of the modernity itself with self correction and sensitivity towards new changes in the world. There are some who talk of Post-postmodernism or metamodernism or altermodernism, indicating many reactions and departures from the cult of postmodernism. Scholars writing in twenty-first century have discussed the end of epoch of postmodernism. Like, Alan Kirby in his essay "The Death of Post modern and Beyond" in 2006 talks of new age of digital technology. Some others talk of cultural hybridisation, expanding formats of art etc. In the field of arts, remodernism arrived showing the revival of interest in spiritualism, self expression and other modernist attributes.



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Conclusion

It is the task of social sciences to constantly engage in questioning, and post modernism perfectly carries on this undertaking. It makes most sense when it is understood in dialogue with other theoretical approaches like feminism, liberalism, psychoanalytic theory, critical theory and utopianism.³¹ It acts as a self corrective method enabling us revisit, confront and revise the content of modernist discourses. As result the spirit of

²⁹ Ibid .p.46.

³⁰ Bennett Jane, (2004) "Postmodern Approaches to Political Theory" in Gaus, Gerald F. and Chandran Kukathas Handbook of Political Theory Sage, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, p. 53

³¹ Bennett Jane, (2004) "Postmodern Approaches to Political Theory" in Gaus, Gerald F. and Chandran Kukathas Handbook of Political Theory Sage, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, p.47.

self reflection and quest for individuation is bolstered. The greatest contribution of postmodernism lies in the fact that by emphasising deep diversity and plurality, it catalysed ecological movements, identity politics, homosexual movements, multiculturalism and such other assertions.

Summary

- Generally postmodernism signifies some kind of shift from the dominant rationalist modernist empirical universal model to more localised fragmented and decentralised understanding of the world.
- Popularised in 1970, it took the shape of a movement affecting literally all faculties of knowledge and creativity.
- There is no unanimously agreed definition of postmodernism.
- Postmodernism displays chronic scepticism towards the foundational, deterministic and essentialist character of all modes of knowledge.
- There is repudiation of hegemonising universal projects, universal models or ideas.
- There is a resistance against hierarchy and centralisation towards fragmentation.
- On the other hand there is recognition of diversity, heterogeneity and plurality.
- Modernity (1650-1800) was based on enlightenment and renaissance and universalised the supremacy of science and reason.
- From 1970s gradually in all faculties, modernist belief and value were questioned leading to the postmodern phase.
- Postmodern discourse, no doubt carries liberating potential, yet there are certain problems in it. If we do not agree on certain basic foundational values, it is difficult for states and societies to be organised and function properly. Utter chaos may not be a viable alternative.

Glossary:

Anti-foundationalism: Rejection of the classical conception of explaining everything in terms of human nature, nature of cosmos, certain universal conceptions etc.

Deconstruction: exploring the history, tradition and dichotomy (binary opposites) that have been put behind the meaning of a word.

Determinism: Having essentialising ideas about human nature or nature of world and other phenomenon.

Deterritorialization: Refers to the non fixity of the conceptions, representations and interpretations. This concept is used by Deleuze and Guatarri to refer to the capitalist culture in postmodern times.

Enlightenment: Period in western history stretching from 17th to 18th century characterised by ideas of freedom, liberty, equality, democracy etc and based on rationality and individualism. It is marked by path breaking revolutions on field of science, art, literature, society and politics. Modernity arrived due to the ideas of enlightenment.

Fragmentation: Denotes deviation from a unified monolithic conception of culture, society, politics etc or any general consensus in politics. It signifies the growing

multiculturalism, heterogeneity and adhesion of people towards their ethical, and communitarian beliefs.

Rhizomatic: derived from term rhizome which is a kind of root structure in shape of web; there are bulbs, tuber stems and filament, no single tap root like structure.

Questions for Consideration:

1. Do you think that that the discourse of postmodernism has been able to emancipate political theory from its deterministic, Eurocentric, universal model building approach?
2. Discuss the central ideas of postmodernism in political theory.
3. The strength of postmodernist political theory also harbours the inherent dangers of making the entire project of political theory redundant. Explain.
4. Critically analyse the problems posed by postmodern approach in political theory.

Match the followings:

SET A	SET B
Pre-modernism	Supremacy of Science and Reason
Modern	No ultimate authority, decentred
Postmodern	Scientific discovery
Renaissance	Guided by the supernatural

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Weblink:

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<http://www.cla.purdue.edu/english/theory/postmodernism/modules/introduction.html>

