Postmodernisation and the Formation of a Postmodern Political Disposition

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Abstract
Capitalist restructuration in advanced capitalist societies – the principal force of postmodernisation - causes socio-cultural displacement. This displacement causes a reorientation or restructuration of traditional norms and values which were previously dominant. Such displacement is conducive to the development and salience of postmodern dispositions. These postmodern dispositions have been mediated by the effect of engagement with the dominant capitalist-liberal combinations of these societies. As a result of this engagement, postmodern dispositions become salient in a mediated form – the postmodern political disposition (PPD). Politics’ engagement of the postmodern political disposition now conditions the strategies politicians and parties are likely to pursue.

In this paper I suggest that the postmodern political disposition has three main features. First, a sceptical or agnostic disposition toward epistemology and foundational meta-theoretical narratives. Second, an emphasis on the themes of contextuality, contingency and difference. Third, a commitment to pragmatism and pluralism which favours post-traditional political practices.
Introduction

Capitalist restructuration causes socio-cultural displacement in advanced capitalist societies (ACS). This is what we understand as postmodernisation. This displacement causes a reorientation or restructuration of traditional norms and values which have been previously dominant. The political consequence of this displacement has been to condition the strategies politicians and parties are likely to pursue.

This paper will suggest that as a result of postmodernisation, politics is conditioned in reference to a postmodern political disposition (PPD). This PPD is politically conditioning because as politics engages – and contributes to – a distinctive combination of dispositions, we witness a directional response. This response is largely one of reconciliation and accommodation to the PPD, in a way which is not antithetical to the dominance of the liberal-capitalist socio-economic formation. In the United Kingdom this has been clearest in connection with a reorientation of social democracy within the Labour Party.

This paper will not discuss the emergence of ‘New Labour’ in any great detail; but rather those factors which have fed into the creation of a new political climate. In the first two sections the paper will identify the principle forces which contribute to a situation conducive to the emergence of postmodern dispositions. The sections identify the character of those postmodern dispositions which have become increasingly salient in advanced capitalist societies. However, it should be made clear from the outset that this set of postmodern dispositions which we label as the PPD is not postmodernism as such. Rather, it is a mediated variant of it. It is mediated through an engagement of the dominant liberal-capitalist socio-economic formation which had caused its existence. In this paper we shall identify the character and content of this mediation. However, the paper does not seek to assess what postmodern themes might or should be political. Rather, it illustrates what sets of dispositions have become politically salient, and in what ways.

Postmodernisation as Capitalist Restructuration

Significant trends can be observed in capitalism since 1945. Primary amongst these is the demise of the Fordist-Keynesian configuration which has instituted a period of ‘rapid change, flux, and uncertainty’. As advanced capitalist economies experienced a so-called ‘collective slow-down’, new forms of economic practice, organisation, and social regulation developed in order to continue to secure the accumulation of profit.
We do not propose to intrude upon the extensive debate over the existence of Post-Fordism. Rather, we wish to draw attention to two aspects of capitalist restructuration which are fundamental to postmodernisation. First, the development of cultural industries and the service sector. Second, the globalisation process. Capitalist restructuration has led to the development of various culture industries which have displaced traditional manufacturing industries. In this way, ‘more and more areas get brought within the grasp of the cash nexuses and the logic of capital circulation’. Additionally, we witness the development of the so-called ‘weightless economy’ of the service sector. For example, it is estimated that by the year 2010 the service sector will account for 80% of economic activity in the UK.

Fundamental to capitalist restructuration in the present historical phase is globalisation. Globalisation contributes to displacement in the socio-economic formations of ACS. In combination with the deregulation of the financial markets we have witnessed a ‘dramatic expansion in the extensity and intensity of global financial flows and networks’. This has contributed to a ‘crisis of representation in advanced capitalism’, which defines ‘a high point of that highly problematic intersection of money, time, and space as interlocking elements of social power in the political economy of postmodernity’. In this situation, ‘postmodernism has come of age in the midst of this climate of voodoo economics’.

However, it is important to point out that the globalisation process is the willing construct of the most powerful capitalist societies. Despite the widespread acceptance of the notion that globalisation has imposed constraints on national government’s macroeconomic policies, governments have encouraged the process, through shifting to a more regulatory influence over economic policy. As such, governments ‘have not proved powerless in the face of overwhelming "globalization" of international finance’. Indeed, it can be argued that markets continue to depend upon governments to regulate their behaviour, given that they are unable to provide ‘equilibrium’ for themselves (see .

**Postmaterialism**

Postmodernisation - that is, capitalist restructuration - causes displacement in the socio-economic formations of advanced capitalist societies. It not only throws into question traditional norms and values, it creates the necessary conditions for the increasing salience of postmodern dispositions. One of the most compelling explanations for the development of postmodern dispositions is seen in Inglehart’s theory of postmaterialism.
Postmaterialism attempts to explain changes in values in terms of the level of economic security, in combination with a socialisation thesis. It argues that as a result of economic security, combined with intergenerational replacement, individuals are increasingly likely to focus upon or develop ‘quality of life’ concerns. These concerns are post-material in the sense that they tend to be developed after basic economic goals have been achieved. They concern issues such of morality, justice and self-fulfilment; and include political issues such as sexual and racial equality, environmentalism and animal rights. For Inglehart, postmaterialism represents an emerging shift in values to a concern with ‘individual autonomy, diversity, and self-expression’.

However, there is no linear progression to postmaterialist values in society, as periods of economic insecurity can intervene which reduces the proportion and salience of postmaterialist values at any given time. This is particularly at times of high inflation. Nevertheless, for Inglehart, economic insecurity only has a short-term effect on the increasingly salience of postmaterialist values given the strength of intergenerational replacement. None of this is to suggest that economic issue become irrelevant concerns to individuals. Rather it is that cultural issues become more important. As such, economic issues increasingly ‘share the stage’ with postmaterialist concerns.

The World Values Surveys show that postmaterialist priorities have increased in 18 out of the 20 societies for which there is comparable data. Indeed, in 1970 Materialists outnumbered postmaterialists by 4:1; but by 1994 this ration had become 1.5:1, creating a situation where postmaterialist values are become almost as salient as materialist values. For example, in the UK alone there was a net shift of +13 toward postmaterialist values. We argue that these values form the basis of the postmodern political disposition (PPD), representing a shift beyond the politics of ‘left’ and ‘right’. This is because the matrix of values to which individuals subscribe, and are socialised into, no longer parallels strict ideological dichotomies of left and right.

Value change is most significant as intergenerational replacement occurs. To be sure, a society’s values do not change overnight, and it takes at least fifteen years for a birth cohort socialised into conditions of economic security to enter positions of social and public responsibility. For example, in a recent survey, only 18% of 15-24 year olds expressed a Conservative Party affiliation, in comparison to a 54% affiliation amongst those aged over 55 years (IEA report cited). Value change means that political parties, particularly those on the left, have had to play the politics of ‘catch-up’ in the sense that they
have had to adapt to the new values developing in society. In particular we can observe a shift away from political cleavages based on class, and towards those based on quality of life concerns. As birth cohorts socialised into conditions of economic security enter the electorate, they bring values and priorities which invariably focus less on class. As such, cultural change feeds back into the political system, to which parties must respond. Furthermore, Inglehart believes that unlike in countries predominated by Materialists, postmaterialists may be more likely to act to attain political goals through a variety of means. The survey data suggested that postmaterialists are two to four times more likely to engage in unconventional political action, than are materialists. As far as democracy is concerned in the postmodernisation phase, there is less emphasis on formal democracy such as voting, and more on issue specific forms of public participation. Party political identification is certainly slipping, with most Western European parties suffering from a decline in membership. For example, the turnout in the British General Election of 1997 was at its lowest percentage figure – 71.5% - since 1935. Indeed, the 13th British Social Attitudes Survey found that only 10.3% of respondents had 'very strong' party identification, with 47.4% answering 'not very strong'. Indeed, 96.5% of respondents were not members of any political party. As such, Inglehart believes that people have become 'increasingly autonomous and elite-challenging'. This is in part connected to a shift away from social-class based political commitments toward emphasis on cultural and quality of life concerns.

The growing salience of postmaterialist issues, coupled to a numerical growth in postmaterialists has meant that parties have had to reposition themselves - there being a 'growing tendency for Western electorates to polarize on a new axis, based on Postmodern issues'. This has meant, in the case of the Labour Party, pursuing a thorough revision of its core assumptions and policies, and attempting to 'co-opt the Postmodern constituency'. For example, an examination of Labour Party manifestos over the last decade, shows the percentage of references to social class has declined, and the percentage of references to postmaterialist issues having increased. By 1997, there were 44 references to environmental protection in the Labour Party's Election Manifesto and none to socialism. As such, parties tend to act in a flexible manner; but not necessarily at the expense of their ideological identity.

The Labour Party's 'modernisation' programme is a response to this postmodernisation of political conditions. In short, it is possible to argue that Labour is being 'postmodernised' – in the sense that it is accommodating and reconciling itself to the
prevailing logics of contemporary capitalist relations. Indeed, New Labour’s modernisation programme can be seen as part of a process which preserves and extends the overall socio-economic forces inherent to postmodernisation. New Labour mediates between various positions on the reconstituted political spectrum, and in different areas. This reflects the postmodern political condition to which it has had to respond; a condition which requires ideational and programmatic flexibility and pragmatism. Indeed, the 1997 Labour Party Election Manifesto stated ‘New Labour is a party of ideas and ideals but not of outdated ideology. What counts is what works’. To be sure, the social democracy of Labour’s 1983 manifesto bears little resemblance to that of 1997. But, social democracy has not been abandoned, but reconstituted. Historically, social democracy has mediated between the ideologies of socialism and liberalism, and as such has always been a ‘hybrid political tradition’, whose hallmark was ‘ideological diversity’. As such, it is judicious to argue that the present constitution of social democracy can only be productively assessed in relation to its present content.

Whilst it can be argued that there have been previous periods of modernisation with the party, the transition to New Labour is distinctly ‘new’ in the sense that it has occurred within the context of postmodernising forces which were absent in previous phases. As such, by accommodating and reconciling itself to those socio-economic forces which constitute the postmodernisation process, the Labour Party is being postmodernised. In reorientating its core values and policies New Labour has increasingly come to reflect the content of an emerging postmodern political condition.

**The PPD as mediated postmodernism**

Thus far we have indicated the material foundations of postmodernisation. In this we begin to make connections between these materialist foundations and the various ways in which postmodern thought has gained salience in the social sciences and more broadly, in politics. In short, This mediation, or ‘mutation’ of postmodern thought occurs against a background of capitalist restructuration.

Postmodernism can mean various things. The term has been employed in connection with various ideas and periods over the past century. However, these remain largely superficial connections outside the boundaries of socio-economic changes since 1945. It is only against the background of economic expansion, particularly in the 1960s, that postmodern dispositions as an aspect of postmodernisation becomes intelligible. The
genesis of the debates over postmodernism, postmodernisation and postmodernity come at this time, and are implicated in a range of notable texts (, , , and . The economic and socio-cultural changes narrated by these critics are fundamental to an understanding of the emergence of postmodern dispositions.

Additionally, the development of postmodern dispositions coincides with various political crises of the late 1960s, particularly in the case of France, which precipitated a weakening of attachments to Marxist philosophy, and a shift toward poststructuralism. The work of poststructuralist authors, such as Derrida , brought into question several traditional philosophical assumptions; particularly dispositions toward the objectivity of knowledge. This shift in emphasis was partly responsible for the development of the themes of ‘difference’ and ‘contingency’. In this way, the emergence of ideas which constitute postmodern dispositions have coincided with a historically specific moment of capitalist expansion in advanced capitalist societies.

One of the consequences of this shift in philosophical orientation has been to turn discourse away from reductionist economic questions, and toward issues of power related to language, consciousness and psychoanalysis. The development of postmodern concerns with diffuse centres of power, combined with the development of forms of political action on multiple levels the potential for a shift in political discourse – territory which had largely been left untouched by both traditional philosophy and mainstream political parties. This is evidenced by the development of what are commonly known as ‘new social movements’. In combination with the political events of 1968 in France, several theorists turned their attention away from orthodox structural Marxism, and toward political movements which gave recognition to such areas as feminism, environmentalism and homosexual rights.

Whilst the accumulation of profit continues to characterise capitalism, the means by which this is achieved is increasingly different from those used in the modern era. In this case, the processes which feed into capitalism are discontinuous. In the same way, ACS may still be broadly characterised as liberal. Nevertheless the content of this liberalism – specifically as it engages in political discourse – is discontinuous. Specifically, as capitalist restructuration produces displacement across most fields of interaction, liberalism has engaged in a more fluid philosophical discourse which is conditioned by elements of postmodern thought. This is particularly seen in the weakening of attachments to the principles of the Enlightenment; namely, Reason, Progress and Universalism.
The character and content of these capitalist-liberal conditioning forces are sufficiently different to be termed postmodern. They are, put simply, forces of postmodernisation. Thus, whilst it may not be possible to admit the concept of postmodernity for some time to come, it is quite clear that forces of postmodernisation are operative. Suffice to say that a broad range of critics accept that some significant historical transition is probably occurring. Gray, for instance, says that we live in a ‘no man’s land between the late modern age and early post-modernity’. Additionally, Gibbins and Reimer (1999) argue that it is now more useful to describe advanced capitalist societies as postmodern, rather than modern, given the nature and extent of change – not least globalisation. As Kumar (1995) has put it, the ‘contemporary world may not be simply or only post-modern; but post-modernity is now a significant, perhaps central, feature of its life, and an important way of thinking about it’.

Displacement does not always mean a radical break or rupture; but more often a modification or reconceptualisation of ideas within the overall context of the capitalist-liberal formation. Purer, or more radical forms of postmodern thought have been mediated by an engagement with the established traditions of this formation. For example, Pangle has commented that ‘Postmodernism at its least dangerous is the incoherent, if humanly understandable, attempt to preserve some of the attractive consequences of humanistic Enlightenment rationalism while putting a knife into the heart of that rationalism’, . In regard to politics, postmodern thought has thus been manifested in terms of a PPD. This is clearly manifested in the various discussions as to the nature and purposes of the social sciences in contemporary contexts.

Nevertheless, it can be argued that the increasing salience of postmodern ideas has not been responsible for creating a debilitating situation in which relativism and scepticism prevail. Instead, in many ways, postmodern ideas have opened up debate across disciplines, making them aware of new concerns which have traditionally been left untouched by modern social science. As such, it has been argued that the postmodern approach has served to ‘attune’ social scientists to their positions which ‘encode and conceal value positions’. This attuning of the social sciences to postmodern dispositions does not necessarily become debilitating or divisive - but only under certain circumstances. In political terms it becomes debilitating when scepticism and relativism obscure and frustrate the decision making process. More extreme or radical versions of postmodern ideas which are solipsistic, anarchistic or nihilistic have not become salient in the field of
political engagement. As such, for the most part, prominent critics sympathetic to the postmodern political disposition have reconstituted their epistemological beliefs in a way which do not usually seek to refer to absolute truth or knowledge.

Thus, whilst there are important concerns about the potentially debilitating effects of certain postmodern ideas, it is wise to give recognition to what they have contributed to contemporary social enquiry. Primary amongst these contributions is a heightened self-awareness of the values and uses to which critical enquiry is put. As such it is possible to have some sympathy with the view that the rise of postmodern dispositions in the social sciences can be perceived as a essentially liberating tendency. It has opened up much debate, and has created the basis for interdisciplinary collaboration which has been previously absent. In this way, postmodern dispositions are not, of necessity, destabilising, but augment social scientific creativity.

The sets of ideational change in philosophy and social discourse more generally may contribute to a burgeoning sphere of communicative interaction. This may at least contribute to the formation of conceptions of alternative historical systems and ideas upon which they are to be based. In this sense, various postmodern dispositions in should not be regarded as debilitating because by largely abandoning the commitment to historical closure and its associated discourse, it has created the basis for political engagement conceived as ‘a vast argumentative texture through which people construct their own reality’.

It may even be possible to develop and argument which views the postmodern disposition as having been responsible for generating new concerns which had been previously neglected by both philosophers and politicians. As such, there is some doubt as to Habermas’s proposition that the postmodern disposition is essentially neo-conservative because it is anti-foundationalist, and thereby prohibits the development of a theory which gives reasons for moving in a particular social direction. Even if the criticism of implicit neo-conservatism were accepted, it would seem that this only applies in one important respect – if postmodern ideas are accepted and come to regulate social enquiry and activity. This may be conceivable, but would seem unlikely. Despite the emergence of a postmodern condition conducive to postmodern ideas, postmodernism has not come to exert a determining power either in academic or government departments. Only certain types of postmodern dispositions have become salient as they apply to the political engagement, and these are broadly liberal in character. To the extent that these
dispositions have become salient, they may have only come to exert regulatory influence, and do not generally characterise academic enquiry. To be sure, postmodernism may well have been responsible for much frustration and consternation in various academic departments. But, by this very fact it has prompted an engagement with new or alternate positions which require attention, and in this sense cannot be regarded as having been in any way conservative.

The implicit relativity and contingency of knowledge that postmodern ideas display frequently prompts a reconsideration of objectivity in social science. The veracity of the attack on traditional philosophy aside, a more practical concern is evidenced. This is that traditional philosophical concerns are incongruous with an emerging socio-cultural formation. Traditional philosophy and social science is no longer relevant to the social world of which it is a part. As a result of these concerns, those conducive to the postmodern disposition have typically argued against a general epistemology, and favoured a contextual or bounded strategy on localised levels, taking an essentially pragmatic view of politics. As Seidman comments, ‘rival ontological and epistemological claims seem meaningful only insofar as they are tied to practical interests or specific forms of life’.

It is not clear whether many of the themes which constitute postmodern dispositions necessarily mark a particularly radical break with traditional liberal commitments to individual rights and liberty expressed by contemporary liberalism. In particular, it is not clear how far the postmodern political disposition departs from the pragmatism of, amongst others, John Dewey. The very fact that the postmodern political disposition might not represent a radical departure with the discourse of contemporary liberalism is one reason why its has been able to gain influence within liberal democratic societies.

Indeed, despite local departures from liberalism in particular states, the world-system as a whole has been characterised by the association of liberalm and capitalism. This is not to suggest that liberalism or capitalism was always and everywhere the same across the world, but the overarching paradigm - at least for ACS - can be characterised as liberal-capitalist. However, the displacement caused by capitalist restructuration has facilitated the emergence of postmodern dispositions which question not only the hegemonic position of liberal political discourse, but some of its principle ideas – particularly of those which derive from the Enlightenment. For example, the year 1968 is an important departure point for the beginning of a reorientation of intellectual ideas against a
background of – and in combination with - important socio-economic changes. Indeed, these two developments can be seen to have fed off each other by creating a climate in which the assumptions of the modern social, economic and political era were thrown into question - displacement.

We have already argued that only certain types of postmodern dispositions have emerged as a product of various displacements in the socio-economic formation. The reason for this is the engagement of these dispositions against the background of capitalism and liberalism. The engagement of postmodern thought against this dominant combination has conditioned the type of postmodern ideas and issues which have become salient in the social sciences. Engagement has brought postmodern thought and contemporary liberalism closer together. There is a process of reciprocal conditioning present in the interaction between contemporary liberalism and postmodern dispositions. As postmodern ideas become more salient – as a product of their engagement in the displacement of the social sciences – they condition and are conditioned by liberalism, or more specifically, liberal political philosophy. Indeed, the product of the engagement between liberalism and postmodern dispositions is an emerging consensus on specific issues. The consequence of this consensus is the formation of the postmodern political disposition (PPD).

The emergent postmodern political condition frequently combines an eclectic appeal to both the past and the future – with inherited historical contexts combining with emergent trajectories to avoid system ‘bifurcation’. It is not so much a society at odds with itself, and more a society coming to terms with change in a way which is not yet clear to those engaged in this process. Postmodernisation displaces conceptions of culture, particularly those of a ‘common culture’. Common culture can be said to involve both values and norms which particular groups or societies hold and pursue. These values and norms are being displaced, the result being that individuals need not be embedded in just one cultural tradition at any one time, with contemporary societies witnessing the extension of what might be called ‘inter-cultural locationalism’.

If certain aspects of the postmodern disposition were to be accepted there may be a concern that individuals are increasingly no more than contingent and superficial entities. This conclusion is drawn from the appearance of various cultural systems and doctrines increasingly permeating the socio-cultural scene amongst and between peoples that were once separated by time and space. One of the effects of globalisation has been to make
societies a more diverse place to inhabit, by decentering shared national cultures. For example, Gray argues that late-modern individuals must ‘accept deep diversity in styles of life as a necessary precondition of the cultivation of a richer common culture’.

Postmodern dispositions thrive in this new cultural context. As a result, it might be suggested that individuals are not embedded within traditional socio-cultural formations as might once have been the case; given that they are diverse, complicated, amorphous entities whose affiliations are fragmented in a way in which they themselves do not necessarily comprehend. As Giddens has commented, advanced capitalist societies are becoming ‘post-traditional’ where tradition has changed status and ‘people now have to give reasons as to why the tradition they follow, or want to defend, should continue to exist’.

One concern with this situation is that the postmodern disposition – especially in its radical guise – permits and supports a culture of radical individualism which cannot help individuals understand the complexity of the world they inhabit (e.g. . It also raises the political concern that people are increasingly unlikely to act collectively to achieve political goals.

The character of the PPD

Pluralism is integral to the PPD, and has had important consequences for the policies which political parties now seek to develop. For example, one consequence of recognising the inescapable pluralism of the contemporary socio-cultural context is that the discourses of liberalism and socialism – as the regulators of political responses – are abandoned in favour of much more contingent responses. In the literature which surrounds and supports the PPD this takes the form of a distrust of ‘grand-narratives’. In political terms it is usually expressed in terms of ‘pragmatism’. However, contingency and pragmatism should not be conflated with rejection of ideology. Politics’ engagement of this new socio-cultural context results in a PPD which accounts for the contextuality of the specific economic, social and cultural traditions of particular societies.

As such, the PPD contains the principle that it is neither possible or necessary to reject in toto elements of ideological dispositions which form the basis of a society’s history. Within the PPD there are many ways in which these past ideologies retain value, especially in respect of possessing a critical or interpretative force which is nevertheless partially detached from claims to an objective scientific explanation of closed philosophical system.
The PPD does not preclude a belief in the continuing relevance and credibility of ideologies. What we tend to find instead is the view that ideologies on their own do not account for the way in which politics should be guided. This is because ideologies represent particularities within the universal context, and are instances of subjective thought. For instance, Botwinick has advanced the concept of a ‘generalized agnosticism’; whilst Wallerstein has suggested the application of what he has called ‘utopistics’, which is the ‘sober, rational, and realistic evaluation of human social systems, the constraints on what they can be, and the zones open to human creativity’.

Therefore, the PPD treats diversity and pluralism seriously, and also takes account of the historical specificity of thought in the context of actually existing societies. What we observe is an attachment to many central elements of liberal and social democratic thinking, but of a sort stripped of Enlightenment, or decidedly modern claims to universality and foundationalism. On this account, the PPD suggests that ideologies cannot be but particular instances of thought because the term ‘universal’ should refer to the absolute totality of everything - all ideas, all peoples, all events, all time and space. The PPD suggests that it is not possible for ideologies to transcend their subjective status and recommend themselves for universal application. As Seidman (1994) has commented on this issue ‘the notion that foundational discourses cannot avoid being local and ethnocentric is pivotal to what has come to be called Postmodernism’.

The PPD does not seek to ignore or destroy particular cultural contexts, and supersede them with some sort of rational morality which has universal application. The political system, according to the postmodern disposition cannot afford the luxury of arbitrarily preferencing one perspective, or set of perspectives over another. Political communities have a rich depth, or texture to them, and as such prohibit what are regarded as simple classifications of class.

It would seem that for the PPD, the socio-cultural context of any country should be intrinsically bound to the political structure; and politics must always be both responsive and reflective of the totality of relations that constitute the historical context a nation. For example, Gray argues that late-modern individuals must ‘accept deep diversity in styles of life as a necessary precondition of the cultivation of a richer common culture’. Nevertheless, in a situation of reorientation of the terms of political engagement, it is frequently observed that political institutions have remained largely static and unresponsive.
The PPD would seem to encourage the development of political action at localised levels as people become conscious of the problems that surround their particular lives, and the lives of those around them who are effected in similar ways. Nevertheless, as Williams has pointed out, ‘in none of the issues on which the important campaigns have been organised is complete success possible without a radical challenge to the system of priorities of the society’.

Indeed, one of the problems with localised political struggle is the possibility of failure to realise that there are wider structural concerns faced by members of a political community; and that consequently there are responsibilities owed to others who do not share the same sets of immediate interest. For example, Harvey has commented that in ‘clinging, often of necessity, to a place-bound identity, however, such oppositional movements become a part of the very fragmentation which a mobile capitalism and flexible accumulation can feed upon’.

The PPD is not one where ideological perspectives, or as Lyotard calls them, ‘metanarratives’, are imposed. Some critics may go further, and suggest that not only should they not be imposed, they should not be chosen. The variant of the postmodern disposition which has filtered through to mainstream political discourse does not necessarily advocate the more extreme rejection of all ideology. The PPD seeks to give recognition to the historical specificity of ideology – to its essential concreteness – and therefore cannot be seen to advocate a total rejection of ideological legacies, nor some of their central concerns.

As such, it would seem that the type of politics that the PPD recommends is one that fosters plurality, or at least harbours it. This would suggest that the type of political system which is not be based on any one single ideological perspective or factor, but mediates between them in a pragmatic, historically grounded fashion. As Bauman (1988) has put it, a postmodern disposition would promote autonomy and solidarity through a Postmodern strategy which ‘refers to values rather than laws; to assumptions instead of foundations; to purposes and not to ‘grounding’.

As it has emerged, the PPD has had a significant part to play in the development of alternative, post-socialist strategies. This has been evidenced in the ‘New Times’ discourse of Marxism Today. Indeed, Callinicos has suggested that postmodern ideas and Post-Marxism became ‘fused’ in the pages of Marxism Today. Elements of the PPD overlapped those of the New Times discussions, and was part of a reconstitution of
thinking on the centre-left in Britain. These elements combined on various levels to give impetus to the modernisation project within the Labour Party, and in Tony Blair's New Labour Party many of these themes are currently present in what has been called the discourse of the 'radical centre'. As such, 'slowly, irreversibly, and usually without acknowledgement, elements of the New Times analysis have begun to permeate the thinking and public pronouncements of much left of centre politics in Britain'.

The apparent 'fact of pluralism' which characterises new socio-cultural conditions, and is intrinsic to the PPD, therefore forms the background to which political parties must respond. For example, if it is the case that voter's interests and responsibilities are spread ever more widely, then it would seem to follow that a political party pursuing an electoralist strategy, such as New Labour, must accommodate itself to changed social circumstances and appeal to sectors beyond its traditional base. This is coupled to a new democratic impulse amongst the modernisers which argues that 'leverage, not size, is what counts'.

Given this diversity, the dominant forms of claims to truth and universal reason are being revised and displaced in favour of a more contingent approach to political activity. For instance, the trends toward diversification and fragmentation that are implicit in these 'new times' make it difficult for political parties to rely upon large homogenous political bases such as the working class. Political parties, particularly social democratic ones, have had to respond by restructuring or reorienting their ideas to meet the interests of a new politically aware electorate with postmaterialist/postmodern value sets.

To conclude, this section has argued that the postmodern disposition tends to advance a pragmatic, tolerant approach in politics. This approach is an attempt to make politics more sensitive to reconciling people, not only to each other, but importantly, to individual's position within a new socio-cultural matrix. For the PPD, the idea that in recognising that people share in a variety of ideas that are intercultural, necessitates an approach to politics which does not favour any one particular system of thought. One of the theoretical bases of this is that within any political community the moral-political basis centres around a recognition of the importance of pluralism which allows expression of, agreement to, and dissension from, the established socio-cultural context. The PPD - consists of a variegated combination of three elements:

A sceptical or agnostic disposition toward epistemology and foundational meta-theoretical narratives.

An emphasis on the themes of contextuality, contingency and difference.
A commitment to pragmatism, pluralism and the development of post-traditional political practices.

Conclusion

The various forces which have combined to exert pressures on the political sphere are multifarious, but centre around economic and ideational change. Various conditioning forces implicitly imply a degree of causation. Nevertheless, the extensity and intensity of these forces vary considerably over time. With this qualification in place, the postmodernisation process has given rise to identifiable trajectories of change with important political implications.

But this is not to support any version of an ‘end of history’ or ‘end of ideology’ thesis. These theses are problematic in that they are in danger of presenting history in almost a linear manner. To be sure, the postmodernisation process results from a combination of trends within liberalism and capitalism, but this does not necessarily imply historical closure.

Economic changes are significant enough to be characterised as postmodern. They represent a restructuration of the methods by which capitalism accumulates profit. The methods are qualitatively different to those pursued in previous phases, but this does not mean to say that they are post-capitalist; as the pursuit of profit for its own sake continues to be the rationale of the system. If the system retains many features from previous phases, why should we be permitted to label the trajectory of change as postmodern? They are postmodern in the sense that the character of the forces present within that system are discontinuous with the form taken in modernity.

Modernity refers to a particular historical condition with observable economic, social, political and cultural formations. By the same token there is considerable evidence to suggest that these formations have altered. If they have changed in a significant manner, then the concept of postmodernity – and therefore postmodernisation – can be accepted. Postmodernisation refers to those processes which are conditioning alternative social, economic, political and cultural formations.

Postmodernisation is a process. As such change occurs over time – it is historical. The pace and extent of change can be perceived to have been rapid and radical. But given that postmodernisation is a process we should expect to observe a period of transition. In this sense processes and practices typical of the previous historical phase would be
expected to persist. This is important because the case against the postmodernisation thesis frequently depends on arguments that change is not discontinuous or significantly different to previous phases. Opposition to the concept of postmodernisation rests on the belief that there is either not enough evidence for the process, or that the evidence is misleading in that where it exists it represents restructuring of past processes and is therefore not discontinuous.

The debate therefore concerns the question of when and how it is permissible to characterise and categorise change. This is possible when the forces which constitute a process are discontinuous. An emergent postmodern condition is discontinuous with modernity given that the forces and process which feed to constitute it significantly different to warrant alternative conceptions. Indeed, the evidence for change is significant enough to warrant an argument that not to alter our conceptions would render social science impotent in the face of change. By denying the extent and intensity of the postmodernisation process social science would be unable to come to terms with the social world to which it relates.

It seems apparent that within a reciprocal relationship capitalist restructuration has resulted in socio-economic change, this is a strong conditioning factor within the postmodernisation process. Given the strength of this conditioning, political engagement has tended to reflect the content of this process. Because change has been conditioning by the context of a liberal-capitalist formation it can be suggested that many potential political alternatives to current trajectories of change have been constrained.

However, this is not a necessary historical fate. Postmodernisation is not a closed historical process, rather, it is open-ended. To be sure, change has occurred in a relatively predictable way, given the character of the forces which constitute the process. In this sense, change is ‘durable but not eternal!’ . Nevertheless, postmodernity as a historical phase may be emergent, but this is a transitional phase. This is not to say that history is necessarily engaged in a transition from one type of society to another, but that there is evidence for a process of transition from modernity to a historical phase whose character is not yet entirely discernable, until we have arrived at a point at which historical reflection is possible.

References


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