

END OF MODERNITY?

Smart, Barry. **Postmodernity**. London: Routledge, 1993.(167 pp.) £ 9.99.

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Are we living in, or all set to enter into, a 'new' time fundamentally different from the 'modern' times which originated in the process of Enlightenment and has ever since been the basis of our civilisation? This is perhaps one of the most widely discussed questions in the contemporary discourse all over the globe. The reflections are many and are often ambiguous. The ambiguity could be discerned from the variety of names which are used as synonymous with the 'new' times, such as 'beyond modern', 'high modern', 'neomedieval', 'postindustrial', 'postmodern', etc. These terms lack a proper definition and clearly defined boundaries, except suggesting a vague synonymity with one another.¹ However, the term 'postmodernism' or 'postmodernity' has been gradually gaining more ground as a term to denote the 'new' times.

But, then, what is 'postmodernism'? Is it something beyond modernism? or *against* modernism? Or the continuity of modernism at a 'higher level'? Or is it a break from modernism? Is it a philosophy? Or a social theory? Or a kind of 'culture'? These are questions for which there are no simple answers. A succinct definition of postmodernism (or postmodernity) has, therefore, remained an elusive task and it has become one of the most contested concepts of our times.

The book under review has sought to fill in this vacuum. The book, in the publisher's own words, "is a short and authoritative critical introduction to one of the most talked about and most misunderstood concepts of current times."

Barry Smart, a sociologist from New Zealand with commendable scholarly credentials in relation to the subject² and some of the thinkers in the field³, is undoubtedly one of the best equipped persons to write a comprehensive conceptual introduction to postmodernism. Smart has divided his book into six chapters focussing on four major themes related to postmodernity. In the first chapter he has dealt with different conceptions of postmodernity or postmodernism. In chapters two and three he has discussed the relationship between post modernity and sociology and the relevance and future of the

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1 Some of these terms however have specific meaning. For instance, the term 'post-industrial' is primarily related to the advanced capitalist countries of Europe and America, and came into prominence during the early seventies. A hall mark of 'post-industrial' society is said to be the decline of working class movement as the central agent of social transformation and its replacement by multisectional movements such as peace movement, women's movement, environment movement etc.

2 See, "Modernity, Postmodernity and the Present" B. Turner (ed.), *Theories of Modernity and Postmodernity* (London: Sage, 1990); *Modern conditions and Post modern controversies* (London: Routledge, 1992).

3 *Michael Foucault* (London: Routledge, 1985); "Europe/America; Baudrillard's Fatal Comparison," in C. Rojek and B. Turner (eds.), *Forget Baudrillard?* (London: Routledge, 1993).

latter in the changing 'new' times. The fourth and fifth chapters has been devoted to a discussion on the issues of 'reason' and 'rationality', the principal characteristics of modernity, and the growing resistance articulated in the emerging forms of regenerated religious belief systems. In the last chapter he discussed, before a short note in conclusion, the issues of 'globalization', 'cultural hegemony' and 'cultural disjunctures'.

Internal Critique of Capitalism

Smart has taken up, at the outset, and rightly so, the task of defining what is postmodern. In the process, he has not only thrown some light, through a review of an impressive list of contending views on the concept, on the roots of the existing confusion, but also tried to arrive at a broad working definition of postmodernism. He has identified three major contending views in the discourse. The first view perceives postmodernism as a 'continuity', despite some differences, of modernity (or capitalism).⁴ It is a 'cultural configuration which is constituted in and through complex relationships with a new generation of technologies, which themselves are articulated with the emergence of a new global economic formations'. It is the 'cultural logic' of late (global) capitalism. In this view postmodernism is seen primarily as the cultural expression of 'globalization'. In other words, postmodernism is not something *post*-modernism but related to an advanced stage of modernism. However, there is a second view within this strand which perceives post-modernism as *post*-modernism, i.e., a reconstruction of modernity as a 'future-oriented' project, which includes "post-scarcity order; multilayered democratic participation; demilitarisation; and a humanisation of technology".⁵

The second, and a relatively less significant, view perceives postmodernism as a decisive *break* with modernism. Smart, however, has left the details of this radical departure unclear. Whether the departure from modernism is all pervasive or limited to a few areas has been left in ambiguous. The third is a 'relational' view of postmodernism which views it as a 'way of relating to modern forms of life, effectively a coming to terms, a facing upto modernity, its benefits and its problematic consequences, its limits and limitations'⁶. Elaborating further on this view, Smart proposes his perception of postmodernism.

The idea of postmodernity indicated as modification or change in the way(s) in which we experience and relate to modern thought, modern conditions and modern forms of life, in short to modernity. However, in so far as modernity is itself continually in a state of flux, perpetually in motion, or processual in character the idea of postmodernity must, in turn, be situated in relation to developments and transformations in society, culture and communications, technological innovation and economic production, and political life.⁷

4 See, p. 17.

5 See, p. 12.

6 See, p. 23.

7 See, p. 39.

Smart is very close here to suggesting that postmodernism is neither a clear break nor a continuity of modernism, but an emerging 'internal critique' of it. This observation has greater significance in the background of the reemerging nostalgia of 'end of history'⁸. The fall of Soviet Union may suggest the 'failure' of Marxism, which is the 'external' critique of modernism (or capitalism). But if one claims that as the 'end' of opposition or challenge to capitalism, that is both naive and superficial, for capitalism has now been exposed to a more vigorous and multifaceted two dimensional challenge- in the form of a 'fission' from postmodernism and 'hammering' from 'reconstructed' marxism (s)⁹

The Crisis in Sociology

The changing times, whether one would like to call it 'postmodern' or not, has precipitate a 'crisis' in sociology. Sociology, Smart has argued, is an outcome of an intrinsic belief of the project of modernity that knowledge of social life may facilitate prediction and control. That is, sociological knowledge has claims to ameliorate or resolve the social problems and provide knowledge and technologies through which social forms and practices might be redesigned and reordered. In brief, it has a claim to explaining social phenomena through 'law-like generalizations' or 'grand narratives'.

The emergence of the 'postmodern condition' as articulated in the 'acceleration of economic and technological change; associated transformations in the experience of space and time; a shift from production to consumption as the fulcrum of individual and social existence; the increasingly global scale of economic and cultural form of life; and the (re)emergence of 'regional', 'ethnic' and traditional social divisions', Smart has, contributed to raise fundamental questions on the (modernist) claims of sociology. It is no longer possible to attach any credence to the idea of secure 'epistemological foundations' or of 'political guarantees'.

What is, then, the relevance of sociology in postmodernity? According to Smart, it neither lies in 'interpreting the old' nor in 'changing' it (obviously in the marxian sense). Rather, the relevance of sociology lies in recognizing the forms of knowledge we produce, the interpretations we generate, necessarily

8 F. Fukuyama, 'The End of History?', *The National Interest*, No. 16, 1989.

9 The fall of the communist regimes has not, contrary to the popular notion, brought in the 'end' of marxism as an ideology or a critical 'world view'. In fact, what seems to be strikingly clear from the 'fall' is the end of the *official* marxism(s). However, the 'fall' has simultaneously given a new impetus to the alternate currents of thought within the rubric of marxism. This has resulted in the emergence of a new scholarship whose interest encompasses a wide variety of crucial issues such as the understanding of state-society relationship, democracy and democratic values, development of environment, liberation or emancipation, in addition to a thorough critique of certain fundamental concepts of Marxism itself, including historical materialism. The literature is however scattered and hence difficult to suggest comprehensive sources. For an idea of internal critique see O. Write et al, *Reconstructing Marxism*, (London: Verso, 1990); A. Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989); and, Z. Bauman, 'Let as Cultural Critique of Modernism', *New Left Review*, No. 179, 1989. 'Reconstructed' socialist views on development and environment can be found in *Capitalism, Nature and Socialism*, a journal published from the US.

contribute to the 'social world's transformation', while fully taking into cognizance the fact that the consequences of our collective conduct remain 'beyond our control, uncertain, at odds in many important respects with both our individual and our collective purposes'.¹⁰ In other words, the 'relevance' of sociology is still centered around the notion of 'social world's transformation', but, as Giddens suggested,¹¹ 'without guarantees'. In short, the purpose of sociology is, to contribute to processes of change, not through the constitution of social technologies which might be employed to regulate or re-design social life, but by cultivating critical forms of sociological inquiry which recognizes the implications of the unavoidably reflexive relationship between social analysis and social life.¹²

The postmodern sociology is therefore a form of analysis that lays no claim to totality or universality. This deceptively simple argument has deeper implications with regard, at least, to our understanding of 'emancipatory politics'.

With the rejection of 'grand narratives' and the claim to totalities' and 'universalities', the postmodern strategy of change has been shifted from 'historical laws' to 'human values'. In other words, the postmodern notion of 'emancipation' is centered around 'life politics' grounded in an 'ethics of the personal', which is exemplified by the growing importance of social movements concerned with aspects of 'individual self-actualisation', which in turn suggests a reemergence of moral and existential concerns, which have been largely marginalised under the influence of marxism.

At the end it must be mentioned that the 'relational' view of Smart has tended to emphasize the positive aspects of postmodernism. After a reading of the book one would feel that the sharpest critical views on the concept have marginal representation.¹³ Notwithstanding this, Smart's work is a splendid and scintillating reading on one of the most confusing and controversial concepts of our times.

10 See, pp. 78-79.

11 A. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, (Cambridge: Polity, 1990) 155.

12 See, p.81.

13 For instance, Callinicos, *supra* n. 9.