

John W. Murphy

Does Postmodernism Undermine Politics? (Ar postmodernizmas sunaikins politikos pagrindus?)

Introduction

With few exceptions, mainstream sociology has been aligned closely with traditional metaphysics. For this reason, many critics have argued that sociology is basically a conservative discipline.¹ The focus of study has been to explain and, in many cases, justify the prevailing social arrangements. The maintenance of order, in short, has been the key project of many sociologists.

As an orientation, attempting to understand and bolster the effectiveness of institutions is not inherently problematic. But when this strategy or *modus operandi* is coupled with the social ontology that traditionally has been adopted, many problems arise. To borrow from Dennis Wrong, the message is conveyed that order cannot survive without the aid of a vast system of social control.² Most important is that persons are believed to be dysfunctional unless they are constrained. Specifically, persons can be integrated into society, and treated as normal, only through the influence of profound external forces.

In this regard, most sociologists have been social realists. Examples of this approach can be found in the work of Comte, Durkheim, and Parsons. Realists believe order must have a foundation that transcends the contingencies of daily life, including both existential and political considerations. Durkheim referred to this base as a “reality *sui generis*, while Parsons tied the fate of humanity to the acceptance and preservation of an all-encompassing social system. In each case, the source of order is severed from human action and autonomy.

Throughout the Western tradition this maneuver has been used to reinforce a variety of phenomena, ranging from personal identity to morality. Central to the success of this method is dualism. That is, the assumption is made that particular norms can be divorced from human contingencies and idealized, thereby establishing universally recognizable rules of demeanor. Because these norms are unfettered by human *praxis*, they are thought to be objective and thus provide a reliable base for order. In this way, an Archimedean point is available to serve as a referent for adjudicating claims and evaluating behavior.

In contemporary parlance, a complete or totalistic conception of order is provided by realists. Perspective is passé, because truth is elevated beyond individual and collective interests. Behavioral expectations, accordingly, cannot be obscured by values or other human foibles. Consistent with what Durkheim had in mind, social reality is given a seigniorial status that cannot be threatened even by a corrupt government. Similar to Plato’s Forms, Divine laws, or natural facts, social reality has a transcendent character. Moral or ethical principles are thus able to ward off any attack.

Clearly, realism facilitates the enforcement of norms. On the other hand, however, persons are led to believe that in the absence of a justification that exists *sui generis* norms cannot be either proposed or enforced. Without an exalted foundation that structures and legitimizes interaction, persons cannot confer with others, coordinate their actions, agree on how institutions should operate, or sanction those who violate the rules that are enacted. Realism, as Erich Fromm noted at one time, saves society from collapse, but also diminishes those who inhabit the social world.³ In many respects, realism allows democratic sensibilities to atrophy, along with an appreciation of cultural pluralism. As a result, society becomes nothing more than a lifeless but intrusive abstraction.

The Postmodern Threat

Postmodernism represents an assault on the approach realists have taken to conceptualizing knowledge and order. Heidegger, for example, asks why such a strategy has been tolerated for so long, given the contradictions that are inherent to realism. Nonetheless, daring to question realism has earned postmodernists an unsavory reputation.⁴ For example, they are accused of undermining culture and bringing modern civilization to the brink of chaos. After all, they show no regard for the principles and standards that have allowed select societies to grow and prosper.

With respect to current politics, they are believed to discard the commitments and moral guidelines that have enabled a range of activists to intervene at appropriate times to improve the conditions of disadvantaged persons. Simply put, postmodernists have undermined any valid basis for formulating a fair and equitable social contract.⁵ Habermas has been instrumental in popularizing this critique of postmodernism. According to him and his supporters, giving credence to postmodernism is synonymous with embracing social atomism and accepting the *laissez-faire* outlook on economics and other aspects of social life. And because the philosophy of *laissez-faire* provides no basis for order other than freely chosen contacts, which many conservatives believe are optional, social correctives have no purpose. Indeed, considering the resulting elusive nature of society, where are interventions supposed to be directed?

Nonetheless, broadly defined, postmodernists have had a lot of followers throughout the Twentieth Century. Proponents of dada, surrealism, existentialism, and phenomenology, for example, have rejected realism. Consistent with Lyotard's definition of

postmodernism, they refused to give credence to the "metanarratives"—ultimate referents such as Forms, God, or reality *sui generis*—realists invoke to support knowledge and order.⁶ As described by André Breton, there is now a profound "crisis of the object." The object is no longer hegemonic and cannot be trusted.

Not only do postmodernists refute these metanarratives, they argue these factors are responsible for alienation and repression. For example, installing absolutes to sustain society undercuts personal agency and the need for individuals to act collectively. The fate of society is guaranteed by the presence of metanarratives, but the direction that is taken may be very restrictive. Everyday existence may appear to be a *fait accompli*.

Lyotard summarizes the postmodern position by adopting Wittgenstein's anti-metaphysical stance. Lyotard maintains that all knowledge is mediated thoroughly by "language games." The identities of all phenomena, in other words, are tied intimately to changes in language use. Nothing, not even objectivity, escapes from the influence of interpretation.⁷ Due to the ubiquity of language, attempting to overcome interpretation is futile. According to postmodernists, persons are condemned to confront a world that is always already interpreted.

There is no hope of discovering the usual sources of pure Being. Neither God nor nature is pristine; as Foucault says, both God and Man are dead. Postmodernism is thus anti-metaphysical, because there is no place to go beyond the sphere of everyday language. There is nothing outside of language or interpretation that insures the accuracy of speech or the validity of norms. Instead of trying to reveal eternal truth, claims Rorty, postmodernists must be content with exploring the various ways in which the

world is deployed and understanding the mode of praxis that is operative in each case.⁸ In this way, human solidarity may be achieved in the absence of ontological security. Persons can begin to unite on the basis of agreement or the recognition of various styles of personal or cultural difference.

But interpretation has never been thought to provide a sound foundation for society. At best, interpretations accumulate with no end in sight. Which interpretation is most authoritative? According to Durkheim, this uncertainty breeds anomie. Choices must be made about the validity of interpretations, without any escape from the mise-en-abime of language. Clarity rests on more talk. For realists, this condition is untenable and frightening. Interpretation, for them, is the source of disorder, rather than a remedy for this problem.

Given the framework proposed by realists, postmodernism is a threat to principled interaction. Consistent with Raul Hausmann's view of existence, postmodernists believe that "mankind is simultaneous, a monstrosity of proper and alien parts, now, before, after, and simultaneously."⁹ Contrary to this description, realists object to any attempt to obscure what they believe are cultural universals. Still, the question remains: Does postmodernism preclude the type of intervention that many critics believe is necessary to establish a just order? Is the social contract, accordingly, rendered obsolete by postmodernists?

Despite the charges of cultural bankruptcy that have been levelled against postmodernists, they have been careful to address the issue of order. Although they disagree with realists, taking this position does not automatically warrant the dismissal of postmodernism. Opposition to realism does not lead inherently to anarchy! Nevertheless, a new way of conceptualizing order must be entertained that has not been given

serious attention because of the dominance of realism. This new approach, moreover, does not preclude establishing a fair and just society. All that is really subverted by postmodernism is recourse to the usual "higher forces" that have been sought to avert disorder. Most important, postmodernists are not affected by the fear of spontaneity that realists try to instill in the general public.

A World without Transcendence

Postmodernists lead persons to the place that Martin Buber refers to as the realm of the "in-between."¹⁰ This is the space that exists between the twin abstractions of the individual and the collective. Both of these options, Buber contends, encourage irresponsibility toward others. Portrayals of social life that focus on either of these elements obscure the direct relationship between persons, as a result of emphasizing individual freedom or group cohesion. This direct link between persons, moreover, provides the framework for establishing order and undertaking political action.

Lyotard declares that "no man is an island," and that persons share a common destiny before they decide formally to unite.¹¹ What Lyotard is saying is that although persons interpret themselves and other facets of reality, they do not do this in isolation from one another. Even prior to their birth, persons are integrated into the history of a host of others. As Levinas describes, persons are fundamentally open to others; the "I" has direct access to everyone else. In sum, postmodernists are not atomists.

As many phenomenologists have illustrated, persons are intersubjectively associated and cannot escape from this condition. Even when they strive for solitude, the presence of others is presupposed. In other words, dealing with the other is not optional, a product of instilling

sympathy or righteousness that is derived from eternal moral mandates. An awareness of others precedes all moralizing about the need for persons to exhibit charity or love. Basic to every person is the other. Accordingly, Levinas announces that ethics precedes all speculation about freedom or personal rights.

But what is the sociological relevance of this talk about a basic connection to the other? Postmodernists have demonstrated that realists are wrong about the need for a metaphysical bridge to unite persons. Instead, there is an essential tie between persons, a vital balance that cannot be denied. In short, the self and the other develop together. There is nothing lost, therefore, by rejecting realism and a reality *sui generis*, for the successful use of this abstraction presupposes an awareness of the other. Bringing persons together assumes they understand the process of forming a unit. Absolutes, in fact, are built on this activity.

The social world is not a mystery that is organized by metaphysical props. Social existence, instead, is predicated on the nexus of the self and other. As Lyotard describes, the social bond is a "fabric formed by the intersection of at least two (and in reality an indeterminate number) of language games."¹² Nothing else is needed to engender order. Relative to the usual abstractions, this base is fragile.

Nonetheless, the "in-between" is substantial enough to support metaphysics and any norms that may be relevant. This conjunction of self and other can also be the focus of political interventions. Intersubjectivity enables the association of self and other to be institutionalized and, if necessary, improved. What more is needed to have discussions and implement policies about order?

The Nature of Praxis

a. Human action is not random or haphazard. All modes of *praxis*, writes Fish, are principled, in that they have parameters and an orientation.¹³ Language, in other words, is a purposeful activity that embodies particular rules and semantic boundaries. Every interpretation represents a particular epistemological commitment. Linguistic order is thus always present, although a specific style may violate traditional standards of speech. The controversy over Ebonics is an example of this sort of misunderstanding. Those who are fluent in Ebonics do not speak aimlessly and constantly miscommunicate to one another; Ebonics does not represent the absence of language, as proponents of Standard English contend, but another option.

b. Behavior is not idiosyncratic. That is, persons are not atoms that are closed off from the rest of the world. Any deployment of the world, therefore, is potentially accessible to everyone. But persons cannot be enamored of their own reality to the extent that other interpretive modes are obscured or distorted. Postmodernists address this issue in their discussions of madness.¹⁴ They argue that traditionally psychologists and psychiatrists have been unable to enter the world of the mad, because of their strict adherence to the scientific worldview. This existential region is accessible but masked by what is believed to be the epitome of reason. As a result, little is really known about madness, other than what professional researchers and clinicians have said about this phenomenon.

c. Norms are not relative. Critics of postmodernism conclude erroneously that this philosophy imparts the disastrous idea that

“anything goes.” But this conclusion is unwarranted for two reasons. First, every existential region has norms that are known to its members. The parameters of right and wrong, for example, are delineated for every participant in a particular linguistic community to examine in a variety of ways. A linguistic community, argues Fish, “share[s] interpretive strategies” for identifying and classifying events.¹⁵ Rules are thus regional. The problem voiced by realists is that multiple communities exist.

And second, the human mind is reflexive, thereby allowing persons to overcome their respective constructions of reality and enter other worlds. Because of the dynamic character of interpretation, the mind is not a blank slate or some other inert object. A part of the process of interpretation is reinterpretation, which implies the presence of multiple interpretations. This awareness is the factor that enables persons to entertain seriously claims about alternative realities.

d. Justice is not left without a rationale. Although the typical rendition of justice—derived from *Dike*—has a cosmic base, an abstraction of this sort is not necessary to promote fairness. At the nexus of the self and other prohibitions can be established against alienation, exploitation, degradation, and so forth. Proposing that all persons should be treated with dignity does not have to be sanctioned by God or Natural Law.¹⁶ Without the aid of these intrusive and potentially repressive elements, solutions to ethical questions can be proposed and institutionalized. For this reason, Derrida has begun to talk about neighborliness as an appropriate ethical principle in a postmodern world. Ethics, in this sense, has a human foundation.

As should be noted, postmodernists do not abandon a commitment to promoting communities. They do not leave the world defenseless against attempts to ignore, diminish, violate, or,

in many ways, depreciate the other. If the aim of politics includes supporting old persons, postmodernists do not subvert this task. Nonetheless, the logic for this assistance cannot be attributed to ethereal considerations, but must emanate from discourse. There is no ultimate justification to prevent persons from creating an inhumane society, if they desire such a world.

Politics Without Guarantees

Usually guarantees have been sought to substantiate order. These absolutes, however, have fostered the development of hierarchies and other approaches to marginalizing persons. The expectation is that everyone will strive to internalize these ideals, and those who refuse or cannot adhere to these standards will be pushed to the periphery of society. A by-product of the social imagery espoused by realists is repressive conformity, whereby challenges to these absolutes are discouraged or prevented. Marcuse, for example, refers to this situation as the product of an “affirmative culture.”¹⁷

Postmodernists, on the other hand, promote a rhizomic world.¹⁸ Because no foundation can be attributed legitimately the status required by realism, the various regions of existence must extend laterally. Like a rhizome, order extends in different directions simultaneously without a center. To borrow from the history of art, order resembles a collage. In each case, elements are juxtaposed and arranged without anyone becoming dominant. “Mutually distinct realities,” remarks Max Ernst, are joined in a “fortuitous encounter.” According to these models, cultural differences can proliferate without chaos. In fact, adding different pieces enhances the beauty of the mixture.

But what is the moral principle that guides the development of a rhizome or collage? Simply put, each element in the composite has in-

tegrity that must be protected and preserved. No wonder Buber claims the fundamental rule is “love your neighbor as yourself”, and that everything else is simply commentary on this maxim.¹⁹ The Golden Rule, as it is sometimes called, is postmodern because order is engendered through respect for cultural differences.

Love of myself, despite the uniqueness of my origin and history, can lead to the recognition and promotion of a wide range of other persons. Like me, each person has a unique character that should not be violated. The recognition of difference, regardless of what conservatives say, is not antithetical to social harmony. For Buber, the recognition of difference is at the basis of the Hasidic community he hopes to build in Israel and elsewhere.

Moreover, within the milieu spawned by the rhizome or collage, social critique is possible.²⁰ Although many critics believe that postmodernists do not provide the means to criticize capitalism, this objection is shortsighted. The asymmetrical class relations that are central to the operation of capitalism are anathema to the rhizome. The economic advantages accorded to some persons in capitalism cause a social imbalance that would not be found in a rhizomic order. Actually, capitalism expands because of the violation of the other that postmodernists reject. According to postmodern social imagery, criticism of the philosophical assumptions of capitalism are not only possible but desirable.

Of course, the desirability of social symmetry can be discovered in religious inspiration. Paul Tillich, for example, hoped for this outcome. But the point made by postmodernists is that this mode of association can be established on a less esoteric base, such as the nexus of self and other. Furthermore, the rhizome and collage provide insight into social solidarity that does not require the evisceration of the human

condition; the discovery of morality does not require the suppression of praxis. Persons are thus free to abandon capitalism or any other system that is predicated on social asymmetry.

Postmodernists do not jettison the public sphere. The traditional reality sui generis is gone, but not the place where critiques, policies, and practices can be discussed and enacted. The nexus of the self and other is the public arena, where hierarchy and marginalization can be illustrated to transgress the image of morality conveyed by the rhizome or collage. Any proposals that undercut the symmetry of the self and other, no matter how natural they may be made to appear, can be confronted and tossed aside.

Conclusion

Versions of order proposed by mainstream sociologists have been overwhelmingly realistic. The model of morality that is associated with this philosophy is hierarchical. As described by Parsons, an “ultimate reality” arranges all subordinate components of the social system.²¹ In the absence of the dictates that originate from this exalted source, social coordination is believed to be impossible.

Postmodernists believe this vertical arrangement is justified by dualism that is passé. Therefore, they maintain the only alternative is a model that is tied to praxis. The resulting moral order is horizontal and excludes the element of domination. Any political or economic philosophy, accordingly, that includes subordination can be challenged and rejected. Conveyed by the rhizome are standards of order that are as legitimate as those linked to traditional metaphysics.

The point is that realists do not have a monopoly on models of order and morality. A hierarchy may be more compatible with their eco-

conomic agenda or religious beliefs, for example, but this style of organization is neither natural nor necessary. On the other hand, a model of order that is dialogical, and regulated by the recognition of difference, is not inherently irra-

tional and devoid of morality. Order without a hierarchy, furthermore, does not preclude the use of political interventions to insure that domination does not arise.

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