(Post)Modernizing Contemporary Intellectual Culture[1]

AIVARAS STEPUKONIS

Lithuanian Institute for Cultural Studies
astepukonis@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0003-3757-6620

The article constitutes the second part of a broader investigation into the intellectual culture of contemporary (primarily Western, but ever more global) societies. The main focus is on the avant-garde tendencies of contemporary intellectual culture, also known as postmodernism. Those avant-garde tendencies are generally driven by rebellion and protest against three fundamental orders: ontologically independent objects; established social (i.e., economic, political, cultural, religious, etc.) relations; and the very structure of human perception.

Keywords: contemporary intellectual culture, postmodernism, deconstruction, subjectivism, hermeneutics, scholasticism, cynicism.

In the first installment of the article series[2], I presented an overview of the *general* tendencies of contemporary culture that create conditions for the emergence of its intellectual proclivities. It is time to narrow the field of research, focusing on the *intellectual* life of today, discussing its directions, predispositions, and features. I immediately propose to distinguish two things that are by no means equal: 1) what might be called the intellectual *avant-garde* of this age and 2) the general intellectual traits of the *whole* age. I'll start with the avant-garde, also known as postmodernism.

Thinking at the Frontier: What is Postmodernism?

Whatever it is, I believe it should not be called a "movement," although there are such descriptions in the literature[3]. Instead, it is a relatively frequent recurrence of certain critical attitudes among writers on cultural, historical, artistic, and other humanistic issues.

As soon as one transitions from the relations of time (with modernism) to the collisions of logic (postmodernism *versus* modernism), the postmodernist *post* turns into an anti-modernist *anti*. In general, postmodernism is much easier to define by reference to its negations than its affirmations; it is in the negations that its unity lies. Postmodernism is an uprising, rebellion, and protest against three established orders: ontologically independent objects; established social (i.e., economic, political, cultural, religious, etc.) relations; and the very structure of human perception – an

1 Continuation. Start in vol. 10, no. 1.

2 See Aivaras Stepukonis. "(Post)Modernizing Contemporary Intellectual Culture," 2022.

3 For example, see Ernest Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*, p. 25.

uprising most influenced by thinkers such as philologist Friedrich Nietzsche; philosopher Martin Heidegger and his pupil, Hans-Georg Gadamer; linguist Ferdinand Saussure; grammatologist Jacques Derrida; psychologist and historian Michel Foucault. Here are the consequences:

The postmodernist is convinced "facts are inseparable from the observer who claims to discern them, and the culture which supplied the categories in terms of which they are described."[4] For this very reason, any positivism (the "belief in the existence and availability of objective facts, and above all in the possibility of explaining the said facts by means of an objective and testable theory, not itself essentially linked to any one culture, observer or mood"[5]) causes allergic annoyance. From now on, the outside world as a manifestation of autonomous being is no longer accessible and therefore no longer knowable. Furthermore, not only the present but also the past lacks objectivity.

Man is a *'construct* of history,' his knowledge is a *'product* of history,' unable to 'transcend historical circumstances.' Therefore, for someone like Hans-Georg Gadamer, universal claims, regardless of who makes them and how they are argued, are nothing more than "prejudice."[6] The postmodernist mindset includes biographical, cultural, historical, local, individual, and genealogical components; it is foreign, one might say, averse to the universality, objectivity, realism, and absolutism of thought; in a nutshell, to any form of logocentrism founded on the "belief that there are abstract truths that have basis in reality."[7]

In this way, the myth of the objective world and universal knowledge is seemingly dispelled. There are no things; just people writing texts about things that appear only when written about. Semiotics becomes the queen of the sciences: at first only a modest subdivision of language theory, but later an all-encompassing analytical method. Why not, if "every closed significant whole is called a *text*" and "one can speak of a linguistic, visual, or architectural text"[8]? The given reality, instead of *having* meaning, itself *becomes* meaning, a multitude of meanings. Ontology is transmuted into semiotics, objective phenomena into subjective signs[9].

Hence, the primary task of the thinker is to explain the meanings of texts in terms of the psychological, social, and historical circumstances of their emergence, relations with their authors and with the subsequent generations of readers. Thus, the

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*

6 Edmund E. Jacobitti. "Postmodernism," pp. 732–733.

7 Horst Waldemar Janson. *History of Art*, p. 903.

8 Felix Thürlemann. *Nuo vaizdo į erdvę*, p. 220.

9 Let me quote Gellner's vivid description of this: "In the current intellectual atmosphere, one senses a feeling that the world is not the totality of things, but of meanings. Everything is meaning, and meaning is everything, and hermeneutics is its prophet. Whatever is, is made by the meaning conferred on it. It is the meaning with which it is endowed which has singled it out from the primal flow of uncategorized existence, and thereby turned it into an identifiable object." (Ernest Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*, p. 24). Also Janson: "Since all cultural products are texts in the sense of documents, everything–history, life itself–becomes a text. […] [E]verything is intertextual; that is, it is dependent on everything else, to the point where no trait can be isolated and no order or causality can exist." (Horst Waldemar Janson, *History of Art*, p. 903).

ISSN 2351-4728

primary task of the thinker is to answer the questions of what the words mean, what the context of the words means, what the context of the words means to the words, what the words mean to their own context, and so on. This art of disentangling meanings is called hermeneutics. One of the most tragicomic predicaments of postmodernist hermeneutics lies in the recognition that the study and comparison of writings from different cultures and eras always involves *"two* sets of meanings, and the problem of their mutual intelligibility and translatability"[10] which, according to postmodernists, cannot be overcome: the writer essentially writes *only* to himself, the reader essentially reads *only* to himself, and both of them think essentially *only* to themselves. Man is by nature closed (to others and, according to the psychoanalytic school, to himself).

The meaning of the text, thus, has to be interpreted–such is the work of a hermeneuticist–knowing in advance (and anticipating accordingly) that the meaning is in principle inexplicable. A paradox, isn't it? The hermeneuticist, however, is cunning: if the meaning cannot be *found*, he whispers to himself, it can be *attributed*. The practical consequences of such a theoretical approach are easily predictable. George Steiner candidly remarks on Martin Heidegger, the father of contemporary hermeneutics, and his "explorations" of Hölderlin's poetry[11]:

> Here, as in his notorious "translations" from the pre-Socratics, Heidegger is carrying to violent extremes the hermeneutic paradox whereby the interpreter "knows better" than his author, whereby interpretation, where it is inspired and probing enough, can "go behind" the visible text to the hidden roots of its inception and meaning. This, undoubtedly, is how Heidegger operates, and on the level of normal expository responsibility many of his reading are opportunistic fictions.[12]

One of the most famous and glaring methods of postmodernist hermeneutics is literary deconstruction, which was pioneered by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. It was *initially* argued that the "meaning of a text often has nothing to do with an author's intentions, but rather can be best understood against the background of inherent structures of a text, for example, unconscious slips or puns, gaps, inversions, or metaphors,"[13] but soon escalated into uncontrollable arbitrariness, which "utilizes (and openly advocates) the deliberate misuse of terms, inappropriate synonyms, willful misquotes, irrational positions, extreme interpretations, and even personal attacks against its opponents."[14] Heed the word "deliberate." This means that any complaint, accusation, or reprimand against a postmodernist for "inconsistency of thought" is likely to be taken as a compliment and a sign that he, the postmodernist,

10 Ernest Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*, p. 26.

11 A linguist and professor of comparative literature, and thus a man with knowledge of both textology and textual archaeology.

12 George Steiner. *Martin Heidegger*, p. 143.

13 Ellliot Neaman. "Jacques Derrida," p. 233.

14 Horst Waldemar Janson. *History of Art*, p. 903.

has successfully avoided "logical banalities" by revealing "contradictory" human nature in the person of both the *other* and *himself*.

Anyone who has had a taste of higher education knows what it means to take shelter in the library for days, look for sources, collect quotes, and write a research paper. Sooner or later, the irritable question, plagued by encyclopedic fatigue, slips out: could it be that postmodernism is (neo)scholasticism–something old and musty rather than fresh and fragrant? What is meant when, in the heat of a debate, one party loses patience and name-calls the other, their speculations and arguments "scholastic"? Trimmers, people, drenched in textbook or school wisdom, who are completely reliant on the thoughts and authorities of others, unrealistic examples, intricate terminology, or other intellectual surrogates! And what is our age like? There are legitimate fears today as to whether the situation in contemporary philosophy is not as it was in the late Middle Ages. Today, as in the olden days, there is a sharp turn from "participation" in issues to a purely "historiographical" approach[15].

Over a million publications in the natural sciences are published worldwide each year; over a hundred thousand journals in the social sciences; and the same number in the humanities[16]. "To perceive the world as a text," Randall Collins says, "is not too inaccurate a description, perhaps not of the world itself, but of the life position of intellectuals: we are almost literally buried in papers," the author worries on, "The pessimism and self-doubt of the intellectual community under these circumstances is not surprising."[17] Elsewhere, Collins defines "scholastic" periods and notes that in such times, "intellectuals are primarily curators of old texts."[18] Curators of texts? What an accurate and poignant description of our times! The rather reckless and, for any honest philosopher, *tragic* replacement of the world with reading and writing, as well as the unavoidable illness of book-induced myopia–these harmful habits were not invented by us; we simply bestowed epidemic proportions on them. At the end of the 19th century, Nietzsche the grumbler complained of the same illnesses, exasperated by the modern man of theory who "still continues eternally hungry, the 'critic' without joy and energy, the Alexandrian man, who is at bottom a librarian and corrector of proofs, and who, pitiable wretch, goes blind from the dusty books and printers' errors."[19]

Once the postmodernist denies the "dogmas" of the Enlightenment, purges himself of the belief in the ideological and moral progress of society, and dispels the positivistic-universalistic illusion of "one world" and "one nature," he is ready to turn to the values and ideals of contemporary culture to "critically" show just how fragile they are and how easily deconstructable into the incompatible processes of consciousness. So is man, the embodiment of instability, whom Jean Paul Sartre suc-

15 See Randall Collins, *The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change*, p. 502.

16 See Derek J. de Solla Price, *Little Science, Big Science, and Beyond*, p. 266.

17 Randall Collins, *The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change*, p. 521.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 793.

19 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 67.

ISSN 2351-4728

cinctly and eloquently characterizes as a "being which is what it is not and which is not what it is."[20] But we have already talked about it. I would like to emphasize something else here. By deriding his own cultural environment, rumpling the cradle in which he was born and raised, the postmodernist must sooner or later admit that without all those "phantoms" of humanity he must criticize and deconstruct, he would have nothing to do. The postmodernist can, incessantly and without remorse, scold the existing education system, dismember the habits of today's enlightened class and intelligentsia (this conservative and self-complacent *establishment*!) to the last bone, while being himself an educator, a university lecturer, and an intellectual who receives (and takes!) a salary from an institution he advises with a grin on his face to deconstruct rather than reconstruct.

This tendency of postmodernism to engage in "shameless" (self)criticism is a special form of cynicism, the same kind that both Ortega y Gasset and Ludwig von Mises talk about, albeit in different contexts. Here is what Gasset says about the pioneers of historical cynicism, the Greeks, "emerging from the heyday of Mediterranean culture":

> Diogenes, in his mud-covered sandals, tramps over the carpets of Aristippus. The cynic pullulated at every corner, and in the highest places. This cynic did nothing but *saboter* the civilisation of the time. He was the nihilist of Hellenism. He created nothing, he made nothing. His role was to undo–or rather to attempt to undo, for he did not succeed in his purpose. The cynic, a parasite of civilisation, lives by denying it, for the very reason that he is convinced that it will not fail. What would become of the cynic among a savage people where everyone, naturally and quite seriously, fulfils what the cynic farcically considers to be his personal role? What is your Fascist if he does not speak ill of liberty, or your surrealist if he does not blaspheme against art?[21]

The tone of this passage is a bit angry, and the assessment is a bit harsh. The cynic is by no means just a parasite. His relationship with society is rather similar to the church's relationship with heretics, without whose help, let's face it, ecclesiastical dogmatics and Christian theology in general would hitherto be dressed in newborn diapers. But the main characteristic is sufficiently clear: the cynic lives on and from what he in one way or another attacks and tries to destroy. Such was, according to Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich Nietzsche, one of the prophets and patriarchs of postmodernism:

> It is noteworthy that the men who were foremost in extolling the eminence of the savage impulses of our barbarian forefathers were so frail that their bodies would not have come up to the requirements of "living

20 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, p. 58.

21 José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*, p. 116.

> dangerously." Nietzsche even before his mental breakdown was so sickly that the only climate he could stand was that of the Engadin valley and of some Italian districts. He would not have been in a position to accomplish his work if civilized society had not protected his delicate nerves against the roughness of life. The apostles of violence wrote their books under the sheltering roof of "bourgeois security" which they derided and disparaged. They were free to publish their incendiary sermons because the liberalism which they scorned safeguarded freedom of the press.[22]

Here, as in the previous quote, the intemperance of cynical bile and bitterness, often outright insolence, is described quite expressively. It is worthwhile to iterate that a "good" postmodernist is a cynic from head to toe. He knows this and, more importantly, uses it, especially when resorting to "inflammatory" tactics.

"What is post-modernism?" Ernest Gellner asks somewhat anxiously, and just as anxiously replies, "[I]t is a kind of hysteria of subjectivity […]."[23] Unfortunately, this is what the "avant-garde" of our culture actually is. It is a phenomenon, however, that is surrounded from the south and north, east and west by the seas of a world that is much wider, more diverse and complex; a world that does not fit into modernism, postmodernism or any other label of "ism." Let's paddle those wider waters in our next investigation.

22 Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*, p. 172.

23 Ernest Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*, p. 29.

Literature

Collins, Randall. *The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change*, Cambridge (MA), London (EN): The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998.

Gasset, José Ortega y. *The Revolt of the Masses*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1932.

Gellner, Ernest. *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*, London, New York: Routledge, 1992.

Jacobitti, Edmund E. "Postmodernism" / Daniel Robert Woolf (ed.), *A Global Encyclopedia of Historical Writing*, vol. II, New York, London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998, pp. 732–733.

Janson, Horst Waldemar. *History of Art*, 5th edition, revised and expanded by Anthony F. Janson, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995.

Mises, Ludwig von. *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*, 3rd edition, Chicago: Contemporary Books, Inc., 1966.

Neaman, Ellliot. "Jacques Derrida" / Daniel Robert Woolf (ed.), *A Global Encyclopedia of Historical Writing*, vol. I. New York, London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998, p. 233.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy*, translated by Clifton P. Fadiman. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1995.

Price, Derek J. de Solla. *Little Science, Big Science, and Beyond*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, translated and with an introduction by Hazel E. Barnes, New York: Philosophical Library, 1956.

Steiner, George. *Martin Heidegger.* New York: The Viking Press, 1979.

Stepukonis, Aivaras. "(Post)Modernizing Contemporary Intellectual Culture". *Sovijus*, 2022, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 46–54.

Thürlemann, Felix. *Nuo vaizdo į erdvę*, iš vokiečių kalbos vertė Lina Kliaugaitė. Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 1994.

ISSN 2351-4728