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A Polemic

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Why talk about the burial rites of contemporary critics dealing with postmodernism? Why talk about the end of postmodernism at all, now that almost everybody has a word or two to say about it, from the Tamil cook at the Spanish Delicatessen deep in Eastern Westfalia to the Brazilian student who came to Germany from a US-American university to play Irish folk at the local pub. Why go all through it again? Reflexions on the development of the dated but still highly popular concept of the postmodern seem timely and appropriate for two reasons: Over the last couple of years there have been several significant changes: a) in the way scholars and cultural critics have handled the term, b) in the way the term has spread over a number of fields in society, and c) in its meaning altogether (Amerika/Olson 1995:2).

If postmodernism ever was useful as a definite and meaningful category, it has most certainly ceased to be so for a simple reason: It has become a commodity and has been extended and adapted to a number of contexts. With my favorite term of the decade, "dot com," I would like to introduce three main areas: "postmodernism.com" for a brief look at what this implies for the business world (and what the implications may be for the rest of the world), "postmodernism.org" for a short survey of the public sector, and "post-modernism.edu" for a glance at the world of academic and intellectual exchange. For all of these areas, I will try to show in which ways they have dealt with phenomena that are usually associated with postmodernism, and where I see obvious trends that go beyond that. I will close with a brief outlook on what lies ahead.

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In the American business environment, still a predominantly white male middle and increasingly upper class domain, theoretical approaches, be they from other fields of society or other nations, have always been viewed with either scepticism or overt antagonism. The coining of new and shiny names for all sorts of ideas, services and tendencies is even more important here than elsewhere, studies in high end companies in the areas of information technology, consulting, the media, tourism and entertainment have proved that discursive strategies here are highly self-referential. Companies in these areas have a number of things in common: a) They offer services, b) their services are defined in terms of complexity and abstraction, and c) they create both their own markets and their response to these markets (Martin 1994:3).

a) These companies are services: in other words, they define them-selves and their quality more and more in terms of total and permanent customer satisfaction. (Observers of the theoretical scene in culture and literature who know their way around Roland Barthes' central idea of a "Mort de l'Auteur" ("Death of the Author"), Reader Response Criticism, or Bourdieuan thought may find the parallel reflexion of the paradigm shift from author to reader, from artist to recipient, from designer to observer, from producer to consumer (Kristeva/Barthes1984:32). In the economy, this customer hegemony has far-reaching implications, as Ignatio Ramonet of Le Monde Diplomatique, Dieter Buhl of the Zeit, Nikolaus Pieper of the Süddeutsche and others, all chronists of the small but significant changes in everyday life, have repeatedly pointed out: measures of rationalization and job cuts, usually euphemized as "out-placement", "streamlining", or "focussing", do no longer have to be justified against employee interests and trade union sanctions - they can always be justified by the rule of demand, by the law of flexiblity and adaptation (Aldrich 1999:7-20).

b) The services offered are defined in terms of complexity and abstraction: they characterize situations as problems by defining these problems in their own terms and promote solutions under the names of

leadership, innovation, rationalization, or physical, mental or emotional well-being, a good proportion of these solutions being based on language games and good old clever rhetoric and really consisting of little more than surrogative mood-enhancers (Decker 1997:48).

c) Today's companies successively create their markets and their reaction to these markets. In a situation where you are both the doctor and the cure, there is almost no limit to your success. In times of disease, you will give your patient a diagnosis that you explain in your terms before curing the symptoms by the means only you dispose of. In times of good health, having established your patient's trust ("Vertrauen ist der Anfang von allem" — "Trust is where it all starts," the Deutsche Bank says), you will congratulate your patient on his good health, warn him against potential risks, and suggest ways of even further improvement — ways that only you know. Communication, entertainment and advertising have known such significant growth precisely because it is these areas that create new desires after all material needs have been fulfilled for at least that proportion of the population that is often referred to as "master consumers".

In an envrionment of ever autonomizing and specializing social and economic spheres, criticism is only tolerated and made public if it is immanent, rarely are there cases of friendly fire. Language is optimized and shaped just like a new software component: All notion of intellectualism and vagueness (as in a term like postmodernism) is avoided in favor of a rhetoric of expansion, democratic progress, and enjoyment that talks of "going global" or "sourcing out" , of "flexicurity", "webvertizing" and "infotainment" — all referred to as insignia of the so-called postmodern in the world of business.

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Needless to say, all of this has not remained without consequence for other areas in society. Having turned its back upon institutions like church and state, the public finds itself more and more differentiated into a number of single groupings of a shared social, political, ethnic, sexual, or, yes, even that occurs, intellectual sense of coherence. So far, it is unclear if this really results in the

much-lamented retreat into privacy that leaves behind all forms of social responsibility or leads to newly defined, but very present and committed parties in an ever-renewing process of negotiation. The situation of common and agreed-upon values remains just as unclear. Some, with Ellen Friedman, diagnose a situation of moral ambiguity that is grounded in crossidentification (or double consciousness) or, the individual's identification through two or more spheres whose value systems traditionally contradict (a white married, wealthy, liberal and catholic man or woman who wonder whether or not they should have an affair may turn to either a religious authority or simply to a friend and colleague in search of guidance and then take their pick). Obviously, this situation of ambivalence has always existed, but it is especially prominent in a hybridized, postcolonial environment and has been frequently documented (Hutcheon 1993:1, 39-41). Friedman is convinced that this situation promotes freedom and new options for the individual's development in a truly democratic society (Friedman/Squire 1998).

Opponents to this view favor clarity and unequivocal moral codes. The Religious Right is still gaining ground, not only in federal politics, but also in communities throughout the country — and in higher education. The highest growth rates in both enrollment and reputation have gone to those high schools, colleges and universities with an uncompromising, fundamentally religious orientation (cf. USNews Ranking 1999). This applies to more than just Christian groups: African and Native American student groups have repeatedly taken up the 1960s tradition of separate graduation ceremonies, career services, and alumni associations. Mass movements like the Promisekeepers or Farakhan's Nation of Islam successfully market the idea of an exclusively legitimate way to wisdom in deliberate exclusion of all potential for uncertainty, ambiguity, or moral apories.

And this may be precisely where the so-called civil society, given so much praise and credit by European observers, has failed: it intended to provide an ethic of the lowest common denominator for a society on the way from a melting pot that it probably never was to a mosaic whose pieces are drifting apart so that the image is increasingly blurred these days (Calthorpe

1993:4). Attempts and concepts supported by leading spiritual institutions, NGOs, foundations, think tanks, and even divinity schools such as the Pacific School of Religion at Berkeley, one of the most liberal and vaguely protestant schools in the nation, imagine a sort of representative concilium of all ethnicity-, gender-, or class-based groups to develop an ethics that combines all their best approaches to form a new highest denominator that everybody can share, much like in Lessing's Ringparabel. Approaches like these sound remarkably naive for two reasons: the first reason — they presuppose that a highbrow concept, negotiated by a number of well-established and highly educated theorists, can be implemented in a society struggling to bridge a remaining and significant gap between wealth and misery, a population of permanently shifting concerns, of partial interests that are rarely reflected upon, let alone in any intellectual contexts. The second reason — in their relativism they still fail to provide one essential foundation for individual orientation, and that is cultural identity, a necessity now often provided by consumerism (Annesley 1998:11-14, Calthorpe 1993:5).

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What is the role of an academic and intellectual forum under the circumstances I have described? What are the positions involved, and what are the perspec-tives? The situation appears very simple: there is a holistic, universalist back-lash on the one hand and an avant-garde perpetuating diversity and polyphony on the other hand.

The holistic backlash sees the theories and applications of post-modernist theory as largely irrational. Moreover, academic discussions on hegemony in discourse, on the construction of role and identity, of experience and medium, on language, consciousness and reality are charcterized as being based on a gesture of denial and negation rather than creation and production. In their search, a number of contemporary philosophers and cultural critics favor new perspectives in pragmatism as an alternative to postmodernism. In detail, thinkers like Pierce, Dewey or Rorty tend to re-favor

1-the universal over the postmodernist particular

2-the abstract over the postmodernist actual or contextualized

3-the structured over the postmodernist chaotic

4-the logocentric over the postmodernist "other of reason"

5-the eternal over the postmodernist ephemeral, historical

6 -the necessary over the postmodernist contingent.

Against a postmodernist "attitude of abandon," pragmatism assumes an "attitude of relativism," against an attitude of "exaggerated expectations," this alternative sets human practice and experience as its point of reference (Gaillard 1993:37).

The latter being the more reflected and epistemologically motivated, another branch of the backlash is more emotionally based: here, both the theory and manifestations of postmodernism are conceived of as a threat, as a dividing force of fragmentation that endangers the coherence of a culture and nation.

Perspective

The post-postmodernist avant-garde promotes originally postmodern terms under new names (e.g. Amerika/Olson 1995). An impressive example is the almost infinite broadening of the terms "information" and "Information Age," recently depreciatively referred to by the CEO of a major and rather traditional German publisher as "the greatest banality boost in the history of the 20th century," the overriding digital opposition between 1 and 0, the verdict over such crucial issues as crunchy or flabby toast, light or darkness in your bedrooms, or Y2K. It is an increasingly media-conditioned discourse that we zap, surf, or float through, and it is ever more self-conscious — and self-referential. "We'll slide down the surface of things," as Bret Easton Ellis keeps reminding his reader by endless name-dropping on screens, mobile phones and other digital gadgets in his 1999 novel *Glamorama*, setting up an aesthetics of redundance that barely covers a breathtaking ethical void.

Apart from Digital Darwinism, demographic and generational aspects come into play and may complete the now almost traditional but still valid

paradigm of race, class, and gender. Child culture, values and initiation are more than ever before influenced by the marketing strategies of global players, as Shirley Steinberg points out in her *Kinderculture: The Corporate Construction of Childhood.* Simultaneously, culture is increasingly infantilized (i.e., reduced to immediate, simple, and often affective solutions for basic needs: *panem et circenses*), reduced by an ever-present agency that spots both prestigious and transferable cultural elements in a distinctly foreign environment, sets them up as social markers in the home economy, and markets them (Steinberg 1997:introd.). Intellectual discourse will find its niches in e-zines and in some feuilleton pages of the major papers, the rest is silence. Over the last three years, the German publishers Piper and Suhrkamp have been forced to cut their more sophisticated critical and philosophical editions by over 40 percent. The market won't read it. No need for the fool on the hill, for the ever-sceptic highbrow in his crumbling ivory tower.

Looking back at it all, it may well be true that, as Gerhard Hoffmann rephrased it in his address at the 1999 American Studies meeting at Cologne University, postmodernism ended with the extinction of the Soviet Union, and that what follows is a new world order, one, however, that leaves us with as many question marks as before. Nothing really new here, but the dimensions are unheard of, and the speed is increasing — this is what makes it the Age of Advanced Pop.

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