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POSTMODERNISM

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JENS KASTNER

"What is "postmodernism"? I'm not up to speed."

—Michel Foucault (1983)

The term "postmodernism" attracted a great deal of intellectual debate from the 1960s at least to the early 1990s. It has been discussed across disciplines and has taken on special significance particularly in architecture, as well as in literary, art, and cultural theory, and in philosophy

and sociology. Many have tried for various reasons to avoid using the term since the 1990s, or to replace it with others—such as "reflexive modernism" (Ulrich Beck) or "liquid modernity" (Zygmunt Bauman).

Since the term "modernism" can already harbor a wide variety of connotations and levels of meaning depending on the strand of discourse, what the prefix "post-" is is actually meant to convey has been a matter of dispute from the outset. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the socialist state models in Central and Eastern Europe even gave rise to the impression that the term "postmodernism" was meant to describe, along with the newly proclaimed "end of history" (Francis Fukuyama), a definitive sociopolitical status quo. This powerful interpretation of the prefix "post" met with anything but consensus, however. Instead, it was assumed that the "post-" in postmodernism was meant not to mark a break with the past but rather continuations, reflections, and radicalizations of what had been articulated as modernism.

Two main issues can be distinguished that have been the subjects of debate when it comes to the term "postmodernism": Do we live in postmodern times (because society and the status of its cultural products have changed markedly)? And: Do we reject modern principles (because we perceive them, or have analyzed them and found them to be, homogenizing, totalitarian, and/or even annihilating)? Although the two questions are related, the answer to the one does not automatically shed light on the other, and vice-versa. And yet both levels of the debate are often deliberately or inadvertently confounded and/or confused. Thus, when we speak of postmodernism it is important first of all to clarify whether we mean it as the diagnosis of a signature period, or as a set of philosophical methods, and/or as a political or artistic concept.

These three levels can be described using three essential criteria each. In terms of historical diagnosis, postmodern societies

have been described as those characterized first of all by an increased differentiation of social disparity (whereby the dissolution of the class system that supposedly goes hand-in-hand with this attitude was also proclaimed in some cases); second, by a greater plurality of lifestyles (with the nuclear family model seen as outdated); and third, by a renewed drive toward individualism, accompanied by the culturalization of everyday life.

In philosophy, postmodernism has been identified with the death of three fixed points—explicitly in the feminist debate between Seyla Benhabib and Judith Butler and others. The death of the subject would allegedly destroy the white-male-Eurocentric project of enlightenment as well its innate assumption of the unity between sex, gender identity and gender performance, which was conceived as a constraint. The death of history was proclaimed in order both to break with the paradigm of faith in progress and to put an end to the (methodological as well as thematic) exclusion of minorities from the historical narrative. The idea of a single dominant and universal interpretation of history being acknowledged as the one and only truth was thus repudiated. Another rejected premise was described as the death of metaphysics: it would henceforth be denied as the ultimate legitimation for subjects and institutions.

Postmodern art was conceived as encompassing various forms and methods that were directed against the modernist principle of the autonomy of the artwork, contravening this assumption in various ways. The artwork was thus seen not as a self-contained unit, but rather understood as a fragment (something that collage and montage turned into a common procedure); the straightforward relationship between the artist's inner self and its expression in the form of an artwork was called into question (resulting in the renunciation of the notion of artist as genius); and the interaction between artwork and viewer was reconceptualized (leading to

participative models such as happenings and performance art).

The criteria for what is to be understood under the term postmodernism resemble one another to some extent, and as a rule efforts at description thus go on to become normative attitudes: the borderlines between the observation of difference, antitotality, and antiteleology (in art, philosophy, and sociology) and their articulation or advocacy have in fact frequently—although not always and not *per se*—been fluid.

Another difficulty in the debate on postmodernism continues to stem from the fact that very few philosophers, sociologists, or artists have been willing to assume this label. A classification under postmodern approaches was, and still is, a discursive production: disparate theoretical currents as well as diverse intellectuals have been subsumed under the category of postmodern thought. These include for example poststructuralist positions (from Michel Foucault to Gilles Deleuze/Félix Guattari), deconstructionists (Jacques Derrida), prominent figures in postcolonial studies (Edward Saïd, Homi K. Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Gayatri S. Spivak), and a line of thinking that has been dubbed "postfeminism" (Judith Butler). With their critiques of social and cultural exclusionism and Western patriarchal universalism, feminist and postcolonial stances in particular have been associated with the postmodernist disavowal of modernism. The emphasis on groups that had previously been considered marginalized, peripheral, different, and minority (and the rejection of the very roots of such a standing in a perceived dichotomy) inspired new social movements on the one hand, but on the other also attracted vehement opposition. The adjective "postmodernist" was not infrequently used pejoratively, by both Marxist and other left-wing intellectuals, who accused "the postmodernists" of turning their backs on the society-transforming project of emancipation, as well as by the conservative right, who perceived the aforementioned postmodern relativizations

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In a 1970 essay, Paul Feyerabend, a philosopher of science, argued against critical rationalism and in favor of a pluralism of methods in the sciences.¹ This plea, expanded into a monograph in 1974 under the title *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge*, contains a related slogan that has often been cited by opponents of postmodern approaches as what appears to be the postmodernists' relativist credo: "anything goes." Feyerabend was among those who did not lay claim to the label "postmodern—unlike" Jean-Francois Lyotard. Even though we still dispute today when the concept actually came into being; i.e., who was the first to use the word "postmodernism" (with the question likewise unanswered of how far the phenomena, methods, and concepts referred to as postmodern go back in history), one of Lyotard's books can surely be counted among the most influential works of "the postmodernists." In *La condition postmoderne*² Lyotard inquires into the status of knowledge in contemporary Western societies. For Lyotard, postmodern is at once the diagnosis of a period—one in which "metanarratives" have lost their legitimacy and knowledge is subject to "mercantilization"—and a new method that he proposes as a consequence. A postmodern brand of science, which Lyotard dubs "paralogy," must henceforth involve a discourse on its own rules. For science, Lyotard writes, borrowing from Wittgenstein, is only one language game among many.

The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman expanded further on this reflexive position. From his viewpoint in sociology, Bauman directed his criticism at the role of his own discipline and that of intellectuals as a whole³ and was one of the few sociologists who, following his critique of modernism⁴ explicitly espoused postmodernist positions by endorsing the diagnosed social diversity and plurality.

In architecture as well, this affirmative association with pluralistic methods and styles was considered a central distinguishing feature of postmodern positions, represented primarily by architect and architectural theorist Charles Jencks.⁵

Although the term is hardly capable any longer of triggering heated debate, the central themes that have been addressed under the "postmodernist" label are as pertinent as ever: the status of knowledge in contemporary societies is still a matter of (philosophical-sociological-political) dispute, as are the solutions for issues of social inequality and cultural differences.

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- 1 Paul Feyerabend, "Against Method," in "Minnesota Studies," *Philosophy of Science: Theories & Methods of Physics and Psychology*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1970, p. 17–130.
- 2 Jean-Francois Lyotard, *La Condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir*, Editions de Minuit, Paris 1979.
- 3 Zygmunt Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters: On Modernity, Post-Modernity, Intellectuals*, Polity Press, Cambridge 1987.
- 4 Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Polity Press, Cambridge 1989; and Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, Polity Press, Cambridge 1991.
- 5 Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, Academy Editions, London 1977.

Lia Perjovschi, *Postmodernism I., II.*, diagrams, 2009

