Postmodernity

The previous lectures dedicated to modernity tried to explain the meaning and structure of this paradigm that the European society produced starting from the eighteenth century. The pillars of modernity were reason, science, secularism, humanism, technology, progress, etc. But modernity also generated negative practices and ideologies that impacted the modern Man in a very destructive way. Hence the emergence of postmodernity as a critique of all the convictions and practices that modernity produced. What is the difference between modernity and postmodernity? Is there a precise moment/time when the transition happened?

First of all, modernity and postmodernity may overlap in matters of time and beliefs; they sometimes coexist. We may encounter many postmodern aspects in the early or late twentieth century. For example, the work of Jackson Pollock, though dates back to the fifties expresses the spirit of postmodernity with regard to subjectivity, fragmentation and uncertainty which are some of the fundamental principles of postmodernity. “There is no precise moment of transition between the modern and the postmodern; rather postmodernism intersects with and permeates late modernity” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2005, p. 251).

Other critics date the birth of postmodernity in the 1980’s because this period witnessed the production of some key works that would shape the mindset of a whole era. These works belong to Michel Foucault, Jean- Francois Lyotard, Jaques Derrida, among others. Symbolically, the transition to postmodernity coincides with “15 July 1972, when the Pruit-Igoe housing development in St Louis (a prize-winning version of Le Corbusier’s ‘machine for modern living’) was dynamited as an uninhabitable environment for the low-income people it housed” (Harvey, 1986, p.39). Similar destructions of working class buildings in Europe happened in the same period because such buildings proved to be unfit for a decent social condition. The 1980’s indeed mark the turning point in the structure of feeling and thought in the western society and the beginning of new way of defining the universe. Postmodernity marks a “shift in sensibility, practices and discourse formations which distinguishes a post-modern set of assumptions, experiences and propositions from that of a preceding period”( Harvey, 1986, p. 39).

The main characteristic of postmodernity is questioning all the absolutes and certainties that the modern thinkers took for granted. It questions progress, reason, science, ideologies ... that the philosophers and scientists of modern era believed eternal and universal for all times and people. The atrocities of wars, the hegemony of master narratives, the pollution of the environment, crimes committed during the colonial era, among others, were tangible enough evidence of how modernity failed to produce a better new world. The questions raised by postmodern thinkers established the foundations of a new way of thinking that deliberately departed away and broke with the modern beliefs. “The postmodern is characterized by questioning these sorts of knowledge and the belief in progress: Do we really know that progress is always a good thing? Can we really know the human subject? How can any experience be pure or mediated? How do we know what truth is?

The postmodern does not believe in one truth valid for all; such a truth is an illusion because based on wrong premises and fallacies. Instead there is a variety of truths that fit better to give a raison d’être for peoples and individuals belonging to different cultures and contexts.

Postmodernity challenged the master narratives that the twentieth century produced in different domains. In science and technology, the notion of progress, that modernists strongly believed in, were proven unfit; the nuclear bombs that caused massive genocide confirm that science when wrongly employed could be extremely destructive. The absolutist doctrines of Marxism, that some believed valid to eradicate poverty and class distinctions, turned out worse an ideology than the liberal one. Marxism generated absolutist regimes and dictatorships.

Postmodernity critically examined some philosophical and political concepts which were beyond reproach in the past. For example, notions like order, identity, gender, race, control, have been investigated to uncover their essentialist nature. Identity in the modern era was seen as the expression of a true and pure origin but such a definition generated ethnocentrism, racism and even genocide in some cases. The Nazi Germany glorified its origin and consequently justified the massacre of Jews in extermination camps. Identity in the postmodern era was approached differently; it was fluid, elastic and nomadic. One individual has the right to celebrate his/her independent identity be it religious, sexual, cultural regardless of the social group he/she belongs to. In matters of race, the supremacy of a given race was challenged by the Others. Each race has the right to represent itself in the way it sees it best. The Black was no longer confined to minor roles (waiter, maid, slave) in cinema, but gained prominence and recognition by black filmmakers. In line with the question of representation, the Arab stopped being the “The Reel Bad Arab” (Jack Shaheen) whole race is often associated with the terrorist, the suicide bomber or the belly dancer. Postmodern Arab filmmakers produced films that catch the culture and identity of the Arab people.

The question of representation or presence was indeed a central postmodern concern. Postmodernists believed “that the idea of presence, or immediate experience, is a myth, and that everything we experience is mediated through language, images, social forces, etc.” (p.252). What Sturken and Cartwright claim here is the impossibility of truly and objectively expressing an idea or a concept without the inevitable intrusion of language, culture and politics. Every single idea or thought we express is predetermined by our culture or language. Culture is so powerful a force that it shapes our thought without our awareness. When we pronounce, for example, that the right hand is the symbol of righteousness, we implicitly reproduce what the dominant culture we belong to prioritizes. Language also exerts a similar force on our thoughts because the words we use in our communication, the grammatical structures are all predetermined by a language whose structure and essence is arbitrary. Again when the word “white” is pronounced, we automatically think of something pure and positive. The reason behind this interpretation is due to how the relationship between the signifier and signified is arbitrary.

In keeping with the postmodern paradigm, a big emphasis was placed on the question of polysemy; the idea that texts can have many meanings. Polysemy marks the death of the author and the birth of many readers. Shakespeare, for example, could be interpreted in multiple ways according to time, place and reader. What Shakespeare meant to Victorian readers is meaningless to modern ones. What Shakespeare means to an English audience today has a totally different interpretation to Moroccans now. Othello for me today is the expression of how multiculturalism is impossible to achieve in the European society where a Maghrebi community lives on the margin of society.

In literature, postmodern writers were no longer concerned with providing ready-made answers in their works. The logical reasoning that the famous formula ‘I think, therefore I am’ was abandoned because the certainties of the past are dead and buried. The postmodern writer was as confused as the reader or the character of his/her own work. One of Jorge Luis Borges characters wonders “Who was I? Today’s self, bewildered, yesterday’s, forgotten; tomorrow’s, unpredictable?”

What the above mentioned words reveal is the total loss of certainty and fixity. The permanence and stability of modernity were replaced by ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity and chaos. Still one should not consider these new conditions as negative and confusing. They are the prerequisites of a new postmodern self. Without abandoning the false certainties of the past, one cannot invent and imagine new possibilities. In this sense, postmodernity is extremely demanding because it rests on one’s power to conceptualize a new world out of vacuum.

Conclusion

From this brief introduction to the meaning of postmodernity, one could state that the transition from the modern to the postmodern was the result of many failures and at the same time the expression of human agency. The postmodern discourse is the expression of how humans are constantly self reflexive, creative and critical beings.

References

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