Modern and Postmodern Thought

Semester 6, G 3

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Course N 6

Grand Narratives

Western modernity rested on many scientific, philosophical, political thoughts that challenged the traditional practices and values of pre-modern society. The belief in reason, in progress, in social justice, technological development expressed a real confidence in the future and the power of Man to create a better new world. But modernity also invented new ideologies pertaining to history, identity, nation, knowledge, among others, that would nullify all the previous optimistic and humanistic values of modernity. These ideologies were invented by new elites to fill the gap of a society that abandoned long established certainties and was in need of alternatives theories and philosophies that would serve as symbolic bonds cementing communities in the modern society. These new ideologies are commonly referred to as Grand, Meta or Master Narratives. Master Narrative, Meta Narrative, and Grand Narrative, are broadly synonymous terms which refer to totalizing social theories or philosophies of history which, appealing to notions of transcendental and universal truth, purport to offer a comprehensive account of knowledge and experience. “Meta” means beyond or about, and therefore here refers to all‐encompassing narratives which explain other, smaller narratives.

The term was coined by the French philosopher Jean Francois Lyotard in his classic book The Postmodern Condition: A report on Knowledge (1979). In this book, Lyotard examined critically the achievements of modernity in matters related to history and Knowledge. “The two meta narratives that Lyotard sees as having been most important in the past are (1) history as progressing towards social enlightenment and emancipation, and (2) knowledge as progressing towards totalisation. Modernity is defined as the age of meta narrative legitimation, and postmodernity as the age in which meta narratives have become bankrupt”1.

What Lyotard meant by this critical definition of two sides of modernity is how history and knowledge were rendered totalizing and hegemonic. History in many parts of Europe was pinned down to an origin that all the components of society had to abide by. In Germany, for example, the Germans were expected to adhere collectively to the Aryan origin, to the expansionist project of a “Greater Germany” and to celebrate that as the most noble and sophisticated model for the nation. German nationalism was thus promoting the idea of Germany whose territory covers other lands such as Austria, Poland, French Lorraine. Such an ideology rests on the belief that a nation is a land, a geography that should be part of the national sovereignty.

“Territory plays a key role in nationalism. National identity cannot be separated from links to

a specific territory which provides the only tangible basis for the national myth. The homeland is the repository of national history. It is the place where the nation has its roots. The mountains of the national landscape are sacred, its rivers carry the national soul, its soil is soaked with the blood of national heroes” (Guntram, 1997. p. 6).

Nationalism emerged as one of the most dominant forms of master narratives in the beginning of the twentieth century. This discourse was based on a hegemonic understanding and interpretation of history. “A master narrative has come to mean the unambiguous historical representation, generally of a nation-state, that is socially dominant and the interpretation of which is not doubted by the population”(Humlebak, p. 2). In other words the nation rested on a one sided view of history, often the view of the powerful and dominant class and elite of that society. “In theory, of course, the state can and often does use force to achieve obedience from its subjects. But forced loyalty is at odds with the modern ideology of both the liberal-democratic and totalitarian conceptions of the state (though in the latter, in fact, it is just a fac-ade), as well as being difficult to obtain except when physical and moral violence needs to be exerted on only a relatively small, dissident minority.”( Llobera, 1994. p. 106).

 The subalterns were not at all included in the definition of the nation because only the elite of the community invented and imposed that perception of nation on the silent majority. “The architects of any master narrative are often political and intellectual elites because such a narrative so obviously has a legitimising function: it claims to be the authoritative version of the community’s history. Thus, by a master narrative, one understands a comprehensive account that orders all the minor narratives about the collective, thus creating a coherent network of historical interpretations that serves to form the collective identity” (Humlebak, p.3).

 The master narrative ideology would highlight and glorify a given period in history and deliberately omit and reject other periods. It would attribute history to a lineage or iconic figures who symbolize a model for the rest of the community. Thus history becomes extremely selective and serves one specific interpretation.

Parallel to nationalism, modern Europe produced another form of meta narrative based on a socialist vision of the state. Communism indeed was the ideological product of a class that long suffered from social injustice and the supremacy of the bourgeoisie. It tempted to place power and management of political and economic affairs in the hand of the proletariat. However, communism would generate monstrous policies and dictatorships. In the name of the party or the state, individuals were denied their rights as citizens, intellectuals, artists. Detention camps were built in many remote areas in Eastern Europe where dissidents and intellectuals were detained or exterminated. The utopian egalitarian society of theory turned into rigid totalitarian regimes. The fall of the Soviet Union and the Berlin wall in 1989 marked the end of an ideology/grand narrative that was once adopted by states and political parties because deemed a modern ideology in the service of Man.

The twentieth century produced other forms of meta narratives, such as the civilizational mission of colonialism, capitalism, orientalism, (pan-Arabism and Islamism in the Islamic world), etc. All these ideologies were thought liberating communities from social, political and economic ills. Again contemporary history teaches us that none of these master narratives were neutral; each discourse was serving a given race, class or ethnic group. Post modernity would challenge all these ideologies by showing their hegemonic origin and essentialist perceptions.

Next lectures will address colonialism as an example of meta narrative employed by the colonial West to subjugate the non West and to legitimize the imperial enterprise. The lectures will focus on the first three chapters of Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Social imagination by Gurminder K. Bhambra. Students should read attentively these chapters in order to grasp the meaning of my account. I left copies of these chapters at Alfalah photocopy stand long time before confinement.

Notes and references

1. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy
2. Guntram, H. Henrik. (1997). Under the Map of Germany: Nationalism and Propaganda, 1918-1945. London: Routledge.
3. Humlebak, C. (2018). National Identities: Temprality and Narration. Genealogy 2, 36.
4. Llobera, R. Joseph. (1994). The God of Modernity: The Development of Nationalism in Western Europe. Oxford: Berg Publishers.