



Postgraduate/Distance Learning Assignment Coversheet & Feedback Form

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For completion by the student:

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Module code: CSPH 7041	Student University Number: 1806397	Educational support needs: NO
Module title: Self and Society		

Module tutor: Rebekah Humphreys

Assignment title: "There is still a significant amount of confusion about what modernity is and whether postmodernity is merely an extension of the self-critique begun in the Enlightenment." Critically examine and assess the validity of this statement using your understanding of its terms.

Assignment due date: 22 March 2019

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Name: Emmanouil Pantelidakis

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“There is still a significant amount of confusion about what modernity is and whether postmodernity is merely an extension of the self-critique begun in the Enlightenment.” Critically examine and assess the validity of this statement using your understanding of its terms.

It is a temptation to decide that we live since 40 or 50 years ago in a special period of history - postmodernity - which is radically different than the previous period of modernity which started hundreds of years ago. We can point to the internet, social media and globalization as the factors that changed everything. This idea that human history is culminating with the people of the present is not a new one. Many recent generations before ourselves probably had this temptation too. The generations of the first world war, the second world war, the emergence and collapse of communism, to name just a few. This essay will study what postmodernity is, especially with reference to the self. But a prerequisite for the study of postmodernity is an understanding of modernity, and this is where we will start.

Modernity

Giddens and Sutton define modernity as “The period from the mid-eighteenth-century European Enlightenment to at least the mid-1980s, characterized by secularization, rationalization, democratization, individualization and the rise of science”.¹ According to this definition modernity is defined as a historical period with certain key characteristics. Other definitions give somewhat different dates for modernity, starting or finishing earlier or later. Other definitions will list more or less characteristics of modernity. However there are two words of the Giddens and Sutton definition that are part of an undisputed consensus: “European Enlightenment”. First, modernity seems to be defined everywhere, with reference to its beginnings, in Euro-centric terms. Second, the beginnings of modernity are everywhere connected to the Enlightenment. “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity” wrote Immanuel Kant in a 1784 essay.²

In the beginning was Descartes’ “Cogito Ergo Sum”. Descartes did not challenge religious authority but set out to find certain knowledge through his methodic doubt.

¹ Anthony Giddens and Philip W. Sutton, *Essential Concepts in Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), p. 10.

² Immanuel Kant, ‘Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?’, *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, December 1784.

He set out to find this knowledge himself, using his reasoning powers and not by relying on religious scripts. Others followed in the same spirit: Locke, Leibniz, Spinoza. These scientist - philosophers paved the way for Hume and Adam Smith (part of the “Scottish Enlightenment”), Rousseau (part of the “French Enlightenment”) and Kant who were the philosophical epicentre of the Enlightenment. These thinkers did not agree with each other on everything. In fact they disagreed on a lot. Take, for example, Descartes views on the self as an indivisible soul and Hume’s view that the self does not exist as a separate and persisting through time entity:

“For my part when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception”³

Or contrast Adam Smith’s sceptical conservatism with Rousseau’s influence on the French revolution. However all of these thinkers showed faith in the ability of humans, through their reasoning powers, to find answers and achieve secure knowledge without resorting to the study of religious texts. Another shared characteristic was the search for universally, through time and space, true conclusions. By reading Descartes’s meditations one can visualize Descartes as floating in a vacuum with nothing around him and his eyes shut. Similarly when one reads “it is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest” from Adam Smith⁴, there is nothing to suggest that he only had in mind Glasgow based butchers, brewers or bakers. It is as if the particulars of a society are not relevant to the validity of the conclusion.

The founding fathers of sociology (Durkheim, Marx, Weber), in the nineteenth century, put forward theories that emphasized the importance of societal factors. The theories of Durkheim and Marx (“the grande theories”) recognized the existence of powerful social structures. Powerful relative to the individual who in these structural

³ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 2011), Book 1, Part 4, Section 6.

⁴ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 2012), Book 1, Part 2, Section 2.

theories is shown to be at the mercy of inescapable social facts. Already at this point one can detect a confusion in the understanding of modernity in literature. Giddens speaks of “individualization”, and no doubt this was an intellectual current in a number of Enlightenment philosophers, but how are we to reconcile this alleged “individualization” with Durkheim and Marx who let each and every individual be absorbed and become an insignificant part of an all-important social structure? It seems to me that in the space of 200 or so years, between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries, we went from one extreme to another. From the all-important individual to the all-important society, and all within a period that is generally recognized as modernity. Weber seems to strike a balance by recognizing the importance of the individual but at the same time allowing for the influence of cultural factors in directing social change. Most famously he explained the emergence of capitalism as a consequence of the protestant ethic.

The towering figure of the early part of the twentieth century was Sigmund Freud. Freud launched an assault on the primary driving force of modernity: the confidence of humanity that by the diligent application of their unique characteristic of rationality progress can be made and the world will be changed. Freud undermines this claim by doubting the rationality of the subject. “The ego is not master in its own house” he declares.⁵ Freud postulates the existence of the unconscious, driving human behaviour without the humans even realizing it. We cannot control what is in our unconscious, as it is mostly formed during early childhood, but at best, through psychoanalysis, can hope to become aware of parts of this unconscious and hence enhance our understanding of our behaviour.

How are we then to integrate into modernity thinkers such as Durkheim, Marx and Freud who challenge in their writings fundamental features of modernity such as individualism and rationality? One shared feature that seems to run through all these thinkers is that they, even the religious among them such as Descartes, do not seem to seriously use the idea of God for explaining who we are. This is a radical change compared to the medieval period. In modernity God is no longer at the centre of the universe. Human is. The vertical relation God-human is abandoned and the

⁵ James Stratchey, ed., *Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Random House, 2001), Volume 17, *A Difficulty in the Path of Psycho-Analysis*.

horizontal relation human-human is launched. With more or less individuality, with more or less rationality but in all cases modernity seems to be characterized by an intense and persistent push to understand the world without reference to God or other superior or mysterious forces. Weber called this “the disenchantment” of the world.

Post-modernity. Where Did “I” go?

Giddens and Sutton define Postmodernity as a “historical period, following modernity, which is less clearly defined, pluralistic and socially diverse than the modernity that preceded it. Postmodernity is said to have developed from the early 1970s onwards”.⁶ The “...less clearly defined...” part of this definition is suggestive of the great confusion surrounding the term Post-modernity. There are those, like Scruton, who dismiss the term as some sort of intellectual firework: “Since the main fear of a modernist is that he may be unwittingly behind the times, he tends to affirm himself as resolutely ahead of them. Hence modernists have invented the label “post-modern” to define their latest position”.⁷

Giddens rejects the term “postmodernity” on more substantial grounds. He claims that we are still in modernity but in a period of modernity with different social challenges put forward by the internet and globalization. The preferred term of Giddens for this period is “late modernity”, a term that highlights our social existence in a special period of modernity but still one where the conceptual tools of classical social theory and modern philosophy are relevant for addressing the challenges. For example, Weber’s social action theory does not sound incompatible with Giddens’ structuration theory which claims that whilst the individual has to make choices within certain social constraints, these constraints came about through the intentional action of individuals at an earlier time. Social constraints are not fixed and going through a deterministic evolution (as Marx would have it) but in an interactive process with the individual. Giddens’ late modernity subject is not dead in the midst of language and discursive influences.

⁶ Anthony Giddens and Philip W. Sutton, *Essential Concepts in Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), p. 13.

⁷ Roger Scruton, *Modern Philosophy* (London: Random House, 2004), p. 2.

However the standard understanding of the self by the majority of the thinkers associated with Post-modernity is different and is known as the “decentring of the subject”, a definite rejection of the Cartesian *cogito* and its acceptance of consciousness as a given, indivisible substance. They are heirs to a critical line of thinking about the self that started with Hume and continued with Nietzsche: “There is no “being” behind doing, effecting, becoming: “the doer” is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything”.⁸ The self is the construct of discourse, where discourse is the particular words chosen to express meaning, depicting reality and prescribing behaviour based on a particular body of knowledge. The body of knowledge, in turn, according to Foucault, is determined by power relations in society. Different power relations will produce a different body of knowledge which will establish different discourses which, ultimately, will construct different selves. Let’s say I am born in Stalin’s USSR, then in my 20s manage to escape to the UK and in my 60s return to post-Soviet Russia. I would have been subjected to three very different discourses and there would have been three different selves in the period. This is a radical departure from Descartes’ modern philosophy or even Locke’s memory theory of identity who would have claimed that I am the same persisting self since I have the same soul or maintain the memories of the earlier phases of my life, respectively. On the other hand, there is some resemblance between postmodernity’s conception of self and Hume’s self. According to Hume, the self is a bundle of perceptions accumulated in the course of life. The conception of self within Enlightenment and modernity is, therefore, not unified and so one cannot simply claim that the self in postmodernity is merely an extension of the self-critique begun in the enlightenment. “Which Enlightenment” becomes the question? Of Descartes’s? No. Of Hume’s? Yes.

The self of postmodernity is superficial. Superficial in the sense that there is no core essence to her, something that will remain as unique characteristic of the individual once the influences of social reality are removed. The postmodern self is sometimes likened to an artichoke – various layers to it but when all are removed nothing remains (to be contrasted with, for example, an avocado!). In our times more than ever before the identity is found in the consumption of material good: “I am what I

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), p. 45.

consume". Tom Wolfe's novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities*⁹ tells the story of a successful Wall street trader who after causing a fatal car accident is taken to a New York police station where all that he thought so durable in his life quickly unravels and his self disintegrates to something unrecognizable. So much for the persisting self...The self of Marx was a lot more stable. Trapped in his factory job, his whole identity was derived from that job: "I am my work". Still, even that self, was a lot less stable than the self of pre-modern times where identity was derived from an unchanging relationship with God and family.

The introduction of risk is another key characteristic of the post-modern existence. The post-modern self operates in an environment without certainty, where the search for universal everlasting objective truths has been abandoned. The metanarratives - overarching accounts providing pattern to people's beliefs- of the past no longer seem to be adequate for a world changing at an accelerating pace. Instead we are confronted with a series of alternative world views to choose from, each of which has its own vocabulary and value system incommensurate with competing paradigms. Since comparison is not possible, one world view cannot undermine another. The optimism of modernity -that with science the one true way had been found and constant progress could be achieved- has given way to the pessimism of postmodernity. Descarte's deep and permanent "I" which was the safest knowledge on which to build further knowledge has been replaced by postmodernity's shallow and temporary "I" created out of prevailing power relations as reflected in discourse. This state of fluidity is seen as an advantage. As Deleuze and Guattari claim in *Anti-Oedipus* "the task of the revolutionary is to free the flux of desire from all codification, from all territorialisation".¹⁰

Conclusion

This territorialisation of knowledge is in fact responsible for the confusions regarding the definitions of modernity and post-modernity. So, for example, modernity for a sociologist tends to start around 1750 and conclude around 1980. For an architect, modernity is typically associated with the first half of the twentieth century. Another source of confusion is originating in the use of the terms modern, modernism and

⁹ Tom Wolfe, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (New York: Vintage Classics, 2010).

¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

modernity to denote something different according to the user of the term. For the English-speaking philosophers modern started with Descartes. Modernist, on the other hand, is someone who is committed to the overthrowing of tradition and establishing new ways to make the world better. The term is used more in the art world, than in philosophy. The spirit of modernism is well captured by the architect Theo van Doesburg, founder of the De Stijl art movement: “The new artist does not imitate, he creates. He does not describe, he designs. What does he design? New values for life”.¹¹ In any case both modern and modernist are driven by the rise of science and the decline in the influence of the church. Lastly, modernity refers to the social conditions prevailing as a result of the changes inspired by Enlightenment: capitalism, urbanization, secularization, population growth to name just a few.

Irrespective of whether we choose to call the period after modernity as “postmodernity” or “late modernity” it is undisputable that there has been a perceptible change in the last 30-40 years. Like Kant saw Enlightenment as the emergence of human out of a state of immaturity, similarly one can claim that postmodernity represents the emergence of human from the fictions of rationality and universality. The self-critique that started in the Enlightenment, when the individual started to re-evaluate herself has continued till our days with contributions from an illustrious line of thinkers, each of them adding new insights. The perfect rationality of Descartes’ individual existing in a vacuum has been replaced with the partially rational individual subject to societal influences. A common driver in these developments has been the confidence of humanity to study itself in order to promote self-understanding, instead of relying on religious scripture to provide the answers. Maybe the best way to divide the history of philosophical thinking about the self would have been in the two categories of “before the death of God” and “after the death of God”, where the first would correspond in the pre-modern times and the second in the modern times.

¹¹ Christopher Wilk, ed., *Modernism* (London: V&A Publications), p. 149.

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