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HSTAA 522
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Last Paper

POSTMODERNISM: RANDOM AT THE SPEED OF LIGHT¹

2:20 pm - Procrastination 101: Part 3, Pseudo Work

Well, I've started. Sort of.

One of my 10-page papers is for my 20th-Century U.S. seminar. The assignment is to take the last half-dozen books we've read and incorporate them into an intelligible essay. We don't have to use all the books, but [the professor] wants to see that we engage the materials in a thoughtful way.

The question is how to best do that? . . .

Right now I've poked at the books. I dragged them all to the Tully's, lined them up on the table and carefully reviewed comments on the back of each, flipping through some intros and some conclusions to refresh my memories of what's in each, in vain hope that some kind of topic would leap out and grab me by the throat.

Alas, not yet.

—Tim Wright, *Cafe_Zeke*, personal blog
http://www.livejournal.com/users/tim_wright/

It is a conversation with no one in particular and everyone at once. I know that it is being read on two continents, in three countries, and at least four states. It's instant, it's random, it's personally impersonal, it has a global reach, and it is available to anyone with access to the World Wide Web. It is my personal blog and it is a prime example of—as well as a response to—the time–space compression David Harvey discusses in *The Condition of Postmodernity*.² Harvey's idea of the shrinking world is, however, more than a matter of

¹ A hyperlinked version of this paper is available online at: http://home.comcast.net/~tim.m.wright/postmod_paper.doc.

² I should note that, as I sat in my apartment in Seattle writing this introduction I was conversing via instant messenger with two friends: one working at Sonoma State University in Northern California and the other at her home in a small town outside of Milan. My friend in Milan

temporal and spatial shifts that give rise to successive crises of representation, it also involves the evolution of flexible accumulation and, implicitly, questions of statism and internationalism. Combined with ideas pulled from several of the other works examined this quarter, Harvey provides the structure with which to examine and critique the rise of avarice and individualism and the seemingly parallel explosion of individual alienation and societal fragmentation in the United States over the last three decades. Taken together, these trends indicate that Americans live a postmodern existence whether they know it or not.

HARVEY'S POSTMODERNISM

Harvey uses a definition of postmodernism that seeks to show that it is simply the latest iteration of modernism, a movement he identifies as beginning in the eighteenth century.³ Harvey gives modernism, itself a child of the thought processes of the Enlightenment, a detailed definition replete with periodizations that encompass changes from 1848 up through the 1960s. But the crux of his definition relies on new strivings toward scientific objectivity and rationality in order to improve life and liberate humanity. He says, “The development of rational forms of social organization and rational modes of thought promised liberation from the irrationalities of myth, religion, superstition, release from the arbitrary use of power as well as from the dark side of our own human natures.”⁴

Fundamental to modernism are two concepts. First is the process of creative destruction. As Harvey notes, “How could a new world be created, after all, without destroying much that

was also chatting online with her friend in Rome while my friend at Sonoma State was conversing with two co-workers at remote locations within the university's sprawling library.

³ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry in the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990), 12.

⁴ Ibid. Poetically Harvey quotes Charles Baudelaire: “Modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immutable.” See Ibid., 10.

had gone before?”⁵ Second are ideas of conceptualizing the “eternal truths” inherent in modernism through language and representation.⁶

Serious breaks in modernism’s onward march toward human improvement—what he terms crises of representation—mark the periods Harvey uses: The first period of modernism ends around the time that the First World War proved that irrationality and disorder were still potent forces; the second, “heroic” modernism, occupies the interwar years; while the last, “universal” or “high” modernism, stretches from the end of World War II to the late 1960s or early 1970s whereupon the postmodern period begins.⁷ According to Harvey, the early period of modernism reached its zenith just prior to World War I and was marked by things such as Ferdinand de Saussure’s structuralist theory of linguistics and Frederick W. Taylor’s *The Principles of Scientific Management*.⁸ The “heroic” period manifested itself in what Harvey calls “reactionary modernism”—when the “tensions between internationalism and nationalism, between universalism and class politics, were heightened into absolute and unstable contradiction” and gave rise to fascism.⁹ High modernism represented somewhat of a resolution of those tensions through modernism’s cooption by the ruling forces—what Harvey calls “a much more comfortable relation to the dominant power centres in society.”¹⁰ High modernism emphasized “linear progress, absolute truths, and rational planning.”¹¹

Harvey pegs the end of each of these modern epochs to a crisis in representation, but

⁵ Ibid., 16.

⁶ Ibid., 20.

⁷ Ibid., 30, 35, 38.

⁸ Ibid., 28.

⁹ Ibid., 33.

¹⁰ Ibid., 35.

¹¹ Ibid.

his concept of representation is much more than a matter of “sign systems and imagery.”¹² Picking up on ideas promulgated by Pierre Bourdieu and Edward T. Hall, Harvey argues that a group’s representation of itself is defined by its “symbolic orderings of space and time” and that intercultural (inter-group) conflicts are grounded in the different ways the groups use time and space.¹³ A crisis in representation is then defined as “a radical readjustment in the sense of time and space in economic, political, and cultural life.”¹⁴ Following that logic, it is clear that a crisis of representation is also a crisis of identity: radical changes in time and space force a reformulation of group representation.

In defining representation in temporal and spatial terms, Harvey links his myriad crises to changes in time–space compression. As society speeds up and technology shrinks and redefines the perception of space, he says the changes have a “disorienting and disruptive impact” that push groups (and individuals) into crisis. Given the increasing acceleration of technology and the pace of life (what Harvey calls “instantaneity”)—with the commensurate distortions of time and space—groups are driven into a perpetual crisis of representation: the symbolic orderings are changing so quickly a group cannot reformulate its identity fast enough to keep pace. The result is then a fragmentation—which Harvey equates to Fredric Jameson’s idea of schizophrenia—of the group, leaving individuals to fend for themselves.¹⁵

Although Harvey is a little dubious about anyone’s ability to definitively define postmodernism, fragmentation and reliance on language and symbols are at the heart of his

¹² Ibid., 287.

¹³ Ibid., 214.

¹⁴ Ibid., 260-61.

¹⁵ Ibid., 53, 240.

definition.¹⁶ Postmodernism, he says, “wallows” in fragmentation, ephemerality, discontinuity, and chaos.¹⁷ It relies on discourse and “language games” that seek to overthrow totalizing meta-narratives; texts—both literal and cultural—are no longer read, but deconstructed in ways that emphasize their intertextuality and the impossibility of their conveying any intentional meaning.¹⁸ Instead of meta-narratives, postmodernism focuses on local determinism and an affinity for otherness. Harvey says, “the idea that all groups have a right to speak for themselves, in their own voice, and have that voice accepted as authentic and legitimate is essential to the pluralistic stance of postmodernism.”¹⁹ Postmodernity also emphasizes surfaces (or “depthlessness”), instantaneity, and a view of history that presents the past as simply “a reserve of equal events.”²⁰ Built on a cultural commodification driven by a mass-culture audience, Harvey argues that postmodernism is “nothing more than a logical extension of the power of the market over the whole range of cultural production.”²¹ Imbedded within cultural production are ideas about the acquisition and control of “symbolic capital,” the goods—including money and its representations—that “attest to the taste and distinction of the owner.”²²

The concept of symbolic capital comes into its own when Harvey discusses the transition of the political economy from the rigidity of Fordism to flexible accumulation.

¹⁶ Harvey notes in his introduction that, “No one exactly agrees as to what is meant by the term, except, perhaps, that ‘postmodernism’ represents some kind of reaction to, or departure from, ‘modernism’. Since the meaning of modernism is also very confused, the reaction or departure known as ‘postmodernism’ is doubly so.” See *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 44-45, 49.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 58-59, 61.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 62.

²² *Ibid.*, 77.

Succinctly put, flexible accumulation “rests on flexibility with respect to labour processes, labour markets, products and patterns of consumption. It is characterized by the emergence of entirely new sectors of production, new ways of providing financial services, new markets, and, above all, greatly intensified rates of commercial, technological and organizational innovation.”²³ Flexible accumulation’s emphases on a flexible workforce, entrepreneurialism, decentralization, mass marketing that promotes high-turnover based on ideas of “fashion” (a permutation of symbolic capital), the power to acquire and control wealth, and the ability to rapidly deploy and redeploy capital across geographical and political boundaries has made it the preferred form of capitalism in industrialized nations.

Because the global financial aspects of flexible accumulation require transnational coordination, Harvey sees a declension in national fiscal autonomy accompanied by a commensurate loss of political autonomy.²⁴ Harvey also notes that notion of entrepreneurialism, in particular, has had insidious ramifications as it has infiltrated the larger society. This new-found “entrepreneurial culture,” he posits, has seriously eroded “collective norms and values” in favor of a “rampant individualism” founded on intensified competition.²⁵ “Entrepreneurialism,” he says, “now characterizes not only business action, but realms of life as diverse as urban governance, the growth of informal sector production, labor market organization, research and development, and it has even reached into the nether corners of academic, literary, and artistic life.”²⁶

Taken altogether, Harvey sees postmodernism as a triumph of reactionary neo-

²³ Ibid., 147.

²⁴ Ibid., 164.

²⁵ Ibid., 171.

²⁶ Ibid.

conservatism that gives with one hand and takes away with the other.²⁷

Postmodernism has us accepting the reifications and partitionings, actually celebrating the activity of masking and cover-up, all the fetishisms of locality, place, or social grouping, while denying that kind of meta-theory which can grasp the political–economic processes (money flows, international divisions of labour, financial markets, and the like) that are becoming ever more universalizing in their depth, intensity, reach and power over daily life.

Worst of all, while it opens up a radical prospect by acknowledging the authenticity of other voices, postmodernist thinking immediately shuts off those other voices from access to more universal sources of power by ghettoizing them within an opaque otherness, the specificity of this or that language game.²⁸

A BRIEF, BUT BROAD, CRITIQUE

Harvey’s discussion of postmodernity, like others, assumes a universality that may not hold true outside of the industrialized world. Predicated on the universality of capitalism, his theories of flexible accumulation may be moot in a country with few resources, limited industrial production, an immobile workforce, and an absence of consumerism. Similarly, perceptions of time differ from place to place. While Harvey invokes different senses of time—for example, “cyclical time,” “family time,” “industrial time,” and the nine varieties of “social times” defined by Georges Gurvitch—all are based on the temporal concepts of “modern society.”²⁹ But what happens when the pace of a contemporary society—say one with an ageing or nonexistent telecommunications infrastructure—is significantly different? Clearly, while the general outlines of his idea of time–space compression may still work, you run into a situation in which societies with different temporal concepts can and do co-exist. Problems are certain to arise when and where those societies engage each other and it seems likely that, in those areas of interface, time–space compression would have to become an

²⁷ Ibid., 116.

²⁸ Ibid., 117.

²⁹ Ibid., 202, 224-25.

elastic concept in order to accommodate both rates of change.

Finally, Harvey does not adequately consider how time–space compression can work to create new groups from the fragments of the old. Although he notes Marshall McLuhan’s somewhat premature discovery of the “global village” in the 1960s, Harvey does not have the benefit of Benedict Anderson’s idea of “imagined communities” (Anderson’s *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and the Spread of Nationalism* was not published until 1991) or a cogent understanding of the latent possibilities of the virtual geography being created within the World Wide Web. But, by the end of the twentieth century, virtual communities were coalescing in new forms of group representation—the listserv, the chat room, the blog, instant messaging—that were based on a new understanding of the symbolic orderings of space and time. The world had become not a single global village but a googol of global villages that were constantly forming and reforming in response to the dynamics of time–space compression.

PUTTING THE IDEAS TO WORK

The trenchancy of Harvey’s conclusion is nowhere more apparent than in the United States in the last part of the twentieth century (and into the twenty-first). While neo-conservatism reached new heights with the election of George W. Bush in 2000, it fed on already ascendant ideas of individualism, consumerism, and an unrestrained pursuit of wealth coupled to a new *laissez faire* (“deregulation”) that encouraged an anything-goes mentality. The result, however, often alienated individuals and seemingly fractured society into a variety of groups, all fighting to assert their representations. While these trends can be detected in almost all of the readings we looked at in the last six weeks, in the interest of time–space compression I will briefly look at how Harvey’s ideas can be applied to just three: Aaron L. Friedberg’s *In the Shadow of the Garrison State: Americas’ Anti-Statism and*

Its Cold War Grand Strategy, Melani McAlister's *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000*, and Nelson Lichtenstein's *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor*.

Friedberg's *In the Shadow of the Garrison State*, with its adherence to the meta-narrative, is the most un-postmodern of the bunch in both approach and content—if anything it can be seen as a relic from “heroic” or “reactionary” modernism. In arguing that the United States is fundamentally anti-statist and that the best decisions are made in a free-market environment, Friedberg exemplifies a kind of rampant nationalistic individualism that strongly advocates flexible accumulation. Friedberg, however, makes it clear that the benefits of such approaches trickled down to a “penumbra of employees, suppliers, and municipalities” who, in their own rampant individualism and pursuit of the benefits of flexible accumulation, provided a potent foil to the peaceniks who might have disastrously “settled” with the Soviet Union.³⁰ “Perhaps after all,” Friedberg concludes, “as they pursued their own interests, the much-reviled members of the ‘military-industrial complex’ did good by doing well.”³¹ This statement betrays the kind of postmodernist thought that Harvey most loathes: the triumph of the aesthetic over the ethical.³² Friedberg fails to consider what “doing good by doing well” cost both in squandered treasure and lives. The largest Cold War conflict, the Vietnamese War, cost the United States more than \$120 billion and the Vietnamese, North and South, 4 million dead.³³

³⁰ Aaron L. Friedberg, *In the Shadow of the Garrison State: America's Anti-Statism and Its Cold War Grand Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 345.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Harvey, 329.

³³ Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), 31, 11. Karnow's costs of war only cover the years 1965 to 1973. The number of Vietnamese killed in the war amounted to 10 percent of their population—an entire generation.

In a classic example of the workings of flexible accumulation, Friedberg touts as advantages the strategies that defense industries used to survive periodic changes in military spending: “Even when budgets were tight, contractors could usually be expected to survive by laying off workers, diversifying, or taking on small pieces of larger programs.”³⁴ Still, as an industry tightly bound up in nationalist interests, the military contractors seldom shifted capital or production outside national borders. The nation’s weapons of destruction remained Made in America.³⁵

McAlister’s *Epic Encounters* takes the most postmodernist approach of any book we looked at. In it, McAlister does her best to deconstruct the representations and symbols Americans have used to construct their ideas about the Middle East. Drawing on movies, books, and a plethora of images, she demonstrates how “cultural texts, foreign policy, and constructs of identity” intersect to create a self-perpetuating loop of cultural-policy production.³⁶ Like Harvey, McAlister is concerned with representations but sees them as the outcome of “imagined communities” that are rapidly morphing nationalist identities into post-nationalist ones.³⁷ In a nod toward the transformative powers of flexible accumulation and time–space compression, McAlister says, “Global capital, virtual communities, and mobile populations threaten both the nation’s political legitimacy and its status as an identity container. Postmodernity has produced it [*sic*] own powerful geographic imaginations, in

³⁴ Friedberg, 294-95.

³⁵ There are cracks in the nationalist character of the U.S. defense industry. For example, in the last seventy-two hours Reuters reported that Northrop Grumman Corp, one of the United States’ largest defense contractors, was teaming up with European Aeronautic, Defense & Space Co. (EADS), Europe’s largest defense contractor, to challenge Boeing Co. over a \$50 billion contract for air tankers. Friedberg should be proud. (See <http://www.reuters.com/newsArticle.jhtml?type=topNews&storyID=8736944>.)

³⁶ Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 276.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

which territory, community, and political affiliations are being reconfigured.”³⁸ These new imaginings of transnational identities, McAlister says, can be based on any number of widely shared interests, “be they religious communities or world music” but they do share the ability to challenge the “expansionist nationalism” of the United States.³⁹

Writing more than a decade after Harvey, McAlister does a better job evaluating the creation, spread, and impact of virtual communities. Still, as the current debate over the impact of blogging on the last national election and the future of the news media show, the acceleration of time–space compression in the virtual world is almost impossible to track—let alone critique—through publications chained to paper and ink.

Lichtenstein’s *State of the Union* keys in on some of the most insidious aspects of flexible accumulation and blames them, along with what Harvey would identify as rampant individualism, for the imperiled state of American labor. Lichtenstein says that by the late 1960s Fordist “rigidities” in capital investment, industrial production, and, crucially, union labor were perceived as making American industry more susceptible to recession and less competitive overall. In language that echoes both Harvey and Friedberg, Lichtenstein says the solution was sought in “flexible specialization” marked by “a more highly educated workforce, rapid shifts in production technology, small firms serving specialized markets, and the creative deployment of skilled labor.”⁴⁰ The impact on the American worker, Lichtenstein says, was cataclysmic and “stripped unions of their functional rationale and social legitimacy.”⁴¹

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 269.

⁴⁰ Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 218.

⁴¹ Ibid., 220.

Although Lichtenstein also credits the rise of “rights consciousness” as opposed to “industrial democracy” and a liberal critique of “monopoly unionism” for the decline of organized labor in the United States, he treads warily around the idea that these could be symptomatic of the rise of rampant individualism, that workers abandoned unions because they felt they could do better without them. He notes, briefly, that “working-class living standards doubled during the single generation following World War II (1947-73), and unemployment dropped to levels well below that of the first half of the century” while many corporations, themselves competing for a stable labor force, offered “their own version of the welfare state” to union and non-union workers alike.⁴² In short, union membership became irrelevant when workers could get the things they wanted without collective action. Indeed, Harvey notes that flexible accumulation, to a certain degree, depends on labor’s transition from collective action to rampant individualism.⁴³ To put it simply, as antithetical as it was to their long-term best interest, workers were driven by their desires to accumulate wealth—or, through “fashion,” the symbols of wealth—and abandoned collective action as unprofitable.

THREE HEADLINES AND A PICTURE

[Economy to improve in 2nd half of 2005](#) (Reuters, June 8, 2005)⁴⁴

[GM plans to cut 25,000 U.S. jobs](#) (*USA Today*, June 7, 2005)⁴⁵

[Google now most valuable media company](#) (Reuters, June 7, 2005)⁴⁶

⁴² Ibid., 13.

⁴³ Harvey, 171.

⁴⁴ See http://today.reuters.com/news/newsArticle.aspx?type=businessNews&storyID=2005-06-08T155823Z_01_N08506189_RTRIDST_0_BUSINESS-ECONOMY-FED-LIVINGSTON-DC.XML. Reuters’ slogan is “Know. Now.”

⁴⁵ See http://www.usatoday.com/money/autos/2005-06-07-gm-cuts_x.htm.

⁴⁶ See <http://www.reuters.com/newsArticle.jhtml?type=topNews&storyID=8727595>.



An Amish man unhooks his horse from a special buggy-only parking area outside the newly-opened Wal-mart store in Middlefield, Ohio, on Friday, June 3, 2005. Expanding their product line to appeal to the area's large Amish community, this Wal-mart sells giant blocks of ice and has an extensive fabric section. (AP Photo/Amy Sancetta)

CONCLUSION

There is a sense of unreality in America today, or, perhaps, surreality. Americans are assaulted on every front by competing and contradictory messages flying at them with unprecedented speed: War is peace, cutting jobs is good for the economy, the past and the future can exist today, bad is good.⁴⁷ With the advent of the Information Age and the ubiquitous presence of the Internet, citizens of the industrialized nations (particularly in the urban areas of the United States) have never before had access to so much “raw” information so quickly. Confronted with such abundance, however, few know what to do. They are ill-equipped to take in, sort, and evaluate—let alone rationally respond to—all the information they receive.⁴⁸ This is nothing new. Harvey locates one of modernism’s first crises of

⁴⁷ In a world of doublespeak, some social critics find George Orwell’s *1984* strikingly germane: In a biting short “mockumentary” that can be found online, the creator’s of *Epic 2014* give Winston Smith’s identity card a prominent role. See <http://www.robinsloan.com/epic/>.

⁴⁸ Not surprisingly, some are turning to technology for a solution to information overload. For example, [Google News](#) uses a “news aggregator” to gather stories from more than 4,500 sources worldwide and touts that its news page is assembled “without human intervention” using

representation in the information overload that led to the First World War. He attributes this breakdown in the modernist rationality to a sort of pre-combat fatigue:

In the summer of 1914, ‘the men in power lost their bearings in the hectic rush paced by flurries of telegrams, telephone conversations, memos, and press releases; hard-boiled politicians broke down and seasoned negotiators cracked under the pressure of tense confrontations and sleepless nights, agonizing over the probably disastrous consequence of their snap judgements and hasty actions.’ . . . the frenzy of diplomatic activity . . . broke down simply because enough decisions could not be made fast enough in enough locations to bring the warlike stresses under collective control.⁴⁹

Fast forward to 2005 and it is not just hard-boiled politicians and seasoned negotiators that are having a hard time coping, it is everyone.

But the current crisis of representation is tempered—some might say “infected”—with mass consumption, kaleidoscopic shifts in fashion, and a grasping, competitive rampant individualism. In a world where everyone is a potential competitor, old ideas of collective identity are susceptible to a critical deconstruction that leaves individuals adrift and often alienated from an increasingly pluralistic and value-relative world. Relationships are marked with superficiality and ephemerality and fragmentation in all things is exalted: Random is king. There is no question that American society is postmodern, the question is “what comes next?”

In trying to come to grips with this postmodernist world fifteen years ago, Harvey underestimated the ability of new, imagined communities to arise out of the chaos, but he did understand that cascading uncertainties tend to push people toward institutions that appear to

mathematical algorithms “to present the most relevant news first.” (See http://news.google.com/intl/en_us/about_google_news.html.) In one interesting experiment, programmers of [Newsmap](#) have attempted to rationalize Google News’s volume into a visual matrix that reveals the frequency with which news items appear. Using frequency, however, is a poor way to assess a news story’s importance or relevancy: The “news” about the winner of the Miss Universe contest can (and did) rank higher than negotiations over North Korea’s nuclear weaponry. (See <http://www.marumushi.com/apps/newsmap/>.)

⁴⁹ Harvey, 278.

offer stability: the family, religion, and the state.⁵⁰ Writing in 1990—well before George W. Bush squeaked into office supported by a neo-conservative coalition that preached the need to “return” to Christian morality and “family values”—Harvey noted that there is “abundant evidence of a revival of support for such institutions and the values they represent.”⁵¹ In retrospect, he was correct but it may be that that the new imagined communities born out of the time–space compression that has created the current crisis of representation may provide an antidote to the ills of neo-conservatism.

Or maybe not.

Does it matter?

⁵⁰ Ibid., 171.

⁵¹ Ibid.