

## Impure Postmodernity - Philosophy Today

It brings me great pleasure that this book has become available in China. The book tries to bring together and to contrast two thinkers who are important for understanding what is going on in the modern-postmodern world. But if that world is to become "our" world, dialogue will have to create an actual global "we." China is crucially important in the dialogue, because of its size and its combination of long historical continuity with social experimentation. I am grateful to my skilled translator, Pei-Hong Zang, for making it possible for me to contribute more fully to that dialogue.

## Hegel and Heidegger Today

Why then read about two German thinkers? Despite all the attacks that he has suffered Hegel remains relevant today. Even with his personal Eurocentrism, Hegel tries to develop a philosophy that does not begin from any particular national or traditional foundation. His is one of the first and still one of the most sophisticated attempts to create a philosophy that refuses any foundation that would be accepted as a first principle or primary datum. Hegel combines this with the attempt to deliver concrete insight into many fields of life. His discussions of the relation of the state and the economy, his acknowledgment of the liberating role of markets along with his refusal to equate human welfare with market efficiency, his investigations of the condition of art in the modern world, his way of avoiding the extremes of individualism and collectivism, his studies of the nature of thought and of philosophy, all these remain important.

In a similar fashion Heidegger remains relevant. Whatever his personal and political failings, his is perhaps the most sophisticated way of coming close to Hegel while differing profoundly from him. He too examines individual and community, the status of art, and the nature of thought and philosophy. He probes the nature of technological society, and if, as I think, his ideas about technology and society are flawed, he has still been the inspiration for other often more nuanced critiques.

Hegel and Heidegger and their mutual confrontation are crucial to understanding our modern and postmodern situation. Besides their general influence, they have affected the expansion of Marxist thought into varieties of critical theory. They, together with Nietzsche, are basic background to more recent thinkers such as Derrida, who like Heidegger finds himself caught in a nearness-distance tension with Hegel, and Deleuze, who while deeply and resolutely anti-Hegelian still faces many of the same issues. (One of the subtexts of this book is that the French reading of Hegel by Kojève, against which Deleuze and others are reacting, is quite mistaken.)

## Modern and Postmodern Today

Our world -- as we struggle to create a shared and equal dialogue that would

make it "our" world -- tries to understand its situation through concepts such as modernity and postmodernity. These are not just popular labels; they represent long labors of thought that tries to grasp in just what ways recent modes living no longer stay within the more fixed horizons of traditional societies. Is it just that the rate of change and reinterpretation has increased, or are there new kinds of societies and institutions, new identities, selves, and thoughts?

This book concentrates first on the term *modern* and its implications in Hegel and Heidegger, and their complex approvals and critiques of modernity. Then, it begins to use the term *postmodern*. After this book I wrote another that dealt with postmodernism in the theory of knowledge and in architectural theory (*Postmodern Sophistications*). More recently, though, the term *postmodern* has acquired so many meanings that it is not as useful as it once was.

In architecture (one of its original contexts) the term *postmodern* started by naming a liberating reaction against what were perceived as the narrow strictures of orthodox modernist architecture. Then the term acquired positive content as the architectural reassertion of particular local histories. Then it became narrowed down to ironic historicist styles of surface decoration for modern boxes. Now it often functions as a term of abuse in architectural discourse. Also, places and buildings have been described as postmodern if they make room for decentered fluid identities for selves and bodies and communities.

In the other arts the situation has been too complex to be caught by any simple dichotomy between modern and postmodern. Still, *postmodern* often denoted reactions against perceived modernist orthodoxies or abstractions. Postmodern novels became fragmented and ironic, postmodern paintings mixed media and crossed genre boundaries. However, in fiction and poetry and painting and cinema, the line between the strong modernist and the postmodernist has never been so clear as it was in architecture. Indeed, Lyotard could confidently say that the postmodern was that part of the modern that abandoned the solace of good form and the ideal of harmony or totality. Recently, whether from older artistic traditions or from resurgent modernists, there has come a reaction against such claims and a reassertion of the "purity" of architecture and the value of abstraction. It is true, though, that the postmodern and the modern share the goal of removing barriers to the expansion of human possibilities.

In philosophy the term postmodern has become associated with deconstruction and other "French" movements that are taken by their proponents to liberate selves, communities, and bodies from the oppressions of modern rational or bureaucratic totalities. Rationality, transparency, autonomy, control, progress -- the values of the Enlightenment -- are not so much denied as deconstructed. That is, their pretensions to absoluteness and totality are questioned and they are located within a field of other values and activities which they can no longer be taken as defining or dominating.

To this is often added the claim that while society and persons cannot live in a state of pure fluidity and some structures and processes are needed, creating structure is an exercise of power in an act of decision that cannot be the result of any rational calculation or algorithm (which is not to say that it is context-free or may not be strategically useful). Here postmodern analyses join with the identity politics and liberations that stem from older (and still "modernist") movements such as Marxism, and from Nietzschean and psychoanalytic cultural studies, which refuse to take the socially given or the "natural" at face value.

As in the arts, there have been strong reactions against the philosophical and cultural-political movements named by the term *postmodern*. They are seen as at best frivolous play when serious analysis is needed, and at worst a nihilistic degeneration of identity and community by a vicious relativism and refusal of rationality and shared values.

The debate about postmodernism itself has a totalizing character that obscures insight by demanding that we align ourselves with one or the other extreme position. There is much that is good and liberating about postmodernist attempts to multiply and question the absoluteness of unities. The older "classical" modes of central unity in society, economy, self, art, and thought are being rightly challenged, and we need concepts of new modes of unity that are less oppressive yet still acknowledge our interdependence and co-creation. Hegel's ideas about mutual recognition need to be restated in new ways today.

The postmodern attack on centered unities is often accompanied by a rhetoric of fragmented identities, masks, irony, play, inner distances and tearings. Insofar as this is a letting go of self-imposed restrictions it is, despite its anti-Enlightenment rhetoric, a continuation of the Enlightenment that Kant defines as a freedom from self-(and other)-imposed tutelage. It can, though, be read by opponents of postmodernism as avoiding substantive commitments and the "serious" business of life. Both Hegel and Heidegger are extremely "serious" philosophers opposed to ironic living, and yet each tries to think kinds of inner distances and inner disunities within self and society, so they may have things to teach us as we try to work out new modes of de-centered selfhood and community.

There is a process of self-reinterpretation and self-construction with no core unity doing the process. Unities and centers emerge within the process; they do not dominate it, and they are never totally successful, whether in society or in the self. Hegel and Heidegger are in deep dispute about the kind of reflection that philosophy needs to think these disunities and internal tensions.

In my comparison of Hegel and Heidegger I argued that we can accept neither Hegel's full transparency nor Heidegger's mystifying history of being and his totalizing attack on technology. We should be alert for the ways in which new unities and new modes of self and community are coming to be.

We are left to make our way with imperfect cognitive tools, always re-interpreting ourselves and our categories. That process has necessary conditions and forms that can be reflected on in something like Hegel's manner, but without achieving the detailed substantive guidance that he derives from such reflection.

We cannot forsake the "modern" aim of widening the field of available individual and social possibilities. It is not just that we should not do so, but that we are unable to do so without falling into bad faith. The awareness of alternatives cannot be erased, though it can be hidden or obscured by various forceful maneuvers.

## Eastern and Western Philosophy Today

One of the major ways we become aware of new possibilities today is in the encounter with global societies and traditions that can no longer be treated, in Hegel's fashion, as less developed than the European. Hegel's knowledge of China was limited to the sources available at the time, and in his philosophy of history Hegel combined the apparently unchanging quality of Chinese civilization with his own theories of development. For him China was a spatially separate civilization frozen at an earlier temporal stage of development, as were India and Persia and, in a different way, Africa.

Hegel's totalizing picture of these societies, and of his European nations, cannot stand against their internal differences and dynamisms. But there is a danger in some postmodern thinking that simply denies classical modes of unity. This postmodernism may try to fragment large unities, such as China or France, into smaller unities, perhaps regions or sexual preference groupings. But these, in turn, will fragment, and soon even the individual begins to fragment into a Nietzschean or Deleuzean crowd of desires and events. There is something right about this pursuit of difference, but unless handled with an eye for commonalities and new types of non-classical unities-in-difference, it fails as a basis for mutual dialogue or political action. Hegel and Heidegger try to think such new kinds of unities and multiplicities, though with mixed success.

Global encounter in philosophy can open us to new kinds of unity and multiplicity. The problems of unity and difference appear in world philosophy. But The standard duality of Eastern versus Western philosophy needs to be questioned, since both of these supposed traditions are themselves riven with differences. Western philosophy breaks into many groups and lineages, some fighting together, some ignoring each other. Eastern philosophy is even less unified, since the term includes several separate great traditions.

What lends some unity to the image of large unified philosophical blocs is that the varied components of, for example, Chinese philosophy have been in dialogue and dispute with one another for a long time. This does not lead to agreement, but it helps to locate themes and questions of mutual

concern, though the degree of commonality is often overestimated. While there was some contact between Chinese and Western philosophy before the twentieth century, dialogue has increased steadily. Now, that dialogue must expand.

Unfortunately there are traps along this path. One is the reduction of confrontation to exhibition: speakers get up and say "this is how we deal with that topic in Confucian (or Daoist, or Hindu or Greek or American) philosophy," showing off their possessions with little attempt to confront the alternatives or to question themselves. The other trap is conversion, where a person or group from one lineage moves completely into another. Little islands of Hindu philosophy appear in America; philosophy departments in Japan become mini Oxfords or Harvards.

Both of these dangers stem from treating philosophy more like religion, as a matter of giving testimony and seeking conversion to a received body of wisdom. Philosophical activity ought to be self-examination and self-criticism and dialogue. We should hope that the resources of the various traditions will be brought into global dialogue, and that all participants will be open to questioning the others, and to having their own positions challenged.

Some of my colleagues feel that the Chinese and Indian traditions are not well equipped for such dialogue because they are more concerned with handing down a set body of wisdom than with argumentative self-criticism of that wisdom. These colleagues say that while argumentation may be used with great subtlety to defend and elaborate the received wisdom, as in Buddhist logic or Neoconfucian debate, the received wisdom itself is not subject to argumentative challenge.

It is true that with Socrates Western philosophy began by rejecting any received wisdom and seeking rationally acceptable conclusions that needed no traditional backing. Yet this is not so absent in other traditions. The disputes among the schools of Neoconfucianism are about the core message of Confucius, not about details. The disputes between the Hinayana and the Mahayana Buddhists concern the Buddha's basic teaching. It is true that these disputes presume that there is a received core to be transmitted, and that the masters are not treated as irreverently as is common in Western philosophy. On the other hand, what actually happens is a process of self-criticism, carried out in part through argument and in part by rival interpretation of texts, as in the Confucian case, or by the production of rival texts, as in the Buddhist. And when rival schools do not share so much, for example Vedanta and Carvaka in India, then the kind of argument that goes on is not too distinguishable from the Socratic methods.

Philosophy is paradoxically always trying to be more than it is, always trying to examine and state its own limits, refusing to be the handmaid of a fixed tradition and a fixed language. The search for absolute certainty and sure foundations in philosophy has been increasingly criticized since the early nineteenth century. But that does not mean an easy relativism, where

philosophy settles down in a socially dictated role. Today more and more philosophers, whether or not they call themselves postmodern, recognize the need for expanded methods that involve radical questioning, while reinterpreting older texts. There is a complex interplay between the inherence of argumentation in a shared language, *and* the movement of thought that goes beyond and examines its own rootedness. As Hegel says in another context, the problem is to understand that "and." For living that combination of roots and refusals, history and openness, both Hegel and Heidegger have skills to teach us, though we must deal with them in our own time.

David Kolb  
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