

Values of the Post-Modern Communities: Issues and Resolutions

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To understand “post-modernism”, we need to understand first – what is “modern”, and what is “modernism”?

The word "modern" refer, generically, to the contemporaneous. In that sense, everything done at a given time, all is modern at the time it is done. In his *Il Libro dell'Arte* (translated as "The Craftsman's Handbook") in 1437, Cennino Cennini explains that Giotto made painting "modern"¹. Giorgio

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¹ For references used for various information given in this paper, please See: Joan DeJean, *Ancients against Moderns: Culture Wars and the Making of a Fin de Siècle*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997. Suzi Gablik, *Has Modernism Failed?* New York: Thames & Hudson, [1984] 1986. Charles Jencks, *Post-Modernism: The New Classicism in Art and Architecture*, New York, 1987. Christopher L.C.E. Witcombe, “Modernism” in *What is Art?...What is an Artist?* (1997) Also: Leone Battista Alberti, *On Painting and On Sculpture*, ed. and trans. Cecil Grayson, London, 1972; Alberti, *Art and Its Significance: An Anthology of Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Stephan David Ross, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984. Moshe Barasch, *Theories of Art from Plato to Wincklemann*, New York: New York University Press, 1985. Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*. 2nd ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992. Hans Belting, *The End of the History of Art?* trans. Christopher S. Wood, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987. Anthony Blunt, *Artistic Theory in Italy 1450-1600*, Oxford: Clarendon, [1940] 1956. Victor Burgin, *The End of Art Theory*, Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities International Press, [1986] 1988. L. B. Cebik, *Nonaesthetic Issues in the Philosophy of Art*, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1995. Cennino Cennini, *The Craftsman's Handbook: Il Libro dell'arte*, trans. D. V. Thompson, Jr., New York, 1933. Bruce Cole, *The Renaissance Artist at Work*, New York: Harper and Row, 1983. Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997. Samuel Y. Edgerton, Jr., *The Heritage of Giotto's Geometry: Art and Science on the eve of the Scientific Revolution*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991. Suzi Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art*, New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991. Robert Goldwater and Marco Treves, eds., *Artists on Art*, New York: Pantheon,

Vasari writing in 16th-century Italy refers to the art of his own period as "modern."

However, as a phenomenon, modernism does not simply mean to be contemporaneous. It is more than that – and actually, in a post-modernist context, not even that. Modernism is an outcome of the philosophy of modernism which gives its aims and goals. This philosophy is the shaper of the modern period of European – and thereby, Western – history and society. This Western “modern” period began with the Renaissance.

The European Renaissance

The Renaissance brought about few new phenomena in Western thinking, all with a common thread of Anthropomorphism:

- a. secular humanism,
- b. the notion that man (not God) is the measure of all things,
- c. a worldly civic consciousness, and "utopian" visions of a more perfect society, beginning with Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* in 1516.

The Renaissance humanism gave rise to the modernist **confidence that humankind can**

- i. **learn nature and natural forces;**
- ii. **understand nature and natural forces;**
- iii. **grasp the nature of the universe; and then**
- iv. **master nature and natural forces; and ,**
- v. **shape our individual destinies and v) shape the future of the world.**

The Renaissance thinking embodying the above ingredients - a) to c) and I) to v) - which emerged in the Renaissance, began to take shape as **a larger pattern of thought in the 18th century**. A "Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns," dominated European intellectual life throughout the century. **The crux was the issue of whether Moderns (i.e. those living in 18th century) were now morally and artistically superior to the Ancients (i.e. the**

1945. Ernst H. Gombrich, 'The Renaissance Conception of Artistic Progress and its Consequences', in *Norm and Form: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance*, London, 1971, pp. 1-10. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, Oxford: Blackwell, [1992] 1993. *Hegel's Philosophy of Fine Art: Introduction*. Trans. by Bernard Bosanquet. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1905. Hugh Honour, *Romanticism*, London: Penguin, 1979. *Kant's Critique of Judgement*. Trans. by J. H. Bernard. London: Macmillan, 1914.

Greeks and Romans). The argument introduces an important dichotomy that is to remain fundamental to the modernist question. In it may be recognized the division between **conservative forces, who tended to support the argument for the Ancients**, and the more **progressive forces who sided with the Moderns**.

The European “Age of Enlightenment”

Two related aspects of the Renaissance were the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment. In the 17th and early 18th centuries, men like Galileo Galilei and Isaac Newton, through the application of Reason to the study of Nature (i.e. our world and the heavens), made spectacular scientific discoveries in which were revealed various scientific “truths”. Through such discoveries, came about the West European “Scientific Revolution” in the 17th and early 18th centuries. The “scientific” truths brought forth through the Scientific Revolution, more often than not flew in the face of conventional beliefs, especially those held by the Church. For example, contrary to what the Church had maintained for centuries, the "truth" was that the Earth revolved around the sun. The idea that "truth" could be discovered through the application of Reason was tremendously exciting. This Scientific Revolution brought about an intellectual movement, called the Enlightenment. The 18th century turned into the Age of Enlightenment, where the humanist belief in **Reason** as the supreme guiding principle in the affairs of humankind – achieved its intellectual maturation. Through reason the mind achieved enlightenment, and for the enlightened mind, freed from the restraints of “superstition and ignorance” – Religion and Faith was dumped together with superstition and ignorance -, a whole new exciting world opened up.

The Enlightenment-affected thinkers of the 18th-century believed that virtually **everything could be submitted to Reason**: tradition, faith/religion, customs, history, art. But, more than this, it was felt that the "truth" revealed thereby could be applied in the political and social spheres to "correct" problems and "improve" the political and social condition of humankind. This kind of thinking quickly gave rise to the exciting possibility of creating a new and better society. Some attempts in that direction, however, in the long run, took on monstrous dimensions. For example, Darwinism led to Social Darwinism, which contributed to Racism as a political ideology and Nazism as its exacerbated form.

One result of the obsession with scientific “truth” was the belief that, Truth means only the "truth" discovered through **Reason; and that such truth – and only such truth - would free people from** the shackles of corrupt institutions such as **the Church and the Monarchy** whose misguided

traditional thinking and old ideas had kept people subjugated in ignorance and superstition. Soon enough the Church was replaced by Religion, and Monarchy by Elders – as the target of modernist attacks. The idea became that scientific truth discovered by Reason only shall set you free from Religion and the Elders in the society

The belief and insistence that "the truth shall set you free" led to a situation where, the concept of **freedom became central to the vision of a new society**. It was believed now that, through truth and freedom, the world would be made into a better place.

One other result of this kind of belief and thinking was the rise of individualism at the expense of the social ethos. Modernist 18th-century thinkers believed that the lot of humankind would be greatly improved through the process of enlightenment, from being shown the truth. With Reason and Truth in hand, the **individual** would no longer be at the mercy of religious and secular authorities which had constructed their own truths and manipulated them to their own self-serving ends. At the root of this thinking is the belief in the perfectibility of humankind. And one result became, centrality of the individual – in thinking of thinkers wishing reform or betterment of people and society.

The vision that began to take shape in the 18th century was of a new world, a better world. In 1763, Jean-Jacques **Rousseau proposed a new society for the individual in his *Inquiry into the Nature of the Social Contract***. Rousseau declared the right of liberty and equality for all men. Such declarations were made first in books, but were soon tried in practice as well in. **In the 18th century, two major attempts were made to put these ideas into practice**. Such ideas, of course, were not popular with conservative and traditional elements, and their resistance had to be overcome in both cases through bloody revolution.

The first major case of such an experiment in creating a new and better society was undertaken in North America. The new ideals were first expressed in the American Declaration of Independence of 1776 – by the new Government of the newly founded United States. It was Enlightenment thinking that brought about, in the Declaration, such phrases as "we hold these truths to be self-evident". It was, again, Enlightenment thinking that brought about, in the Declaration, the notion "that all men are created equal." The worldly – **secular** – character of the American Declaration of Independence is clearly reflected in its stated concern for man's happiness and welfare in this lifetime - a new notion that runs counter to the Christian

focus on the afterlife. The American Declaration of Independence also brought forth in practical terms, the notion of **freedom, liberty**; it was declared one of man's inalienable rights.

In 1789, the French revolutionaries also attempted, through a bloody revolution, to create a new society - with the s rallying to the cry of equality, fraternity, and liberty. The French Revolution, however, failed to bring about a radically new society in France. A third major attempt to create a new society along fundamentally Enlightenment lines took place at the beginning of the 20th century: through the Russian Revolution, perhaps the most idealistic and utopian of all. It has also failed.

Modernism

It is in the ideals of the Enlightenment discussed above - that the roots of Modernism, are to be found. Simply put, the overarching goal of Modernism, has been the creation of a better society based on Enlightenment ideals of freedom, reason, individualism, and humanism as opposed to obedience to Divine institutions and authority, faith, social ethos, and Religion as embodiment of Deism.

It was the 18th-century belief that only the enlightened mind can find truth. It was believed that, both enlightenment and truth were discovered through the application of reason to knowledge, a process that also created new knowledge. The individual acquired knowledge through discovering truth in it through proper education and instruction. It was believed that, cleansed of the corruptions of religious and political ideology by open-minded reason, education brings us the truth, or shows us how to reach the truth. Education enlightens us and makes us better people. Educated enlightened people will form the foundations of the new society, a society which they will create through their own efforts.

Until recently, this concept of **the role of education has remained fundamental to western modernist** thinking. Enlightened thinkers, and here might be mentioned for example Thomas Jefferson, constantly pursued knowledge, **sifting out the truth by subjecting all they learned to reasoned analysis**. Jefferson, of course, not only consciously cultivated his own enlightenment, but also actively promoted education for others, founding in Charlottesville an academical village that later became the University of Virginia. He believed that the search for truth should be conducted without prejudice, and, mindful of the Enlightenment suspicion of the Church, deliberately did not include a chapel in his plans on the campus.

The Church and its narrow-minded influences, he felt, **should be kept separate** not only **from the State**, but also from **Education**.

Jefferson, like many other Enlightenment thinkers, saw a clear role for art and architecture. Art and architecture could serve in this process of enlightenment education by providing examples of those **qualities and virtues that it was felt the enlightened mind should be guided by**.

In the latter half of the 18th century, the model for the ideals of the new society was the world of ancient Rome and Greece. The Athens of Pericles and Rome of the Republican period offered fine examples of **emerging democratic principles in government**, and of **heroism and virtuous action, self-sacrifice and civic dedication in the behaviour of their citizens**.

It was believed, in fact, certainly according to the "ancients" in that quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns mentioned earlier, that the ancient world had achieved a kind of perfection, an ideal that came close to the Enlightenment understanding of truth.

Modernists saw a specific, contributory role for art, like that for education, in building a new society. Speaking as a member of the Revolutionary Committee on Public Instruction a few years later he explains that the Committee:

considered the arts in all respects by which they should help spread the progress of the human spirit, to propagate and transmit to posterity the striking example of the sublime efforts of an immense people, **guided by reason and philosophy, restoring to earth the reign of liberty, equality, and law**.

He states categorically that *"the arts should contribute forcefully to public instruction."*

With respect to the quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns, David can be associated with the supporters of the Ancients. He envisioned a new society based on conservative ideals. In contrast, there were others, we can call them Moderns, whose vision of a new world order was more progressive.

The Moderns envisioned a world conceived anew, not one that merely imitated ancient models. The problem for the Moderns, however, was that their new world was something of an unknown quantity. The nature of truth was problematical from the outset, and their **dilemma over the nature of**

humans who possessed not only a rational mind open to reason but also an emotional life (love, for example, which is demonstrably beyond all reason) which had to be taken into account.

It was also felt that **reason stifled imagination, and without imagination no progress would be made.** Reason alone was inhuman, but imagination without reason also "produces monsters" (see Francisco de Goya, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*). **It was agreed, though, that freedom was central and was to be pursued through the very exercise of freedom in the contemporary world.**

After the Revolution of 1789, the Ancients came to be identified with old order, the ancien régime, while the **Moderns became identified with a new movement we call Romanticism.** In the wake of the 1789 revolution, these two movements, each with their own vision of the future, were soon politicized.

The Ancients, on the one hand, were caste as politically conservative and associated with classicizing, academic art. On the other hand, the Moderns were seen as progressive in a left-wing, revolutionary sense and associated with anti-academic Romanticism.

Post-modernism

By the later half of the 20th century, it became clear that modernism is riddled with doubt about the continued viability of the notion of progress. The Marxist experiment to create a communist society – the ultimate modernist utopia - undertaken in the former Soviet Union, collapsed. Fundamentalism in nearly all of the world's major organized religions rose sharply in recent years in direct opposition to many ideals of modernism. For example, American Christian fundamentalists declare agreement with Martin Luther's comment that, "Reason is the greatest enemy that faith has; it struggles against the divine word, treating with contempt all that emanates from God."

By the last quarter of the 21st century, growing number of people came to believe that modernism has failed to bring about a better world. The mass slaughter of the World Wars I and II, as well as other modern wars - achieved through the advances made in science and technology - was the result of the modernist commitment to "progress". This led people to begin question the value of the modernism itself. After the Second World War, optimism about building a perfect world through modernist ideals in practice, was difficult to sustain. With the advent of the Cold War and the constant

threat of nuclear destruction, any sort of future with unbridled capitalist-industrial advances of modernism, looked even more doubtful.

In the search for reasons to explain the failure of modernism, questions have necessarily been raised about the whole Western humanist tradition at the root of modernism. Many have come to the conclusion that, the worldview fostered by the Western humanist tradition - through modernism - is flawed, corrupt, and oppressive. The events of the 20th century, including the World Wars, Cold War, and senseless destruction through most advanced modern technology in many other wars since – planned and executed in mechanized “logic” devoid of emotions - and the perception of those events - have given rise to the conclusion amongst many that, that modernism is now floundering and directionless. This means, in reality, the end of modernism.

With the end of modernism, we then, now, face a new period. Some have called this new period - that of “Postmodernism”.

Postmodernism has taken on two broad forms. The one most hostile to its predecessor – modernism – is called, “Deconstructive Postmodernism”. In that sense, it means anti-modern. The anti-modern stance of post-modernism – the “deconstructivist “ stance - involves a basic rejection of the major tenets of modernism. **A rejection of:**

- a. the doctrine of the supremacy of Reason;**
- b. the notion of truth being only that “scientifically discovered”;**
- c. the belief in the perfectability of man; and**
- d. the idea that we could create a perfect, society.**

Deconstructive postmodernism seeks to destroy the modern worldview. It seeks to destroy also the assumptions that sustain it. It "deconstructs" the ideas and values of modernism to reveal what composes them and shows that such modernist ideas as "equality" and "liberty" are not "natural" to humankind or "true" to human nature - but are ideals, existable only in intellectual constructions. Through such a process of taking apart the modernist worldview, the deconstructionist post-modernists reveal modernism's constituent parts and lays bare modernism's fundamental assumptions. Then, they raise questions who were responsible for these constructions, and what were their motives behind constructing such ideals and assumptions? Who does modernism serve? From history, it is clear that modernist culture is Western in its orientation, capitalist in its determining economic tendency, bourgeois in its class character, white in its racial complexion, and masculine in its dominant gender. As such, post-modernists

of this genre are ipso facto, against dominant Western culture, capitalist economy, bourgeois class-identity, White racism, unbridled patriarchy.

Deconstructive postmodernism is not only anti-modern, but in its extreme, can go beyond – to nihilism. In that extreme form, it seeks to eliminate the ingredients not only of the modernist world-view, but of world-view *per se*. Such concepts necessary for any worldview as: a Supreme Being, self, purpose, meaning, a real world, and truth.

Resolution?: Constructive Postmodernism

The resolution of the conflict between the oppressive world-view of modernism originally launched in the name of freedom and Reason – and the deconstructive postmodernism, tending to destroy even the basic fabric of society and human mind, probably lies in what has been termed, “Constructive Postmodernism”. This alternative understanding of postmodernism, seeks to revise the premises of modernism- rather than destroy everything that modernism stood for, or derived its antecedents from.

Constructive postmodernism does not reject all ingredients or underlying assumptions of modernism. Instead it seeks to revise its premises, and supplement – humanize – them, with functional, traditional concepts. Like deconstructive postmodernism, it attempts to erase all state-boundaries, and to undermine the claimed legitimacy of the state as the ultimate political manifestation of oppressive modernism. Like the deconstructionist postmodernists, the constructionist postmodernists also seek to dislodge the logic and the existence of the modernist state. And all its oppressive ramifications and results in the arena of economy, class-relation, individual-society nexus, education and art, etc.

For this, constructive postmodernism offers a new, wholistic unity of scientific, ethical, aesthetic, and religious intuitions. It rejects not science as such, but only that scientific approach in which only the data of the modern natural sciences are allowed to contribute to the construction of our worldview.

As a part of this wholistic postmodernist world view, constructive postmodernism proposes also a return to pre-modern notions of divinely wrought reality, of cosmic meaning, and an enchanted nature. In its version of scientific inquiry as a means to “truth” that shall free Man – it includes use of non-sensory perception as much a mechanism for that inquiry, as the sensory-perceptive mechanisms preferred by “modernist” science. Rather than rejecting the pre-modern past, constructive postmodernism seeks to recover truths and values from various forms of pre-modern forms of thought

and practice – including Religion. Constructive postmodernism views modernism and its result – modernity - as threatening the very survival of life on the planet. Postmodernism of this category, wants to replace such modernism and modern with its own new world-view.

Some aspects of constructive postmodernism have been reflected in the so-called "New Age" thinking. The possibility that mankind is standing on the threshold of a new age informs much postmodernist thought. However, the New Age movement is not necessarily entirely postmodern, nor is it the only movement that has taken on postmodernist outlook, ideals, or life-styles. In some sense, New Age movement have derailed from the postmodernist path. In some sense, many other movements – such as the new faith movements in the West – are moving onward on the postmodernist path of the constructive variety.

Modernism seeks closure in form and is concerned with conclusions, postmodernism is open, unbounded, and concerned with process and "becoming." The post-modern Man is creative, is self-aware and consciously involved in a process of thinking about himself and society - "de-masking" pretensions - becoming aware of his/her cultural self in history, and accelerating the process of self-consciousness. This sort of sensitivity to cultural, ethnic, and human conditions and experiences has been ridiculed by modernists and conservatives alike. But postmodernists might take being ridiculed as yet another dimension of being post-modernists by values of the pre-modern they like to bring back. After all, being ridicule had been the lot of all the inspired ones of the yesteryears of pre-modern eternal Past.