postmaterialism

A term coined by Inglehart (1977) for societies in which there has been a "cultural shift" in political attitudes away from issues of production and distribution. The combination of affluence and a strong welfare state eases the salience of class-based politics (CLAVAGE), which are replaced by approaches reflecting environmental concerns along with what Inglehart terms "orientations towards work, fertility, and consumption goals".

Reference

Suggested Reading

postmodernism

A movement in art, the social sciences, and the cultural world characterized by skepticism towards the grand claims and grand theories of the modern era with its privileged EPISTEMOLOGICAL Vantage point for the artist, theorist, or observer (decried by Rorty as the "God's eye view"), and bearing an equal suspicion of changeless, foundational relationships that escape the contingencies of time and space (cf. FOUNDATIONALISM). Instead, interpretations of the phenomena are regarded as socially constituted, contingent, and partial, so that postmodern positions stress an openness to a range of voices and perspectives in social inquiry, artistic experimentation, and political empowerment (Lyotard, 1984). PLURALISM, then, is endemic to postmodernism, and the term is often used generically to refer loosely to a series of more specific perspectives (such as POST-STRUCTURALISM, POST-COLONIALISM, and even feminism; see FEMINIST GEOPOLITICALITIES) that share these anti-foundational features. Consequently, while this much may be said, there is agreement about little else (though for classificatory attempts, see Hassan, 1985, and Jenecks, 1993). The babbles of voices around postmodernism is also intermixed with the extraordinary disciplinary affiliations that emerge through philosophy, theology, the arts, and the social sciences. Indeed there is even a postmodern position in such apparently rational enlightenment fields as accounting and CARTOGRAPHY.

Nor in some fields is the break between modern and postmodern genres all that clear (cf. MODERNISM). If collage, for example, is a central feature of postmodernism as many in the arts assert (citing, perhaps, the works of David Salle) then it is salient to recall that collage was also part of the experimentation of the modern avant garde (Kern, 1983; Pred, 1995). So too the collapse of disparate elements in postmodern politics is calculated to stir the same strangeness to the familiar as was attempted by the modern tactic of defamiliarization. Even the stability of a fixed perspective, a God's eye view, was disrupted in the perspective pluralism of the cubists; both in the political Right and on the political Left, defensive of their own grand narratives, commonly engage in undifferentiated search and destroy missions. Symptomatic of the approach from the Left is Harvey's (1989) rejection of postmodern culture as an art of superficiality that simply functions as a surface alteration of the formal and institutional political-economic. In response, Deutscher (1995) has demonstrated how the work of some postmodern artists is not a reflection of surfaces but an interrogation of them. Cindy Sherman's-generic images of women, far from upholding superficial stereotypes, challenge the very act of social construction that reduces subjects to limited social roles. One can see the same attention to a more fluid and contingent treatment of identity in such authors as Margaret Atwood or Michael Ondaatje (Hutchinson, 1986).

Constructionism is also at the heart of the notion of modernity's categorical postmodern method. The recognition that reality, including knowledge, is a social product achieved by subjects with distinct subject positions, encourages a strategy of deconstruction, and a mode of critical interpretation that seeks to demonstrate how (the multiple) positioning of an author (or reader) in terms of CLASS, CULTURE, RACE, GENDER, etc. has influenced the writing (and reading) of a text (cf. POST-STRUCTURALISM). The determination of meaning, of fixed interpretations, throws into doubt both the ONTOLOGICAL certitude of reality and also the authority claims of interpreters. Positively, it prises loose alternative readings of texts, whether these take the form of literary criticism, CARTOGRAPHY, or LANSCEPSES. In human geography, Olsson (1980, 1991) was the earliest exponent of deconstruction and remains its most innovative and skillful practitioner. However, negatively, Olsson's work also shows the methodological weaknesses of a RELATIVISM that knows few limits. Given the uncertain (or at least contingent) ground upon which the observer stands, the scholar's claim to provide an adequate understanding of other people and places must be slender indeed. This crisis of representation has been a major
concern in recent theoretical writing on ETHNOGRAPHY (Clifford, 1988), and has given rise to the notion of ethnographies as fictions, that is, productions in which are embedded the unseen subjectivities of the author. How then does it become possible to represent the other when the shaping of that representation is so utterly contaminated by the author's own socialization?

It is at this stage that the epistemological challenges of postmodernism's radical perspectivalism become for many intolerable, and perhaps untenable. Radical perspectivalism or the strong constructionist programme appears to lead to an intellectual dead end, where entrapment within a socially constructed world allows little confidence in reaching beyond its borders for understanding (cf. Barnes, 1996). In this (over)socialized domain, the closure effected by internalized actions, VALUES and (especially) LANGUAGE refutes any meaningful knowledge of the other and thus also any meaningful politics. The strong programme may also encourage, ironically, its own ESSENTIALISM with attributes assigned to 'all men' or 'all gays' or 'all whites' on the basis of a single socialized standpoint. Bonnett (1996), for example, has identified this serious weakness in a number of anti-racist sources that, in their eagerness to expose RACISM, duplicate the mind of the racist in ascribing invariant characteristics to the homogeneous category of whiteness. The limitations of strong constructionism have been recognized by many authors, some of whom prefer a weak constructionism, much closer to the historic position of HERMENEUTICS. For while hermeneutics acknowledges the collision between the author and the data as an inescapable element in the production of knowledge, it is a realization that generates not paralysis but a series of best practices to limit and contain authorial distortions. This weaker position recognizes both the materiality and contingency of the world and readings of it; however, for foundationalists even the weaker form can be a betrayal of both science and politics (cf. Yapa, 1996, 1997; Shrestha, 1997).

References

Suggested Reading

postmodernity In contrast to POSTMODERNISM, postmodernity is usually regarded as the historic period when the social and economic processes associated with the postmodern turn have taken place. For a number of authors this periodization goes on to include its own content, so that postmodernity becomes not just an era but also the shorthand for the dominant processes of that period writ large in SOCIETY and SPACE. David Lyon, for example, writes 'Postmodernity...has to do with putative social changes. Either a new kind of society is coming into being, whose contours can already be dimly perceived, or a new stage of CAPITALISM is being inaugurated' (Lyon, 1994, p. 7). In his controversial interpretation, David Harvey selects the latter option: the condition of postmodernity is explained as the social and cultural forms flowing directly from the 'CRISIS