

Jean-Francois Lyotard's Postmodernism and the Contemporary World

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ABSTRACT

Postmodern technocrats seem to want to isolate themselves from all prior philosophical perspectives. To the postmodernist, there exists no absolute truth. The postmodernist believes that corruption is the dogma of the day and they offer no auspicious future. Although it may be accurate to portray the world existing in inequity and disproportionate states, prevailing protocols still guide behavior, actions, and outcome of groups and individuals. Even without such "absolute" reality, the world can and do glean adequate information to function relatively stable. Therefore, the extent to which postmodernists will seek to distort such reality should be rejected. Jean-Francois Lyotard, for example, opined that one should reject Kantian philosophy in totality on the basis that it is unrealistic for contemporary times. The realization that civilization builds upon earlier experiences should be enough to demonstrate that extracts of particular domains are important to the absolute whole but Lyotard conveniently escape that point.

Keywords: *Jean-Francois Lyotard, Postmodernism, Modernism, Traditionalism, The enlightenment movement, Kantianism, Utilitarianism*

1. INTRODUCTION

Postmodernists argue from an epistemological and ideological perspective [6] on the "condition of knowledge" [4, p. xxiii] especially within developed societies. Postmodernists reject the Kantian perspective that ethics depends on epistemology. In other words, a postmodernist would argue that practical reason (ethics) is not directly dependent upon pure reason (epistemology) [1]. The gravamen of the postmodernist therefore is to dispel as falsity the traditionalists and modernists view that science can and do establish "objective truth" [6, p. 1]. To the postmodernists, this distortion of objective truth undermines any facts associated with ethics and oppression [6]. Lyotard, a seminal theoretician, and foremost philosopher on postmodernism [2] proffered that massive transformation has occurred within the 20th century among the rules of "science, literature, and the arts" [4, p. xxiii] and posits that there is nothing new to conflicts between the narratives and science [4].

2. LYOTARD AND POSTMODERNISM

Lyotard hypothesize that as societies advance into the postindustrial and postmodern age, communities alter both knowledge and culture at a speed dependent upon the level of technological development of particular countries [4]. Lyotard argued that such transformation influences knowledge considerably. Knowledge, he opined, cannot be static in such changing circumstances and more profoundly, computer hegemony dictates reasoning and acceptable knowledge [4]. Lyotard argued that as societies advance into this postmodern era, one produces knowledge for sale, therefore knowledge "cease to be an end in itself" [4, p. 5].

In an attempt to underscore his understanding of knowledge, Lyotard noted that the purpose of a hypothesis should be strategic in relation to questions raised and not a predictive value for reality [4]. To do the latter would be trite because no one has ever questioned the cumulative outcome of scientific and technical

knowledge [4]. Lyotard opined that narrative knowledge is not above scientific knowledge but that "its model is related to ideas of internal equilibrium and conviviality next to which contemporary scientific knowledge cuts a poor figure" [4, p. 7]. Lyotard believed that scientific knowledge has been largely compromised "completely subordinated to the prevailing powers" [4, p. 8].

Lyotard hypothesize the pragmatic facts of language as utmost to understanding meaning. Lyotard noted the important role that the sender, the addressee, and the facts of the statement (referent) share. Lyotard stated that whenever referent utterances "coincide with its enunciation" [4, p. 9], the addressee do not have to verify or discuss its validity, but merely to accept it. In summarizing Wittgenstein's language game, Lyotard made three observations: (1) "their rules do not carry within themselves their own legitimation but are the object of contract" [4, p. 10], (2) "if there are no rules, there is no game" [4, p. 10], and (3) "every utterance should be thought of as a 'move' in a game" [4, p. 10].

Lyotard believed that one does not always play a game to win but that at times one may simply enjoy its pleasure and that such pleasure must generate success over the "adversary" [4, p. 10]. Lyotard concluded that this "observable social bond" constitutes language "moves" [4, p. 11].

Lyotard argued that if philosophy is to address knowledge in any serious way then society must regard its methodological representation and argued further that such divisions are (1) Talcott Parson's whole or (2) Marxist two functional parts [4]. Parson argued that where society ceases to be a whole then no society exist. Parson noted that the constituent elements for such "self-regulating" society are no longer the "living organism" but "cybernetics" that extends the models capabilities [4, p. 11].

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Liotard explained that Parson's perspective is optimistic because, maybe, its only objective is to maximize its global competitiveness [4] that he termed "performativity." Parson proffered that regarding the whole, processes or conditions either "contribute" to a system's development or destabilize it [4]. Liotard, believed this to be simplistic. Liotard argued that Horkheimer's "paranoia" of reason may set in. He cautioned however, that methodological self-regulation could only be paranoia if interpretation is protected from flatter or charm [4].

Liotard opined that social bond is irrelevant to contemporary societies because of the confluence of "techniques and technology" [4, p. 14]. Liotard posit that as society remove decision-making from administrators to machines, so too will the ruling class shift from the "traditional political class" to experts within the major professions [4]. Liotard argued that individuals recognize his or her insignificance within the "grand narrative" but noted that equally important are that no 'self' stands alone. His stronger point here is to state as fallacy that language games are prerequisites for society's existence [4].

Liotard posited that knowledge and science are not synonymous and therefore knowledge "cannot be reduced to science, nor even to learning" [4, p. 18]. Learning, he noted, are independent statements that conform to truth or deception whereas science is a subset of such statements although compromising explicit statements with conditions [4]. Liotard argued that knowledge is also about "know-how" and therefore extends beyond truth [4]. Liotard opined that such sentiment is true of custom. What denote good or bad custom, he argued, are acceptable and relevant rules.

Liotard presented two perspectives of legitimation and one of delegitimation of knowledge on his grand narrative thesis. Liotard argued that humans could be a hero for liberty where all persons have a right to science at the primary level or through universities where the relationship develops between "science, the nation, and the state" [4, p. 32]. Notwithstanding the foregoing, Liotard noted that the "grand narrative has lost its credibility" [4, p. 37] irrespective of whether the narrative is about liberation or theory.

Liotard noted that contemporary research is experiencing "two important changes" [4, p. 41] a multiplicity of methods and complexities. Liotard believed that such complexities and unconventional reasons diminish proof. Liotard believed that although the application is pragmatic, he calls into question what it is that constitute a correct axiomatic and by extension, what legitimizes outcome. As Liotard puts it, what becomes "pertinent to legitimation" [4, p. 42].

3. REACTION AND CRITIQUE

Liotard contested the function of metanarratives of modernism as construed by Marx or by the Enlightenment movement. Marx, for example, argued that metanarratives provides meaning for separate groups engaging in social and scientific endeavors beyond their own interpretations. Liotard argued that no such proof exist to satisfy such claim [2]. I would argue that a tremendous amount of what I know and treat as knowledge is a result of engaging in social and scientific endeavors. I would further opine that to dispel metanarrative in totality is somewhat ludicrous because society still favor the metanarratives.

In his language game, Liotard argued that the differend exists where no accepted rules can establish difference. Kant, noted however, that the sublime feeling is not from the object per se "but is an index of a unique state of mind which recognizes its incapacity to find an object to the sublime feeling" [2, p. 1] therefore, the sublime is the differend. Liotard is therefore delirious when he posit that the differend belong to a particular category or genre. To say that the differend is of a particular genre and that period solely, is to reject creative thinking [2]. My experience is that, especially in artistic, architecture, and other such similar endeavors, epochs cross and style influence style. Kant would seem far more relevant in this regard.

Liotard rejected the view of relativism and opined that thought is rooted in "a respect for differences among things, not relativism's respect for things" [1, p. 270]. However, Liotard demonstrates an unenviable respect for the differend. Notwithstanding, relativism posits that individual persons and cultures give meaning to truth, good, and evil [3, p. 1]. People's opinion differ on what constitute truth and therefore "relativism denies that there can be any objectivity in matters of truth and morality" [3, p. 1]. I would argue that both relativism and Liotard's treatment of the differend is somewhat skewed as Kant posits the sublime is the differend. If there is no objective truth, who is to decide on right and wrong and who is to decide on appropriate punishment and reward.

4. CONCLUSION

Liotard's postmodern perspective "offer no corpus praescriptum" [1, p. 271] for human existence. Nevertheless, his views evoke provocation and thought. Liotard's analysis invites the traditionalists and modernists to reassess contemporary thought given to meaning and self notwithstanding the inherent bias of his reasons.

Because Liotard reject truth, this rejection invites a free flow of power and may instill fear in individuals who may never know when to claim justice and rights. Individuals are therefore likely to be subjects of their master because they lack a sense of respect in the absence of clear truths.

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Lyotard postmodern analysis attempts to prevent “totalitarianism” [1, p. 272] but he miserably failed. His denying that justice and truth are independent of each other leaves the power hungry to advance his or her will at any cost to the governed. The history of man has enough evidence indicating that where there is no clear justice, the possibility for anarchy is never too distant.

As Lyotard himself stated, the need for that bridge “separating the discourse of knowledge, ethics, and politics” [5, p. 2] must occur for the sake of “unity of experience” but that unity can only manifest itself if there are clear and unambiguous understanding of reality.

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AUTHOR PROFILE

X. B. Charles Henry received his Masters degree in Management Information Systems from the University of the West Indies in 2003. He is currently pursuing his doctoral studies with University of Phoenix in Organizational Leadership with specialization in Information Systems and Technology. He is dedicated to conducting research and have many publications in multiple international peer reviewed Journals. He is the information technology manager for a large law firm in Kingston and lectures as an adjunct professor with the University College of the Caribbean, Kingston.