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<u>W</u>hat is 'postmodernism'?

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The term 'postmodernism' is a somewhat elusive one for it does not constitute an ideology, such as Marxism or liberalism, nor, as Callum Brown argues, is it a 'state of government or economy…[or even] a coherent set of beliefs'[1]. However, instead it has been suggested that postmodernism is in fact a theory *enabling* ideologies to exist in the, albeit questionably, postmodern period. This 'postmodern condition' is the embodiment of a rejection of empiricist values and philosophies (*not* methods however), where 'old fashioned certainty over knowledge and morality has been undermined'[2] and instead replaced with a theoretical agenda based on opposition to authoritative voices.

At its core, postmodernism holds one major fundamental principle; the denial of 'the possibility of true knowledge…[and] in more extreme versions [the denial of] a reality independent of language'[3]. This principle is based on the belief that reality is unable to be represented in an objective manner, thus only *versions* of reality exist, and 'with an inability to represent reality, no authoritative account can exist on anything'[4].

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[1] Callum Brown, *Postmodernism for Historians* (2005), p.8

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] Stephen Davies, *Empiricism and History* (2003), p.138

[4] Brown, *Postmodernism*, p.7

Because postmodernism is evident in many disciplines (such as literature, art, architecture, and history), its origins are difficult to trace. However it is clear that the general idea spurted from a small number of influential philosophers during the nineteenth century, such as Nietzsche[5] and Weber, and has evolved from what is known as modernism, through to postmodernism.

This evolution is marked by several key stages. The first was a transition from the period of modernity to structuralism. This occurred during the mid twentieth century by several influential French cultural theorists such as Saussure, Lèvi-Strauss, Althusser, and Barthes. Structuralism arose from the linguistic development created by Saussure in the early 1910's, gradually shifting from language to culture, and instead became focused on 'the syntagmatic oppositions in language and how [they] were prevalent in all cultures'[6], claiming that the majority of human activity could be understood with linguistic codes and rules. It was this characteristic which linked structuralism to postmodernism, described by one contemporary as 'the heart of all postmodernist theory'[7]. Furthermore, structuralism also found much contempt for the empirical qualities in historical thinking, a quality that postmodernists would hold to the highest esteem later on.

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[5] Nietzsche once argued that 'there are no facts in themselves...[and] it is always necessary to begin by introducing a meaning in order that there can be fact', a phrase which would come to galvanise postmodern theorists in later years – quoted in Roland Barthes, 'The Discourse of History', *Comparative Criticism*, 3 (1981), p.7

[6] Brown, *Postmodernism*, p.76

[7] *Ibid.* p.33

However structuralism was unable to 'provide any...theoretical account of historical...development'[8], and so was continually challenged. In its place formed poststructuralism, a notion which 'rejected the scientific pretensions of structuralism, but retained...[the] insistence on language...as the foundation and model of all social and cultural knowledge'[9]. Here the real origins of postmodernism can begin to be seen. Poststructuralism was based upon a concept of textual analysis and discourse, but from the view that there was no determinate meaning which could be identified in any text.

The real leap between poststructuralism and postmodernism occurred during the 1970's (albeit many argue it was more of a combining force then a leap), when 'the uncertainty, ambiguity and linguistic emphasis...intrinsic to the poststructuralist stance were extended from texts to history'[10]. The prominent figure who started this transgression was Jean-François Lyotard, creator of the term metanarrative, used in order to attack assumptions oh historical progress or development. This became one of the defining traits of postmodernism, 'the loss of credibility of these metanarratives'[11].

The process postmodernists use to derive meanings from texts is known as deconstruction, and implements several key ideas that were developed during the French cultural revolution in the 1960's and 70's. Contemporary postmodernists have managed to narrow down the key ideas into six main areas; sign, discourse, text, self, morality, and representation.

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[8] Willie Thompson, *Postmodernism and History* (2004), p.8

[9] *ibid* p.133

[10] *ibid* p.14

[11] *ibid* p.16

The concept of sign and semiotic theory in postmodernism was dominated by Saussure, who objected to the traditional method of studying languages by looking at the evolution of words. Instead he argued for people to think in terms of signs, and that signs and ideas came into existence through interaction. The core principles of Saussure's theory were that every sign was constructed of two distinct parts, the signifier (the vocal sound of a word or a drawing of an object) and the signified (a mental conception of an object). What confuses many who try to learn postmodernist theory is that in fact the physical object (known as the referent) is not actually part of the sign system, but is known as to being *exterior* to it.

Although Saussure initially argued that the signified had priority over the signifier, by the late 1970's (when poststructuralism had taken over from structuralism) this process was reversed, and thus signifiers over structures were prioritised, for example the word over a concept or language over a structure). This shift in priority became known as the *linguistic turn* and marked a shift towards what is now known as postmodernism.

This work, which 'undermined the certainty of a connection between a word and a thing'[12] was furthered by Barthes during the 1950's and 60's, who claimed that oppressive ideologies were made normal in society through *sign systems* in popular culture which, as a result, saw it slowly shift from a 'study of language to a study of culture'[13].

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[12] Brown, *Postmodernism*, p.37

[13] *Ibid.*

Apart from the connections of how political structures use the signified and signifier to impose their ideologies and control society, the sign is of vital importance to postmodern theories in the way they relate to reality, as it 'introduces the notion of different constructions of knowledge'[14]. This suggests that reality, outside of the sign system, cannot be perceived by humans, with the implication being that 'language determines the order of the world'[15]

The semiotic application in history has had a massive impact on how historians use words in their texts, forcing many historians to look critically at their work and de-centre the words used. This *reflexive concern* is now accepted as standard practise with historical writing, with professionals and students alike required to show a consciousness that words have the ability to convey hidden meanings.

The next element of postmodern theory is known as discourse. Callum Brown best describes the relationship between sign and discourse:

> 'The sign is the basic unit of the postmodernist conception of the system of knowledge. Signs come lumped together to make up the *discourse*...[and] are the major vehicle within knowledge for conveying meaning.'[16]

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[14] *Brown* p.42

[15] *Brown* p.43

[16] *Brown* p.59

The discourse is a message rooted in the signs given, and arises as a group of statements that 'belong to a single system of formation'[17]. In terms of the nature of discourse, Barthes asserted that it is plainly obvious to the desired audience, and should in effect require no more than usual study to understand it, thus it essentially becomes the norm. More so, the discourse is not seen as a system of semiotics, but instead as a fact. Foucault described this as the *truth effect*, as the reader believes the discourse is true.

Similar to a sign, discourse sits in opposition, both vertically and horizontally, to other discourses. A discourse can also be perceived in a sense that if one is good, then the opposite must be bad, creating a sense of binary opposites whenever a discourse is mentioned. To further complicate matters (or perhaps simplify, depending on opinion) individual discourses can be grouped together with others in a discursive formation, with each one gaining acceptance in their own sites of exteriority. This unity eventually becomes what is known as the *knowledge system* of a given episteme.

Within the discipline of history, Barthes argued that not only is the historian unable to be neutral, but that 'History...projects its own discourse'[18], with no endeavour to imagine the past (the signified/referent) is embedded in the discourse. In contrast to other discourses, in postmodern history discourse is defined as true by 'arguing that it is not *a priori* true, but has been accepted...as a result of rational thought, empirical endeavour and research'[19]. This concept essentially proposes that, in contrast to the

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[17] Michael Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), p. 107

[18] Brown, *Postmodernism*, p. 65

[19] *Ibid*

empiricist view, all narrative and fact must be judged as every sentence holds a discourse.

A further important point that discourse raises in history is the issue of ownership of discourse. Both Barthes and Foucault argued that once a text is written, what follows is the death of the author, because 'with a discourse conveying a major meaning, the discourse exists prior to any author who circulates it'[20]. Foucault then went further and suggested that in fact it was the dominating classes in society that wrote, with the work (including all discourses) preceding the author in ownership of the text.

In terms of practical application, discourse has forced historians to change their task, from 'reflecting on who wrote a document...[to also] considering what discourses it contains, and who gains power from their circulation'[21]. Thus is provides an insight into the discursive power which existed before the author even wrote the text and, through discourse analysis, historians can study socio-political power in any period and geographical location.

Along with discourse analysis, a major tool required by postmodern historians is that of being able to implement the deconstruction of texts. For a postmodern historian to successfully do this they must fulfil certain criteria, including imposing poststructural awareness, decoding the sign, and as previously mentioned , perform discourse analysis.

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[20] 𝄞⚞🐗p.66

[21] 𝄞⚞🐗p.67

Texts have two distinct qualities which distinguish them from signs, textuality and intertextuality. Textuality is defined as the quality of the *non-referred,* so the text is constructed of several signs, with the signifiers being not the referent, but instead a concept. In order to make language into a viable text, Brown argues it must "be opened to contain a meaning....only achieved by removing the presence of the real thing. However, this then removes any certainty, so the text becomes ambiguous in its meaning, as people can always interpret a text differently based on their social and cultural backgrounds and experiences, and because, what Jacques Derrida called, the illusion of closure has been deferred.

As a result, meanings contained in a text are capable of differing by, as Derrida asserted, *difference* (via structural or synchronic disparities in meanings) or *différance* (through a process of postponement in diachronic change). Thus closures must be imposed within textual signs for usable meanings to be read.

Intertexuality on the other hand is defined as a concept where texts essentially have borrowed their ideas from texts already written, so in essence, nothing is deemed as original. This void of originality leads to what is known as *intertextual borrowing,* with styles, narrative structures, and discourses all being borrowed because they are familiar to the author and to the target audience.

The product of all of these textual qualities thus makes texts somewhat a confusing concept, hence postmodern historians have created a tool used to analyse texts, known as deconstruction. This is made up of various

elements that historians must implement in order to gain meaning and insight to the text itself. Empiricist issues must be examined (such as the authenticity of the data, the author of the text, subsequent checking of sources contained in the text, etc.); the signs embedded in the text must be processed and decoded; discourses must be identified and analysed; and structures inherently rooted within the text may be subjected to rejection or de-centring. Furthermore, opposite and ambiguous meanings must be identified, along with modes of emplotment, trope, and ideology. Finally, one must isolate any metanarrative founded in the text. These rules however, are not to be strictly adhered to in that precise order, and some can even be omitted, with the final choice up to the postmodernist historian's discretion.

The implementation of textual analysis in history has led to a variety of different writing styles, reflecting an awakening in narrative method. Not only present is the, albeit rather simplistic, thick description method, but thanks to postmodernism, there has been a noted rise in ~~narrative techniques~~, and autobiographical writing. Such diversity has 'become endorsed through the postmodernist notion of the unknowability of the past'[22], forcing reliance upon heavy use of metaphor, especially in the evolving field of social and cultural history.

Throughout the 1980's and 1990's an area which sparked a massive amount of interest was that of 'self', or (a certain element of Marxism is apparent here) whether the individual is a victim of history or an agent of change. It appears that postmodernist history gives rise to two opposing views on how far an individual is held historically responsible for change. The first

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[22] ~~Jenkins~~ p.113

suggests 'discursivity of culture prescribes...the choice of human actions'[23] resulting in the fact that, as all cultures are inevitably composed of discourses, human action is thus limited and socially constructed, restricting what an individual can do to change history. Coupled with the textuality of all knowledge, causing continuous the intertexual lending of ideas, originality is deemed incapable of being attained.

However, according to many theorists, in a Lancanian sense, 'each individual has to negotiate through discourse within the context of their body...and material environment'[24]. Thus the individual empowers themselves through their own agency, deploying their self as an agent in 'which life...become[s] constructed as the product of personal choice'[25].

The issue of 'self' in history raises key points about the personal position of historians. Origins of suck ideas date back to the 1940's with Gramsci arguing that it is imperative to 'know...thyself as a product of historical processes'[26]. Thus historians require acknowledgement in their narrative of (mainly political) issue brought to the text, otherwise known as *reflexivity*, and evidently shows ideological, cultural, and sexual biases in texts, along with a banishment of neutrality.

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[23] *Ibid.* p.135

[24] *Ibid.*

[25] Nikolas Rose, 'Assembling the modern self', in Roy Porter (ed.), *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present* (1997), p.241

[26] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1978), p.25

Somewhat controversially, postmodernism argues that morality is unable to, and therefore shouldn't be, founded upon empiricist methods. It is as much the public opinion now as it was the academic opinion during the earlier stages of the twentieth century that through history it is possible to understand ethical and moral issues. However, following the rule of binary opposites, a sense of morality can only be derived from a sense of the immoral, not (as some empiricists will argue) from citation of historical events.

Albeit postmodernists argue a sense of immoral can be gained from history, it is wrong to suggest they are empirical as 'immoralities are declared, not proven'[27]. To argue their case, postmodernists gives three main reasons; firstly morality is not a static concept, with changes occurring dramatically through society, geography, and culture, breaking links between any empirical certainty and morality. Furthermore, facts (which are representations of historical events) are constantly open to re-evaluation or dispute via new research, and so cannot 'be allowed to be the decisive factor in...[the] construction of human morality'[28]. In addition to this, due to the inherent nature of narrative and the different interpretations it gives rise to, humans are thus unable to rely on narrative to constitute reality.

It is not surprising that such due controversial issues postmodernism holds, especially for history as a discipline, it has attracted many criticisms. Most notably they come from three distinct and different areas; Empiricists, Marxists, and Poststructuralists.

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[27] Brown, *Postmodernism*, p.145

[28] *Ibid.*

The Empiricist attack focuses on postmodernist's undermining the concept of 'facts', with critics arguing against the notion that signs are incapable of providing a ~~true~~ representation of reality, and instead show only one representation of reality. Many empiricist historians agree with Richard Evans, convinced that 'rules of verification...evidenced in footnotes and bibliographical references, provides the subject with a foundation of...reality'[29].

The Marxist critique however rejects the whole of the founding principles of postmodernism, by developing a tradition of linguistics to oppose the dominant Saussurian approach, a noteworthy example being Volosinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1929), which:

> 'viewed language primarily as a form of social interaction, as dialogues that could not be separated from the temporal-spatial and socio-economic context in which individuals speak or write.'[30]

Yet, irrespective of these criticisms (which do raise valid points), it is unavoidable to say that postmodernism has not raised significant issues within not only the discipline of history, but in almost all aspects of society and culture itself.

In terms of history, its impact has caused a massive change in the methods and role of historical research, making evident the sensitivity of language, the subjectivity of historians, and the inherent problems with the way

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[29] Richard Evans, *In Defence of History* (1997), p.115

[30] Matt Perry, *Marxism and History* (2002), p.142

history is written. Moreover, postmodernism can be argued to be the reason behind the increasing new fields in history, 'popular culture, [and] the study of personal testimony'[31] and so on.

Postmodernisism's impact is just as controversial as its definition and content, with it splitting apart the discipline's community. The denial of a possible representation of an accurate and true reality has led to numerous arguments, discussions, and countless articles. After looking at the present and the impact caused, the future of postmodernism should be looked at. It is entirely possible that this era of postmodernity will produce 'new insights into society and culture. Some being incorporated into historiography and...expand[ing] the scope of historical understanding'[32].

On a concluding note, perhaps Keith Jenkins proposed the future of postmodernism best, saying:

> 'In the post-modern world, then, arguably the content and context of history should be a generous series of methodologically reflexive studies of the makings of the histories of post-modernity itself.'[33]

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[31] Brown, *Postmodernism*, p.180

[32] Thompson, *Postmodernism*, p.128

[33] Keith Jenkins, *Re-thinking History* (1991), p.70

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