

MODERNITY, POST-MODERNITY AND PROTO-HISTORICISM: REORIENTING HUMANITY THROUGH A NEW SENSE OF NARRATIVE EMPLOTMENT

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ABSTRACT: As a grand narrative of progress, the utopian project of modernity is primarily concerned with notions of rationalism, universalism, and the development of a metalanguage. The triumph of the Moderate Enlightenment has seen logics of domination, accumulation and individualism incorporated into the project of modernity, with these logics giving rise to globalised capitalism as the metalanguage of modernity and neoliberal economics as the grand narrative of rational progress. The project of modernity is all but complete, requiring only the formality of an end. However, rather than utopia, the foreseeable endpoint of modernity is environmental collapse, with neoliberal economics also serving as a grand narrative of environmental destruction. As an anti-modern response, postmodernism has been a triumphant failure. While there is much to be gained from the postmodern critique of modernity, its incredulity towards metanarratives has left it incapable of forming an adequate response to modernity, especially in regards to action on climate change. Postmodernism is better characterized as a crisis located within modernity itself and it will be argued that rather than the pursuit of the modern or the post-modern, we need to re-imagine ourselves as proto-historical to overcome the impasse of late-capitalism.

KEYWORDS: Proto-historicism; Postmodernism; Modernism; Modernity; Narrative; Neoliberalism

I: BLINDED BY THE ENLIGHTENMENT: THE MAKING OF A MECHANISTIC MODERNITY

Science will teach men ... that they ... are no more than a sort of piano keyboard or barrel-organ cylinder ... that whatever man does he does not do of his own volition but ... by the laws of nature. Consequently, these laws of nature have only

to be discovered, and man will no longer be responsible for his actions, and it will become extremely easy for him to live his life.¹

Those of us living in the present can agree that we inhabit the modern era, but are we all modern? What separates the modern from the primitive? Can this distinction even be made between temporal contemporaries? Habermas points out that the term ‘modern’ has a long history, with its Latin form *modernus* being used as early as the fifth century in order to distinguish the Christian present in opposition to the Roman and Pagan past.² He identifies it as an expression of ‘the consciousness of an epoch that relates itself to the past of antiquity, in order to view itself as the result of a transition from the old to the new.’³ The difficulty we find in categorizing the modern as an era is due to the synonymous relationship it has with the contemporary. If we are talking about ‘the modern’, we are often talking about ‘the now’, the ‘cutting edge’ or the most advanced up until a point in time. As Habermas maintains, modernity can be viewed in contrast to the ancient, but even this can be problematic.

For instance, the French revolutionaries of the late eighteenth century were eager to dispose of what they called the *ancien régime*, despite the fact that this regime only extended back to the fifteenth century where the seeds of Renaissance modernity were being sown.⁴ In contrast to the modernity of the fifth century Christians, this regime was a thousand years more *modernus*, yet only three hundred years *ancien* when compared to the revolutionaries who sought to overthrow it. In this sense, Harvey aptly describes the modern era as ‘ephemeral and fleeting,’⁵ constantly changing and rearranging the scope of itself. The modern, it would seem, is never fixed. Rather, it is constantly shedding its prior self, only to rematerialize *ad infinitum*. The modern is the new, it is the progressive, and it is the result of history’s long march forward.

Modernity: an Enlightenment Ideology

Despite the difficulty in defining the ‘modern era’ as a fixed period, as an epoch and an ideal, the notions of modernity we experience in the twenty-first century arose with the philosophies of the European Enlightenment. Giddens describes modernity as the ‘modes of social life and organization which emerged from Europe about the

¹ F. Dostoyevsky, *Notes from Underground*, trans. J. Coulson, Melbourne, Penguin Books, 2010, p. 27.

² J. Habermas, ‘Modernity – An Incomplete Project’, in H. Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Port Townsend, Bay Press, 1983, p. 3.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ S. Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1990, pp. 22-23.

⁵ D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1990, p. 11.

seventeenth century onwards and ... subsequently became more or less worldwide in their influence.⁶ Similarly, Toulmin argues that notions of modernism and modernity are 'held together by ... a shared conception of rationality, which came to the fore in the seventeenth century, and has come to dominate Western thinking ever since.'⁷ For Habermas, 'the project of modernity' came into focus during the eighteenth century through the efforts of philosophers to develop 'objective science, universal morality, and law ... according to their inner logic.'⁸ This project aimed to deliver 'the development of rational forms of social organization and rational modes of thought,' as Enlightenment thinkers actively sought 'to break with history and tradition.'⁹ The Enlightenment can thus be viewed as a defining epoch in which the otherwise passive notion of temporal modernity collided with an emerging ideological goal to actively *become* modern. This saw the Enlightenment embrace progress while crystallizing the goals of modernity into a unifying grand narrative that would see Western civilization emerge as the harbingers of a universal and rational process of modernization.

The Telos of Modernity: Metalanguage and Utopia

The goals of the Enlightenment and the beliefs it took to be axiomatic were that 'there could only be one possible answer to any question ... [and] the world could be controlled and rationally ordered if we could only picture and represent it rightly.'¹⁰ A quest for efficiency, the project of modernity makes the assumption that 'the surface complexity of nature and humanity distracts us from an underlying Order, which is intrinsically simple and permanent.'¹¹ Harvey identifies universal modernism as 'the belief in linear progress, absolute truths, and the rational planning of ideal social orders,' which would culminate in the 'standardization of knowledge and production.'¹² As such, it seeks to order society rationally and efficiently by developing or uncovering a metalanguage that can be used to describe reality objectively. The *telos* of modernity can therefore be seen as reaching a utopia of absolute knowledge, in which the true, objective nature of reality can be understood in its entirety through the development of a universal metalanguage.

Modernity, then, is inherently reductionist, with the goal of systematically reducing concepts of truth to a singularity, within which the true nature of reality can be understood purely and objectively. The goals of modernity can thus be understood as

⁶ A. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1990, p. 1

⁷ Toulmin, p. 198.

⁸ Habermas, 'Modernity – An Incomplete Project', p. 9.

⁹ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 12.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹¹ Toulmin, p. 201.

¹² Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 9.

threefold: as a commitment to progress, to the rational organization of society, and to the development of a metalanguage under which all else can be understood.

A Tale of Two Enlightenments

While modernity can be characterized as a unified quest to uncover the universal truths that govern the natural world, the *realization* of modernity can be understood as a struggle between two competing traditions of thought; that of the Radical and the Moderate Enlightenments. The Radical Enlightenment, defined by Gare as the ‘true’ Enlightenment, ‘evolved out of the Renaissance quest for liberty and democracy,’ whereas the Moderate or ‘fake’ Enlightenment was intended to ‘neutralize the ideas of the Radical Enlightenment.’¹³

In the intellectual tradition of the Renaissance, the Radical Enlightenment celebrated the world and life as creative.¹⁴ It built on the democratic ideals of the Civic Humanists, for whom ‘liberty was characterised as being a member of and an active participant in a free, self-governing community,’ and the Nature Enthusiasts, who were hostile to hierarchical power structures and promoted egalitarianism.¹⁵ As a continuation of these Renaissance ideals, the Radical Enlightenment rejected all compromise with the past and sought to sweep away existing power structures entirely.¹⁶ The Radical Enlightenment was an anti-aristocratic, republican movement that rejected divine-right monarchy in favour of egalitarian and democratic virtues.¹⁷

By contrast, the Moderate Enlightenment ‘aspired to conquer ignorance and superstition ... by means of philosophy but in such a way as to preserve and safeguard ... essential elements of older structures, effecting a viable synthesis of old and new, and of reason and faith.’¹⁸ Inspired mainly by Descartes, Hobbes, Newton, and Locke, the Moderate Enlightenment was developing its ideas in direct opposition to the democratic and egalitarian impulses of the Radical Enlightenment.¹⁹

As the mainstream branch of the Enlightenment, the Moderate Enlightenment found support in governments and influential church factions,²⁰ allowing it to

¹³ A. Gare, ‘Reviving the Radical Enlightenment: Process Philosophy and the Struggle for Democracy’, www.academia.edu/5692810/Reviving_the_Radical_Enlightenment_Process_Philosophy_and_the_Struggle_for_Democracy, 2008, (accessed 3 June 2014) 2008, p. 1.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 6.

¹⁶ J. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 11.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁹ Gare, ‘Reviving the Radical Enlightenment’, p. 9.

²⁰ Israel, p. 11.

ultimately triumph over its radical counterpart. As a result, the modernity inherited by Western civilisation is one that is infused with the philosophies of the Moderate Enlightenment, and Gare argues that the triumph of the Moderate Enlightenment has resulted 'in the massive concentration of wealth and power,' with a world-system that is 'inexorably undermining the environmental conditions for human existence.'²¹

Mechanistic Materialism: The Logic of Domination

A feature of the Moderate Enlightenment is the development and imposition of a mechanical view on nature. Initiated by Descartes, this mechanical philosophy provided the impetus for Enlightenment thinkers to 'bring all beliefs before the bar of reason and to create a rational society accordingly.'²² Seeking to replace 'the authority of tradition, dogma, faith, superstition and prejudice' with a new method modeled on mathematical thinking, Descartes provided a picture of the natural world as a single system that could be accurately described and explained by rational principles.²³ Insisting that animals were 'nothing more than complicated machines,' Descartes extended this to the human body, which he saw as a no more than a mechanical system.²⁴ Conceiving of minds as 'thinking substances ... disjoined from the extended matter of the physical universe,'²⁵ Descartes separated the world of rational human experience from the world of mechanical natural phenomena.²⁶ This separation 'left open the possibility ... that all reality, including humanity and human thought, could be explained through a purely materialistic philosophy.'²⁷ By making a distinction between the mind and body, Descartes effectively severed the two, creating a decontextualised concept of consciousness that was separated from the mechanical workings of the body. As Cartesian dualism saw consciousness become disembodied, the body could be viewed as nothing but a vehicle to mediate our experience with the external world, thereby asserting 'the right for thinking men ... to impose their will ... to order and control society as well as nature.'²⁸ Rationality took on an immutable, platonic form, while the body merely became the means to pursue rationalist ends.

²¹ Gare, 'Reviving the Radical Enlightenment', p. 15.

²² A. Gare, *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis*, London, Routledge, 1995, p. 38.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

²⁴ P.J. Bowler, *The Earth Encompassed: A History of the Environmental Sciences*, New York, W.W Norton & Company, 1992, p. 93.

²⁵ Gare, *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis*, p. 37.

²⁶ Toulmin, p. 107.

²⁷ M.C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans*, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1981, p. 44.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

Following on from Descartes, Hobbes saw the world as matter in motion, defined by mathematically measurable attributes and moved forces inherent to it.²⁹ He saw such mechanical operations as offering a sufficient explanation of natural phenomena, and attempted to apply these mathematical principles to the social actions of men.³⁰ Hobbes ‘analysed men as mechanisms in motion, as essentially self-moved matter,’ with their political morality ‘springing from their actions or motions ... from their desires, passions and repugnances, and not from any outside source ... or supernaturally endowed ethical standard.’³¹ From this we can see Hobbes’ bleak, materialistic worldview, in which men are merely machines driven by appetites and aversions,³² moved only by the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain, with this mechanical philosophy later giving rise to utilitarianism.³³

Further elaboration on the mechanical worldview was provided by Newton, whose laws of motion dictate that:

- i. Every body preserves its state of rest, or uniform motion in a straight line, except in so far as it is compelled to change that state by forces impressed upon it.
- ii. The rate of change of linear momentum is proportional to the force applied, and takes place in a straight line in which the force acts.
- iii. To every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.³⁴

These laws view all matter as inert and acted upon by outside influences, providing the image of a static world set in motion by an abstract force. Newton’s cosmology provided an empirically testable metaphysical framework, which underpinned a mechanical view of the world rooted in mathematics. This upheld the view of the universe as posited by Descartes and Hobbes, while providing a model around which an orderly society could be based.³⁵ The accuracy and success of the Newtonian method in predicting and explaining natural phenomena became a clear indication that ‘the application of rational methods would lead to the uncovering of all nature’s secrets.’³⁶ This vindicated the mechanical worldview through the demonstration of seemingly pre-existent mathematical laws and attributes, while demonstrating the predictability—and subsequent passivity—of the natural world.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 75.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Gare, ‘Reviving the Radical Enlightenment’, p. 8.

³³ Ibid., p.10.

³⁴ S. Blackburn, *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 261.

³⁵ Bowler, p. 95.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 85.

The result of these mechanistic philosophies meant that the natural world was reduced to no more than a physical resource at the mercy of rational beings to exploit and control. With this came the strong belief that further control over the world could be actively achieved through the discovery and utilization of the rational laws that govern it.

Epistemological Materialism: The Logic of Accumulation

Materialism was subsequently extended to the non-physical world, typified by the Enlightenment quest to accumulate knowledge in order to control the world. For early Enlightenment thinker Francis Bacon, science was ‘the widest possible accumulation of knowledge.’³⁷ Similarly, Hobbes argued that science was ‘merely the accumulation of knowledge of how to control the world,’³⁸ while the reward promised to those following the Cartesian scientific method was ‘nothing less than mastery over nature.’³⁹

Cassirer notes that for the Enlightenment, reason came to be viewed as an ‘acquisition’ rather than a heritage,⁴⁰ and Habermas identifies the goal of Enlightenment philosophers as utilizing ‘this accumulation ... for the rational organization of everyday social life.’⁴¹ Harvey maintains that the nature of Enlightenment thinkers was ‘to use the accumulation of knowledge generated by many individuals ... for the pursuit of human emancipation and the enrichment of daily life.’⁴² From this we can identify not only a materialistic approach to knowledge, but also a sense of epistemological utility. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the Enlightenment effectively turned thought into an instrument or thing,⁴³ with this instrumental reasoning carrying an implication of means and ends, whereby knowledge is seen as a tool that can be used to achieve materialist goals. For the Enlightenment, knowledge was quite literally *there* to be discovered, acquired, and *used* for the betterment of mankind. The assumption that knowledge and truth exist ontologically as ‘things’ to be discovered or attained through the implementation of a rational method is illustrated in the philosophy of Descartes.

³⁷ M.C. Jacob, *The Cultural Meaning of the Scientific Revolution*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1988, p. 31.

³⁸ Gare, ‘Reviving the Radical Enlightenment’, p. 16.

³⁹ Jacob, *The Cultural Meaning of the Scientific Revolution*, p. 59.

⁴⁰ E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. F.C.A. Koelln and J.P. Pettegrove, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1951, p.13.

⁴¹ Habermas, ‘Modernity – An Incomplete Project’, p. 9.

⁴² Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 12.

⁴³ M. Horkheimer and T.W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. J. Cumming, New York, The Continuum Publishing Company, 1944 p. 25.

By taking truth to be absolute, Descartes ‘hoped to elevate questions of epistemology ... out of reach of contextual analysis,’⁴⁴ effectively assigning all notions of knowledge to an immutable, platonic realm removed from the subjectivity of everyday experience. Descartes maintained that rational thought ‘could not rely on inherited tradition,’⁴⁵ and, wherever possible, the rational thing to do was to clean the intellectual slate and ‘start from scratch.’⁴⁶ By taking into account the reductionist belief that reality is no more than the sum of its parts, Cartesian philosophy dictates that we can—and should—examine things in isolation through the implementation of a disembodied and objective approach to rationality. However, Toulmin identifies that ‘when dealing with intellectual or practical problems, we can never totally clean the slate and start from scratch, as Descartes demands.’⁴⁷ The act of doing so would forfeit our own consciousness and contexts—the very conditions by which we are able to think at all. By starting from scratch, Descartes assumes that all rational beings would come to the same conclusion, as there can exist only one ‘true’ answer to any possible question. This is the ontological nature of objective and universal reason, and Toulmin argues that this ‘decontextualised ideal’ has remained a ‘central demand of rational thought ... among modern thinkers well into the twentieth century.’⁴⁸

As an extension of the mechanical worldview, epistemological materialism lends itself to a logic of accumulation, whereby the active accumulation of knowledge is seen to lead—in a linear, Newtonian fashion—to the further control and mastery over nature. This logic of accumulation is more inherent in modernity than the mere acquisition of knowledge. Modernity itself, as the product of a chronological march forward, is primarily conceived as the accumulation of *time*. Time has, in this sense, become a demonstrative tool of progress, tightly wound up in the definition of modernity. The very nature of modernity is an accumulative process. Following on from the materialist tradition, this has been extended to material possessions. The importance of accumulation is further demonstrated in the third logic of modernity, in which individual property rights and the accumulation of wealth become key attributes of a modern society.

⁴⁴ Toulmin, p. 44.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 199.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 82.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 200.

Leviathan and Liberalism: The Logic of Individualism

A third logic evident in the philosophies of the Moderate Enlightenment is the appeal to individualism. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the Enlightenment ‘has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty,’⁴⁹ with the project of modernity promising ‘liberation from the irregularities of myth, religion, superstition, [and] release from the arbitrary use of power.’⁵⁰ According to Habermas, ‘Above all, the modern age stood under the sign of subjective freedom,’ with society the space in which one’s own interests could be rationally pursued.⁵¹

One of the key Enlightenment demands for individual freedom is from the tyranny of tradition—of monarchs, religion and superstition. This logic of liberation and individualism is manifest in two seemingly contradictory ways; the first in Hobbes’ conception of society as demonstrated in *Leviathan*, the latter displayed in the classic liberalism derived from John Locke and Adam Smith. While Locke shares much of his philosophy with Hobbes, a transition from the Hobbesian philosophy towards classic liberalism can be traced through Locke to Smith who, while not necessarily a Moderate Enlightenment thinker, made important contributions to the individualism inherent in modernity today. However, as with many Enlightenment philosophies, the origin of the emphasis on the individual can be found in Descartes.

Descartes’ proposition, ‘I think, therefore I am,’ rested upon the preeminence of the thinking ‘I’, and the assumption that individuals can achieve complete mastery over their own intellectual processes and the world around them.⁵² This ‘aggressive assertion of the self’ was encouraged in intellectual matters, in the organization of society, and also in the pursuit of material interests.⁵³ By giving a first person account to the theory of knowledge, Descartes effectively located the principle reality in the self,⁵⁴ with the individual justifying not only claims to existence, but to rational thought and agency in an otherwise passive world.

The primacy of the individual and the implicit assertion of the self can also be found in Hobbes’s political philosophy. In a world of many individuals, Hobbes saw the natural state of man as ‘a condition of [war] of every one against every one’ in which man is governed by his own reason.⁵⁵ He characterizes the life of man as ‘solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short,’ marked by ‘continual feare, and danger of

⁴⁹ Horkheimer and Adorno, p. 3.

⁵⁰ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 12.

⁵¹ J. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. F. Lawrence, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1987, p. 83.

⁵² Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment*, p. 43.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Blackburn, p. 101.

⁵⁵ T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, London, Penguin Books, 1985 p. 189.

violent death.⁵⁶ According to Hobbes, natural law dictates that man is ‘forbidden to do, that, which is destructive of his [own] life.’⁵⁷ For Hobbes, reason dictates that ‘in such a condition, every man has a Right to every thing; even to one anothers body ... therefore, as long as this naturall Right of every man to every thing endureth, there can be no security to any man.’⁵⁸ Hobbes makes the assumption of a natural state of war between men, whose insatiable appetites will ultimately lead to their conflict and demise unless moderated or controlled by a central power, which he embodies in an autocratic monarch. He proposes a social contract in which freedom is a *trade* of one’s liberty in return for personal safety, with men able to *contract* to one another in order to collectively lift themselves out of barbarism.⁵⁹ It then becomes in the best interest of the individual to obey the laws of a sovereign for their own sake, rather than for the sake of others.

Contrary to the Hobbesian concept of individuality, classic liberalism emerged as a political ideology centered upon the individual as having natural rights *against* the government.⁶⁰ Classic liberalism sees men as ‘naturally endowed with the right to life, liberty, and property’ with the role of government being limited to ‘securing and protecting these individual rights, especially private property.’⁶¹ Developed in opposition to the ‘mercantilism of monarchs, who exercised almost total control over the economy,’⁶² classic liberals preached the virtues of the ‘free market’ and ‘*laissez-faire*’ economics.⁶³ In this way, classic liberalism ‘naturalized the market as a system with its own rationality, its own interest and its own specific efficiency ... as a distributor of goods and services.’⁶⁴ However, like Hobbes, classic liberalism sees relations in the marketplace as mediated by an *exchange* of certain freedoms for a set of rights and liberties.⁶⁵ Two important thinkers in the classic liberal tradition are John Locke and Adam Smith.

Following on from Hobbes, Locke argued that in a state of nature, all men were free and equal, possessing inalienable rights independent of any government or

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 186.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 189.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 190.

⁵⁹ Blackburn, p. 176.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 218.

⁶¹ M.B. Steger and R.K. Roy, *Neoliberalism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 5.

⁶² Ibid., p. 2.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ J. Read, ‘A Genealogy of Homo-Economicus: Neoliberalism and the Production of Subjectivity’, *Foucault Studies*, No 6, pp. 25-36, Feb 2009, p. 27.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

authority.⁶⁶ He saw the natural state of men as a ‘state of perfect freedom’ in which one could ‘order their actions and dispose of their possessions and persons as they see fit ... without asking leave, or depending upon the will of any other man.’⁶⁷ However, Locke maintains that ‘though this be a state of liberty, yet it is not a state of license, [and] though man in that state have uncontrollable liberty ... he has not liberty to destroy himself.’⁶⁸ As with Hobbes, this is an appeal to self-preservation, and like Hobbes, Locke offers reason as the method to achieve this, arguing that ‘the state of nature has a law to govern it ... [and] reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind who will but consult it that ... no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions.’⁶⁹ In order to guarantee one’s own safety, Locke sees the need for man to quit this state of nature, and to elevate himself into civil society to avoid a natural state of war. Like Hobbes, he appeals to a central power, ‘for where there is an authority, a power on earth from which relief can be had by appeal ... the state of war is excluded, and the controversy is decided by that power.’⁷⁰ However, unlike the tyranny of a monarch that Hobbes advocates, Locke places his faith in a lawful society based around private property rights in which political authority is derived from individuals.⁷¹

Smith further developed Locke’s emphasis on private property with a political philosophy centered on economic freedoms. Based on the tendency of mankind to ‘truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another,’ Smith sees the potential of man as uniquely collaborative when contrasted with other animals.⁷² For Smith, this capacity for fair and deliberate exchange leads to a degree of co-dependence between men, resulting in mutual benefit in terms of economic growth, prosperity and social development.⁷³ In this sense, the pursuit of self-interest is seen to actively promote the common good.⁷⁴ Placing a large emphasis on the ‘natural state’ of the free market as the condition for ‘perfect liberty’, Smith saw the intervention of governments, the development of monopolies, the formation of trade unions and the fixing of prices as

⁶⁶ Steger and Roy, p. 5.

⁶⁷ J. Locke, ‘Two Treatises of Government (1690)’ in P. Hyland, O. Gomez and F. Greensides (ed.), *The Enlightenment: A Sourcebook and Reader*, London, Routledge, 2003, p.154.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 155.

⁷¹ P. Hyland, O. Gomez and F. Greensides (ed.), *The Enlightenment: A Sourcebook and Reader*, London, Routledge, 2003, p. 154.

⁷² A. Smith, ‘The Wealth of Nations (1776)’ in P. Hyland, O. Gomez and F. Greensides (ed.), *The Enlightenment: A Sourcebook and Reader*, London, Routledge, 2003, p. 198.

⁷³ Hyland et al., p. 193.

⁷⁴ Blackburn, p. 354.

undermining public welfare and prosperity.⁷⁵ Rather, through free trade and the pursuit of private gain, individuals could, through their own capacity for reason, ‘strike deals and contracts to their own advantage.’⁷⁶ The implication of this being that the more ‘reasonable’ a man is, the greater his prosperity will be. In this sense, it is in everyone’s best interests to act *reasonably* in accordance with the free market.

Smith is also credited with developing the concept of *homo-economicus* as an economic anthropology of man. *Homo-economicus* takes for granted that the natural state of man is that of exchange, whereby ‘everything for which human beings attempt to realize their ends ... can be understood economically.’⁷⁷ This approach views people as ‘isolated individuals whose actions reflect mostly their material self-interest.’⁷⁸ Similar to the Hobbesian appeal to men being moved by appetites and aversions, *homo-economicus* is propelled by economic self-interest.

Both the logics of *Leviathan* and liberalism place the individual at the fore of modern society. As individuals endowed with innate rationality, to act in accordance with reason is to act in the material best interest of the self.

The Logics of Modernity

The mechanistic materialist tradition inaugurated a process of modernization that saw the fundamental nature of reality organized around a substance-based philosophy. The world could be explained in mechanical terms, knowledge seen as a thing to be hoarded, and humans understood as economic agents acting on behalf of their material wants and needs. By viewing all physical reality as primarily consisting of inert matter in motion, the mechanistic materialists reduced the whole world to a ‘gigantic piece of clockwork with which humankind could tinker at will.’⁷⁹ Human beings could now be seen as no more than cogs inhabiting a vast machine, with mechanistic materialism becoming an expression of our growing detachment and alienation from the world.⁸⁰ By ascribing the implicit role of service and utility to both humanity and nature, the mechanistic materialists demystified these concepts. Nature had been denatured, and man had been made alien to it—quite literally extra-terrestrial and *outside* the world. The mechanical metaphor symbolized the means by

⁷⁵ Hyland et al., p. 193.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Read, p. 28.

⁷⁸ Steger and Roy, pp. 2-3.

⁷⁹ Bowler, p. 91.

⁸⁰ A. Gare, *Nihilism Inc.: Environmental Destruction and the Metaphysics of Sustainability*, Como, Eco-Logical Press, 1996, p. 123.

which nature could be controlled and subordinated,⁸¹ with human progress gauged by the development of further mastery over nature.⁸²

As products of Enlightenment epistemology took on static and immutable forms, they came to exist as unchanging principles that guided the inert and irrational world of matter. While the idea of a perfect reality removed from our own can be traced back to Plato and beyond, it took on renewed significance during the Enlightenment, having instilled modernity with an ideological drive to actively accumulate rational forms and apply them to the mechanical world. With the promise of knowledge equating to control over nature, knowledge became power, and the accumulation of it paramount for the purposes of modernity. As ‘the scientific domination of nature promised freedom from scarcity [and] want,’⁸³ scientific knowledge then became the central tool for the mechanistic materialist. The accumulation of knowledge would facilitate not only the further control over nature and the acquisition of abundance, but would serve as the tangible indicator of rational progress.

The logics of domination and accumulation are enhanced by the individualist philosophies of the Moderate Enlightenment. The logic of individualism sees the act of competition as a positive affirmation of rights, liberty and the sovereignty of the self. It encourages self-interest above that of others and sees individual gain as the sole motivating force behind mankind. Relying on the assumption of *homo-economicus* as an accurate portrayal of man, classic liberals envisage a world in which—rather than a state of literal and physical war—men are free to rationally and ruthlessly compete in the marketplace under the governance of natural market laws. This works off the assumption that, rationally, every man is actively working to increase his own economic advantage.

Deus Ex Machina: Grand Architects, Autocrats, and Hidden Hands

While these three logics of modernity share repeated references to reason and rationality, what is more striking is the inclusion of a *deus ex machina* to either control the mechanical world or set it in motion. A *deus ex machina*, or ‘god from the machine,’ is defined as ‘a theatrical device whereby a supernatural agency is introduced to solve [a] dramatic situation ... [as] any artificial, introduced, external, [or] ad hoc solution to the problem.’⁸⁴

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 134.

⁸² Ibid., p. 27.

⁸³ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 12.

⁸⁴ Blackburn, p. 103.

Although Descartes argued the human body was nothing more than a mechanical system, he maintained there must still be a soul integrated somehow.⁸⁵ Despite the materialist reductionism inherent in his work, Descartes still made room for his Christian beliefs. Similarly, Newton, who inaugurated the ‘new science’ of the Enlightenment, saw the role of God as paramount in constructing the universe, even ‘[regarding] himself more as a theologian than ... a scientist.’⁸⁶ His cosmology dictated that the physical universe could be understood by mathematics and experiment, but only through reference to mechanical laws emanating from a supernatural being.⁸⁷ For Newton, ‘matter, motion, and the mathematical laws of nature ... [originated] in the will and power of the Almighty,’⁸⁸ with Newton insisting on the existence of ‘a supernatural being separate from nature ... [who] imposes order in nature and society.’ Referred to as the ‘Grand Architect,’ this was ‘a supernatural entity that could be worshipped by either Christians or deists,’ the function of which resembled ‘that of the strong, but not arbitrary, monarch.’⁸⁹

While Hobbes’ conception of the world was ultimately atheistic, he was concerned with maintaining absolute rule through an earthly monarch. His concept of *Leviathan*, characterized as an ‘irresistible monster,’⁹⁰ is a fear-inspiring image akin to an all-powerful deity, albeit embodied in an autocratic ruler. However, the implication of *Leviathan* extends beyond the individual ruler. The Leviathan is depicted as an anthropomorphic being, with the State literally conceived as an artificial man, a *Body Politique*, ‘of greater stature and strength than the Naturall,’⁹¹ which would serve to dominate the natural world and men alike. Effectively, Hobbes sought to replace God with a modern, mechanical, and monolithic State.

The supernatural explanation for a pre-ordered rationality offered by classic liberalism is the conception of the ‘hidden hand.’ Classic liberals believed that society could be moderated by an ‘invisible hand,’⁹² and placed their faith in the infallible, arbitrating nature of the free market. The significance of a ‘hidden hand’ again conjures God-like imagery, and implies autonomy on the part of the free market. The market is attributed sentience as a functional force whose fluctuations we should act in

⁸⁵ Bowler, p. 93.

⁸⁶ L. White Jr., ‘The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis’, in I.G. Barbour (ed.), *Western Man and Environmental Ethics: Attitudes Towards Nature and Technology*, Reading, Addison-Wesley, 1973, p. 27.

⁸⁷ Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment*, p. 87.

⁸⁸ Israel, p. 519.

⁸⁹ Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment*, p. 87.

⁹⁰ Toulmin, p. 194.

⁹¹ Hobbes, p. 81.

⁹² Hyland et al., p. 193.

accordance with. This conception of the market sees it as natural rather than artificial, and as primary rather than emergent.

Inherent in the philosophies of the Moderate Enlightenment is the need for man to be subordinate to a higher power. By proposing otherworldly perfection that man has the capacity to synchronize with rationally, these philosophies encouraged deference towards abstract laws and powers whose inherent reasonableness would elevate men from otherwise animalistic tendencies. While the Enlightenment is often contrasted with tradition, the philosophies of the Moderate Enlightenment tended to *incorporate* pre-existing traditions, and in instances where this was not the case, merely *inaugurated* new traditions to similar effect. For Descartes and Newton, the ultimate authority remained God. For Hobbes it was more literal, insisting on a monarch. For classic liberals, the abstract hidden hand of the free market became the de facto source of rational guidance. These appeals to a rational authority demonstrate how the philosophies of the Moderate Enlightenment ultimately sought to reinforce or simply remake traditional powers. The Moderate Enlightenment can therefore be seen as an intellectual sleight of hand; espousing notions of modernity, rationality and liberty while simultaneously re-enforcing the overall centralization of power in the hands of a privileged elite. In response to the genuinely progressive nature of the Renaissance and the Radical Enlightenment, the moderate thinkers offered piecemeal philosophies that, while suitably novel and revolutionary for their time, were restricted by pre-existing power structures. They promoted ‘modern’ insights that would go some way to satisfying Enlightenment curiosity, but simultaneously reinforced the established traditions of the Church and the Monarchy, while for classic liberals, the sanctity of the free market and private property became paramount.

This shift in tradition is demonstrated in the French revolution of 1789, where the overthrow of the *ancien régime* coincided with the inauguration of a new capitalist tradition.

Bourgeois Revolt: Liberty, Equality, and Property

The French revolution of 1789 is seen by many to be the turning point of modernity, particularly in reference to the development of modern liberal democracies and the emergence of capitalist societies. As a political manifestation of Enlightenment philosophies, the revolution ‘overtly challenged the three principle pillars of medieval and early modern society—monarchy, aristocracy, and the Church—going some way to overturning all three.’⁹³ Israel describes it as ‘one of the great defining episodes in

⁹³ Israel, p. 714.

the history of modernity,⁹⁴ while for Habermas the French revolution signified the very beginning of the modern era.⁹⁵

Essentially a struggle of non-nobles against aristocrats,⁹⁶ the French revolution saw the development of a class-conscious bourgeoisie. In what became a ‘conflict between progressive capitalist-oriented classes and the retrograde aristocratic classes,’⁹⁷ the revolution saw men of non-noble backgrounds, but of economic means, assert themselves in public and social life. As the burgeoning capitalist classes became aware of the disparity between their wealth and social usefulness, on the one hand, and their lack of opportunity and social prestige on the other,⁹⁸ the bourgeoisie of the French revolution became the perfect embodiment of the Enlightenment man. They came to see themselves as ‘*individuals* ... separated from those above by rejecting privilege, from those below by personal merit, and by emancipation from ignorance and backwardness ... by use of reason.’⁹⁹ This assertion of the self saw the coming-of-age of *homo-economicus*, with the revolution not only won by the bourgeoisie,¹⁰⁰ but also *formative* of the bourgeoisie¹⁰¹ as a distinct class with interests of its own.

While it is true that ‘by destroying the *ancien régime*, the French Revolution opened the road to democracy and political participation,’¹⁰² to who was this participation open? Even though the French revolution of 1789 involved the participation of the working classes, it was the bourgeoisie who initially benefited. Hobsbawm argues that the ‘equality’ achieved by the revolution was not intended to be egalitarian or democratic, and that it was not pressing the social and political claims of all commoners. Rather, it was those in the ‘available’ classes of ‘professional men’ in the Third Estate who were to benefit.¹⁰³ Elections became ‘restricted to the enlightened,’ constituting an ‘open elite selected for talent, irrespective of birth,’ demonstrated chiefly through ‘property and education.’¹⁰⁴ Elite status came to be recognized as the control of landed property, with the development of the 1791 constitution making

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Toulmin, p. 8.

⁹⁶ E. Hobsbawm, ‘The Making of a “Bourgeois Revolution”’, in F. Fehér (ed.), *The French Revolution and the Birth of Modernity*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1990, p. 40.

⁹⁷ C. Lucas, ‘Nobles, Bourgeois and the Origins of the French Revolution’, *Past & Present*, no. 60, 1973, p. 84.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Hobsbawm, p. 43.

¹⁰⁰ Lucas, p. 84.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 126.

¹⁰² Toulmin, p. 8.

¹⁰³ Hobsbawm, p. 40.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., pp. 40-41.

‘every public position ... largely confined to men of ... property.’¹⁰⁵ In this sense, property became the new privilege, as the hereditary titles of land effectively replaced the hereditary titles of nobility. The *nouveau élite* in French society came to be defined in terms of ‘landholding ... with the hereditary element confined to the simple passage of wealth and its advantages from one generation to another.’¹⁰⁶

The outcome of the French revolution was the development of a self-conscious class of free flowing capitalists and professional men who—guided by rationality—were able to assert their economic dominance over the traditions and pretensions of the *ancien régime*. As the acquisition of nobility became increasingly irrelevant, elite status was developed around attributes of wealth, no matter how acquired or expressed.¹⁰⁷ Capital therefore became the new tradition, with the French revolution establishing ‘a framework for the emergence of the capitalist economy ... a class society and ... the modern world.’¹⁰⁸

Hobsbawm argues that ‘the ideology of the Enlightenment inevitably made economic progress into a central aim of society,’ with ‘post-revolutionary France ... a society in which, more than any other, wealth was power and men were dedicated to the accumulation of it.’¹⁰⁹ The French revolution thus echoed the Moderate Enlightenment logics of individualism and accumulation, where the rational imposition of these modern attributes became the logical justification for the political dominance of a particular class of modern men.

II: THE COMPLETED PROJECT OF MODERNITY: CAPITALISM, NEOLIBERALISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL DESTRUCTION

As far as I know you deduce the whole range of human satisfactions as averages from statistical figures and scientifico-economic formulas. You recognise things like wealth, freedom, comfort, prosperity, and so on as good, so that a man who deliberately and openly went against that tabulation would in your opinion, and of course in mine also, be an obscurantist or else completely mad, wouldn't he?¹¹⁰

While the philosophies of the Moderate Enlightenment may no longer be the *explicit* point of reference for twenty-first century modernity, culturally, their legacy has endured. From the Moderate Enlightenment, we can understand the modernization

¹⁰⁵ Lucas, p. 126.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 84.

¹⁰⁹ Hobsbawm, pp. 43-44.

¹¹⁰ Dostoyevsky, p. 23.

process as thus: dismantle tradition (to a tolerable extent), reduce reality to a single language (a medium of equivalence), accumulate knowledge (or ‘power’) within said language, and apply this knowledge in order to control the natural world. This is a process that has been uniform with the rise of globalised capitalism and the development of neoliberal economics as the grand narrative of modernity.

The Metalanguage: Capitalism

Capital has become the universal metalanguage of modernity. It is the single value by which all aspects of life can be measured. Global in its application, the origins of capitalism are inherently international in scope.¹¹¹ As a ‘medium of exchange,’ capital ‘negates the content of goods or services by substituting them [with] an impersonal standard.’¹¹² It permits the exchange of ‘anything for anything,’¹¹³ making globalised capitalism the metalanguage *par excellence* for the project of modernity. Coinciding with the development of globalised capitalism, we have also seen the rise of a new class of international bourgeoisie. Gare identifies the international bourgeoisie as agents of transnational capitalism who have brought to fulfillment a modern and refined version of the mechanical world-view.¹¹⁴ It is no accident that the rise of the international bourgeoisie has coincided with the development of a globalised metalanguage, as the very goal of modernity is to seek an equivalence that can be applied universally. Likewise, bourgeois society is ruled by such equivalence, of making ‘the dissimilar comparable by reducing it to abstract quantities.’¹¹⁵ Horkheimer and Adorno point out that ‘to the Enlightenment, that which does not reduce to numbers, and ultimately the one, becomes illusion.’¹¹⁶ In the context of a global society in which capitalism has become the universal, that which does not reduce to this medium, or serve as an instrument for the international economy, is dismissed as illusion and subsequently devalued.¹¹⁷ The intrinsic connection between modernity and the bourgeoisie is demonstrated in the way Cartesian and Newtonian philosophy has premeditated bourgeois thought, which Sarup describes as stressing the idea ‘of the conscious subject who calculates means and ends,’ in which ‘the subject is rational, autonomous and capable of initiating action.’¹¹⁸

¹¹¹ Giddens, p. 57.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Gare, *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis*, pp. 10-11.

¹¹⁵ Horkheimer and Adorno, p. 7.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Gare, *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis*, p. 11.

¹¹⁸ M. Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*, 2nd edn., Athens, The University of Georgia Press, 1998, p. 69.

Capitalism is a metalanguage in the most literal sense; it transcends national boundaries, cultural relativities, and even physical form, existing merely as semiotic interactions taking place in virtual worlds. Advances in technology have meant that capital mobility has conquered time and space, with the ability to be inserted or withdrawn almost anywhere at astonishing speed.¹¹⁹ At its optimistic best, capital can be understood to represent labor exchange—proof of productivity, work or contribution. However, it can also represent inheritance, theft, or luck at the roulette table. Capital does not discriminate. As a symbol, it signifies success, progress, and the sovereignty of the self, regardless of the source. Reduced to a singular symbolic system, the success of the worker or the artist is now comparable to that of the gambler, bureaucrat or thief. The value of work is no longer demonstrated *in* the work itself, but in the symbol of capital, which has become the only method of quantifying success.

Science Subordinated

The only discourse that comes remotely close to capitalism as an objective force is science. Viewed as the greatest intellectual achievement and ultimate reference point of modernity, science is generally seen as having access to truth in ways that would privilege it over other modes of language.¹²⁰ However, rather than the pursuit of truth, science has become concerned with the pursuit of power.

According to Gare, ‘scientific experts and ... knowledge ... are available to anyone with enough money.’¹²¹ This echoes Lyotard’s argument of ‘no money, no proof,’ in which ‘the wealthiest has the best chance of being right.’¹²² For Lyotard, an ‘equation between wealth, efficiency, and truth,’ has been established, leading the goal of science to be ‘performativity ... [in which] the only credible goal is power.’¹²³ In this sense, science has become no more than ‘well-organized research for the development of technology’, with funding ‘allocated by states and corporations according to their potential to augment political and economic power.’¹²⁴ As research funds are allocated in accordance with this ‘logic of power growth’, research that fails to augment such aims is subsequently ‘abandoned by the flow of capital.’¹²⁵ As capitalism orients

¹¹⁹ Gare, *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis*, p. 6.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹²² J-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. 45.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46.

¹²⁴ Gare, *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis*, p. 24.

¹²⁵ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 47.

research ‘first and foremost toward technological “applications”,’¹²⁶ science finds itself as a capitalist enterprise in which ‘scientists, technicians, and instruments are purchased not to find truth, but to augment power.’¹²⁷ The application of science then becomes aimed at delivering an economic return for investors, and further entrenching the dominance of the bourgeoisie through the development of new technologies.

In the quest for objectivity, the reduction of truth to a tradable medium has occurred, with the relationship between capital, science, and truth being reduced to one of investment and commodity production. Science does not have privileged access to truth; capital does. As the *universal* it is quite literally the one truth, with everything else required to fall in line with this master discourse. Even in its most pure and idealistic form, science is held contemptuously below the superior discipline of economics. The total subordination of science to economics is evident in the success of private interests in derailing the discourse surrounding climate change. Even where climate science is accepted as credible, potential solutions to the problem are typically dealt with through cost-benefit analysis, where the preservation of the Earth’s ecosystem is generally perceived as too expensive, or simply ‘not worth saving’ in economic terms.¹²⁸ From this, we can understand that scientists are held to be the ultimate arbiters of truth—to a degree. They are the arbiters of truth unless the science they produce conflicts with the ideology that legitimates them. The cutting edge of modernity can be bought, sold, and quantified, solely in terms of economic capital. The epistemological materialist approach to knowledge means that it can be treated as a material resource whose extraction relies solely on the correct capital investment.

The Triumph of the International Bourgeoisie

Democracy has similarly come to be used as a stepladder for the advances of capitalism and the advantage of the bourgeoisie. As seen with the French Revolution of 1789, the overthrow of monarchs has resulted in the seizure of power by the bourgeoisie, with the global spread of liberal democracies facilitating the rise of a new, international species of capitalist. This new breed seem to operate on the assumption of continual transcendence from constraints—of traditions, monarchs, nations, time and space—as harbingers of a new liquid capital mobility, bringing forth the saturation of this absolute into every facet of life. While Gare argues that it is ‘too simple to account the cultural transformations of the west as the result of strategy of a

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 45.

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 46.

¹²⁸ Gare, *Nihilism Inc.*, p. 52.

class to establish cultural hegemony over society,' he maintains that it is possible to understand how this class has asserted its dominance by looking at the *unintended* consequences of social and economic processes that have affected people's ways of thinking.¹²⁹ Rather than accusing the international bourgeoisie of a conspiracy, in which they have methodically seized power, we can regard it as conspiracy by accident, perhaps even by negligence. In recent decades, we can regard it as a conspiracy of acceptance, in which self-destructive modes of thought have been accepted, encouraged, and homogenously applied worldwide. The ways of thinking that have given rise to the dominance of the international bourgeoisie stem from the Moderate Enlightenment, and have come to fruition in the grand narrative of neoliberal economics as the discourse of modernity.

The Grand Narrative: Neoliberalism

With capital as the metalanguage, the grand narrative of progress has been completely subsumed by neoliberal economics. Built upon the classic liberal ideal of the self-regulating market,¹³⁰ neoliberalism has become 'the defining economic paradigm of our time.'¹³¹ It has come to completely dominate how we operate as a global capitalist society over the last quarter century.

The Mont Pelerin society first systematically developed neoliberal policies in 1947 as 'a small and exclusive group ... gathered around the renowned Austrian political philosopher Friedrich von Hayek.'¹³² Neoliberals since have identified themselves in the tradition of classic liberals due to their fundamental commitment to concepts of personal freedom, and their belief that the hidden hand of the market is the best way of 'mobilizing even the basest of human instincts such as gluttony, greed, and the desire for wealth and power.'¹³³ As a system of thought, neoliberalism actively glorifies 'individual self-interest, economic efficiency, and unbridled competition,'¹³⁴ and as a political philosophy, it promotes three key policies: deregulation of the economy, liberalization of trade, and privatization of publicly owned assets.¹³⁵ Neoliberalism is therefore characterized as an economic practice that promotes individual entrepreneurial freedoms through strong private property rights, free markets and free

¹²⁹ Gare, *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis*, p. 13.

¹³⁰ Steger and Roy, p. 11.

¹³¹ R.W. McChesney, 'Introduction' in N. Chomsky, *Profit Over People: Neoliberalism and Global Order*, New York, Seven Stories Press, 1999, p.7.

¹³² D. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford & New York, Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 19-20.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

¹³⁴ Steger and Roy, p. x.

¹³⁵ McChesney, p. 14.

trade.¹³⁶ Governments that subscribe to a neoliberal agenda see the role of the state as extremely limited, with state interventions in markets being kept to a bare minimum.¹³⁷ Instead, neoliberals place their faith in the free market to maintain order through its seemingly natural and self-regulating nature, with the market presumed to work as an appropriate guide and ethic for all human action.¹³⁸

Neoliberalism Naturalized

A distinctive feature of neoliberal economics is the organic and ‘rational’ status it has attained. Harvey argues that neoliberal ideology has had such ‘pervasive effects’ on our ways of thought that it has ‘become incorporated into the common sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world.’¹³⁹ Neoliberal ideology claims to present not just an *ideal* for social and political organisation, but an immutable *reality* of human nature.¹⁴⁰ Margaret Thatcher (U.K. Prime Minister 1979-1990) famously argued that there simply ‘is no alternative’ to neoliberal policies,¹⁴¹ and this argument has proven to be chillingly prophetic in decades since, with almost all modern states having embraced some version of neoliberal theory since the 1970’s.¹⁴² Otherwise known as ‘economic rationalism,’ neoliberalism implies there is something inherently logical about this set of ideas, inferring that anything contradicting neoliberal ideology would be *irrational*. Neoliberalism is therefore not just an ideology that sees capitalism as the only possible economic system, but one that sees capitalism as synonymous with rationality.¹⁴³ Consequently, it views free market capitalism as the most pure and natural relationship that can be formed between humans, with natural law being dictated by that which is in accordance with the free market.

Deus Ex Machina: Neoliberalism and the Law

However, following on from its Moderate Enlightenment predecessors, the perfect neoliberal free market society has its own conservative paradox to contend with; the rule of law. Despite their insistence on unbridled freedom and the diminishing role of government, neoliberals place a strong emphasis on conservative values, such as tough law enforcement and a strong military.¹⁴⁴ According to Harvey, the ideal neoliberal

¹³⁶ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 2.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 165.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁴⁰ Read, p. 26.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 36.

¹⁴² Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, pp. 2 -3.

¹⁴³ Read, p. 32.

¹⁴⁴ Steger and Roy, p. 14.

state should ‘favor strong individual private property rights [and] the rule of law’, along with the institutions of freely functioning markets and free trade.¹⁴⁵ However, it is not necessarily the rule of democratic law that neoliberals appeal to. Rather, they are ‘profoundly suspicious of democracy,’¹⁴⁶ and, bizarrely, ‘governance by majority rules is seen as a potential threat to individual rights.’¹⁴⁷ Democracy is instead viewed as a luxury that can only be extended ‘under conditions of relative affluence coupled with a strong middle-class presence.’¹⁴⁸ Rather than democracy, neoliberals prefer ‘governance by experts and elites,’¹⁴⁹ an ethos that echoes the French revolution, where privilege and positions in government were only extended to professional men of economic worth.

The anti-democratic streak of neoliberalism is ingrained in its formation, with Hayek and his colleagues in the Mont Pelerin society ‘vowing to stem what they saw as the ‘rising tide of collectivism’.¹⁵⁰ This is a trait that can be traced to Smith’s mistrust of collectives such as trade unions, monopolies, governments, and so forth, as artificial distortions on the natural conditions of free trade. In their justification for this disposition, neoliberals argue that state decisions are inevitably ‘bound to be politically biased depending on the strength of the interest groups involved.’¹⁵¹ However, this seemingly ignores the primary role of a democratically elected government. An elected government should work on behalf of the largest and strongest interest group involved, namely the polity it represents. Neoliberals see individual freedom as paramount, as long as that freedom is not organized politically, expressed democratically or sought in the best interests of a community. Democracy is only tolerable if the population consists of an adequately endowed middle-class with capitalist tendencies and aspirations or, as McChesney puts it: ‘Democracy is permissible as long as the control of business is off limits to popular deliberation or change, ie. so long as it isn’t democracy.’¹⁵² McChesney argues that in order to be effective, democracy requires that people feel connected to their fellow citizens through specifically non-market institutions.¹⁵³ He sees neoliberalism as ‘the immediate and foremost enemy of genuine participatory democracy’ whose net result is ‘an atomized society of disengaged

¹⁴⁵ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 64.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ Steger and Roy, p. 15.

¹⁵¹ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 21.

¹⁵² McChesney, pp. 11-12.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

individuals who feel demoralized and socially powerless.¹⁵⁴ Therefore, the neoliberal free market system develops an ‘important and necessary byproduct—a depoliticized citizenry marked by apathy and cynicism.’¹⁵⁵ This atomization of society into individuals is evident in the neoliberal transformation of *homo-economicus* from a creature of exchange, to a creature of competition.

Neoliberalism Embodied

Whereas the classic liberal account of *homo-economicus* was primarily concerned with notions of mutual co-dependence through exchange, neoliberalism places a greater emphasis on competition, viewing *homo-economicus* as a creature ‘whose tendency to compete must be fostered.’¹⁵⁶ The transformation of *homo-economicus* has seen him evolve not only into a creature of competition but, more alarmingly, into one of *corporation*, with the worker now viewed in terms of ‘human capital.’¹⁵⁷ For *homo-economicus*, ‘any activity that increases the capacity to earn income ... is an investment in human capital.’¹⁵⁸ This embodiment of capitalism means that, as a political rationality, neoliberalism now finds itself ‘without an outside. It does not encounter any tension with a competing logic of worker or citizen ... States, corporations, and individuals are all governed by the same logic ... of interest and competition.’¹⁵⁹ Consequently, in a world where everything is a commodity, *homo-economicus* has become both a commodity and an entrepreneur—an entrepreneur of himself.¹⁶⁰

Neoliberalism: Product of Modernity

Similar to Descartes’ conception of the natural world as a single system that can be described and explained by rational principles, neoliberals see the world as rationally organized around *a priori* market forces and, based on Newton’s model, the new science of economics has become the central discourse for defining our world.¹⁶¹ Just as in the seventeenth century Hobbes was developing his ideas to ‘not only oppose the ideas of the civic humanists, but to make them unthinkable,’¹⁶² so too have proponents of neoliberalism legitimated their philosophy ‘based on the stark absence of

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁵⁶ Read, p. 28.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 28.

¹⁶¹ Gare, ‘Reviving the Radical Enlightenment’, p. 10.

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 8.

possibilities.¹⁶³ Harvey posits that ‘we can ... interpret neoliberalization either as a *utopian* project to realize a theoretical design for the reorganization of international capitalism or as a *political* project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites.’¹⁶⁴ However, it matters not whether neoliberalism is a utopian project or one that is geared towards inequitable capital accumulation; either way it is a process that conforms to the project of modernity and the worldview dominated by the Moderate Enlightenment philosophies of Descartes, Hobbes, Newton, Locke, and Smith. As an ideology based on competition, neoliberalism implies domination through the maximization of personal profit, where the accumulation of capital is the means and ends by which everything *homo-economicus* attempts can be judged.

The Legacy of Domination

According to Wainwright, ‘the historical coincidence of global capitalism with the transformation of our planet’s atmosphere is no accident.’ He maintains that ‘capitalism is at the heart of the challenge of confronting climate change, and any serious attempt to address global climate change must contend with global capitalism.’¹⁶⁵ However, he acknowledges that comprehending, let alone acting upon, human-driven climate change is not possible if humans cannot recognize the world as anything other than an enormous collection of resources.¹⁶⁶ That capitalists cannot possibly see nature as anything other than something to exploit is the direct result of the imposition of a mechanical view on the world, inevitably leading to the ‘constant conversion of the planet into a means of production.’¹⁶⁷ Harvey posits that if we are indeed ‘entering the danger zone’ of transforming the global environment, then the further embrace of neoliberal practices will ‘prove nothing short of deadly.’¹⁶⁸ Whereas economic growth was supposed to lift people out of poverty and put them in a position where they would be free of the tyranny of nature,¹⁶⁹ it has ironically achieved the complete opposite; bringing forth the likely demise of humanity through the collapse of an ecosystem that has been pushed beyond its capacity for economic growth. This is the legacy of mechanistic materialism and the Enlightenment quest for control.

¹⁶³ Read, p. 36.

¹⁶⁴ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 19.

¹⁶⁵ J. Wainwright, ‘Climate Change, Capitalism, and the Challenge of Transdisciplinarity’, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 100, no. 4, 2010, p. 988.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 173.

¹⁶⁹ Gare, *Nihilism Inc.*, p. 27.

The Legacy of Accumulation

Following on from this, the idea that truth exists ontologically as a literal ‘thing’ to be discovered or acquired by man has also had disastrous consequences for the environment. It presupposes the possibility of only one absolute truth in any matter and, reduced as it has been to a singular language of capitalism, dictates that there can be no other way to conceive the world other than one rationally organized around free market capitalism. It also promotes a mindset of commodity fetishism and capital accumulation, the bulk of which is done on behalf of the international bourgeoisie. However, as Gare argues, what is conspicuously missing is any point to this accumulation at all, with the international bourgeoisie having nothing to gain other than power for the sake of power, control for the sake of control and consumption for the sake of consumption.¹⁷⁰ However, it is not merely a matter of consumption for consumption’s sake, but consumption for the sake of *capital*. Rather than acting on behalf of themselves, the international bourgeoisie have become the agents of capital; with commodity production only one half of the process we call capitalism.¹⁷¹ The *telos* of capital is replication. Capital is deployed in order to produce commodities, which are then sold, with the original investment returned along with a profit, only to be reinvested again to facilitate further accumulation. As capital is driven by this ‘constant need to realize more value’, it has become a ‘growth oriented process of commodity production,’ creating the ‘incessant demand for growth and expansion we associate with capitalist economies.’¹⁷² Rather than accumulation for the sake of practical means, capital has become the talisman of modernity and the chief indicator of progress. This is the legacy of epistemological materialism, where the act of reproducing the *symbols* of capital has become the very *raison d’être* of the modern man.

The Legacy of Individualism

Meanwhile, the seemingly contradictory forms of individualism expressed by Hobbes and Smith have been synthesized by neoliberal economics. The base assumptions of competition between self-interested individuals and the inalienable right of private property have become the core tenets of neoliberal doctrine. According to Hobbes, a modern state requires ‘overwhelming force concentrated at the center, under the authority of a sovereign,’ with subjects being made to understand ‘that their personal activities take place under ... the shadow of this overwhelming central force.’¹⁷³ Neoliberals have effectively deferred this role of central organizing power to the free

¹⁷⁰ Gare, *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis*, p. 11.

¹⁷¹ Wainwright, p. 988.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ Toulmin, pp. 194-196.

market, stripping individuals of any autonomy to operate outside its pervasive shadow. Individuals in neoliberal societies have been coerced into an unhealthy reliance on market values as the only means to gain reciprocal recognition. This is ensured through the presumption that ‘everything can in principle be treated as a commodity,’ and that property rights exist ‘over processes, things and social relations, [and] that a price can be put on them, and that they can be traded.’¹⁷⁴

Similarly to how Hobbes’ sovereign was seen to be ‘both the wielder of supreme power and the source and guarantor of Rights,’¹⁷⁵ the market has come to be viewed as the appropriate guide for all human action.¹⁷⁶ The reality that both Hobbes and the neoliberals provide is one in which human nature cannot be rationally explained as anything other than a perpetual war of all against all. Jacob notes that in his ‘obsession with greed and the self-interest of men,’ Hobbes can therefore be seen as ‘the first major interpreter of the market society ... [and] emergent capitalism.’¹⁷⁷ Hobbes’ *Leviathan* can thus be re-read one of two ways, but each with the same devastating effect; either as rule by transnational corporations or as subordination to the market itself. The appropriate metaphor for the twenty-first century Leviathan would see the market as innate rationality, with corporations (quite literally ‘bodies’) constituting the earthly *Body Politique*. While neoliberals claim to take their cues from classic liberalism, they seem to have more in common with a Hobbesian view of the modern state, in which the source of power and guarantor of rights in a neoliberal society is found in the autocratic rule of the market Leviathan.

Wainwright argues that ‘within a capitalist economy, inequalities in wealth and power make it difficult to build coalitions around shared sacrifice,’ as ‘inequality entrenches the capacity of the wealthy—who benefit disproportionately from economic growth—to prevent the conversion of our carbon-intensive economy into a more sustainable alternative.’¹⁷⁸ These inequalities are generated and reinforced by free market capitalism, making it impossible to adequately confront climate change. To do so would require transnational alliances and trans-class co-operation built around notions of shared sacrifice.¹⁷⁹ These are concepts that are in direct contradiction with neoliberal economic policies and the logics of modernity. The nature of *homo-economicus* means that he cannot conceive of a shared goal, let alone an altruistic one. This is the legacy of individualism, where the atomization of individuals,

¹⁷⁴ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 165.

¹⁷⁵ Toulmin, p. 196.

¹⁷⁶ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 165.

¹⁷⁷ Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment*, p. 77.

¹⁷⁸ Wainwright, p. 989.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

the primacy of the self and the transcendence from backwards notions of traditional collectivism would see any collaborative, organized action on climate change contrary to a core logic of modernity.

Economysticism: The Legacy of the God Machine

Designating themselves as the rational and proficient users of the metalanguage, neoliberal economists profess to have uncovered the method by which we can worship the market correctly. Given that the underlying nature of reality can be explained objectively through reference to mathematical laws of causation, and that material appetites are sufficient causal explanation for all human behavior, capital has become the modern impetus for any meaningful action in the world. In this sense, capital is the Cartesian soul, it is the Grand Architect, it is the all-powerful Leviathan and it is the invisible hidden hand that oversees all earthly phenomena. As the pursuit of capital has become that which drives us, investment is seen to actively construct our world; it organizes governments, arbitrates equality, and dispenses justice. As long as citizens and governments continue to worship correctly, as long as the appropriate tribute is offered, the Grand Architect of capital will continue to create the world. It is the closest thing to God in the mechanical world, and the *deus ex machina* of modernity—complete with eschatology.

Enlightenment as Self-Destruction

Habermas stresses that the project of modernity is incomplete and that we should at least try to hold on to the intentions of the Enlightenment, rather than declare the entire project of modernity as a lost cause.¹⁸⁰ However, the project of modernity cannot result in anything *but* environmental collapse. Modernity and capitalism (and subsequently neoliberalism) have become one and the same. Marx and Engels argue that ‘the bourgeoisie ... draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilization’ by compelling ‘all nations ... to adopt the bourgeois mode of production ... to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst ... [and] to become bourgeois themselves.’¹⁸¹ To modernize a nation is to modernize an economy, and to do so is to introduce neoliberal economic policies and a growth oriented capitalist mindset. However, it is becoming increasingly apparent that ‘society can no longer live under this bourgeoisie,’¹⁸² given the current ecological state of the world. Just as the existence of the bourgeoisie Marx and Engels wrote about was ‘no longer compatible with society ... because it is incompetent to assure an existence to its slave within his

¹⁸⁰ Habermas, ‘Modernity – An Incomplete Project’, pp. 9-10.

¹⁸¹ K. Marx and F. Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. S. Moore, London, Penguin Books, 2002, p. 224.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 233.

slavery'¹⁸³ so too has the international bourgeoisie become equally incompatible with the Earth, which it has transformed into its slave. The international bourgeoisie finds itself incompetent—or worse, unwilling—to assure the Earth's ongoing existence beyond short-term profit margins. Zealously propelled by their own sense of economic 'rationalism', the international bourgeoisie have become incompatible with themselves, and the Enlightenment has proven to be, as Horkheimer and Adorno argue, 'indefatigable self-destruction.'¹⁸⁴

Ideological Hegemony and Soft Power

What is most concerning is that the international bourgeoisie have the ideological backing of those who have nothing to gain, yet everything to lose, from their ongoing conversion of the earth into a source of personal profit. Both Gramsci's concept of ideological hegemony and Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power are useful in demonstrating how this has occurred, while the extent to which capitalism has come to precede ecological reality can be understood through Baudrillard's theory of the hyperreal and the precession of simulacra.

Gramsci's concept of ideological hegemony aims to describe how a ruling class is able to maintain its dominant position in society.¹⁸⁵ Gramsci stresses that cultural and intellectual factors underlie this. His concept of ideological hegemony insists that 'the rule of one class or group over the rest of society does not depend on material power alone,' and that 'the dominant class must establish its own moral, political and cultural values as conventional norms of practical behaviour.'¹⁸⁶ In particular, it is this 'intellectual and moral leadership' that constitutes hegemony.¹⁸⁷ More than just 'the ideological predominance of a particular group or class,' it is 'the predominance obtained by *consent* rather than force.'¹⁸⁸ Hegemony needs to be understood precisely as that—quite literally *pre*-dominance—in that it informs the majority, common-sense view of the world while also serving as the *pretence* for domination by justifying and facilitating the means to do so without resistance. Because it receives 'consent from below,' hegemony is a superior form of control as opposed to traditional domination

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Horkheimer and Adorno, p.xi.

¹⁸⁵ G. Ahearne, 'Towards an Ecological Civilization: A Gramscian Strategy for a New Political Subject', *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2013, p. 319.

¹⁸⁶ J.V. Femia, *Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness, and the Revolutionary Process*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1981, p. 3.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 24.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., pp. 23-24.

through force.¹⁸⁹ Under ideological hegemony, the proletariat ‘wear their chains willingly ... condemned to perceive reality through the conceptual spectacles of the ruling class ... [and] unable to recognize the nature or extent of their own servitude.’¹⁹⁰

This is a mode of control successfully deployed by neoliberalism, whose success relies not only on the material capabilities and assets of its economic evangelists, but on tactics of ‘soft power’ as opposed to ‘hard power’. Whereas ‘hard power refers to military and economic might,’ soft power refers to ‘the use of cultural and ideological appeals to effect ... desired outcomes,’ relying on ‘attraction and seduction’ rather than crude force.¹⁹¹ While the threat of physical violence is virtually implicit in the imperial aspirations of neoliberalism, this capability is typically used as a foil for the spread of its ideological imperative—freedom. As a soft power, ideological hegemony ‘performs functions that the military and police machinery could never carry out; it mystifies power relations ... [inducing] the oppressed strata to accept or “consent to” their own daily exploitation and misery.’¹⁹² This consensual enslavement has succeeded in creating a society in which ‘everyone is now willing to mumble ... that no society can function efficiently without the market.’¹⁹³

The Precession of Symbolic Power

Ideological hegemony is reinforced by the active participation in and production of what Bourdieu terms ‘symbolic power’. Bourdieu defines symbolic power as ‘that invisible power which can be exercised only with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it or even that they themselves exercise it.’¹⁹⁴ It is a ‘power of constructing reality,’¹⁹⁵ of ‘making people see and believe, of confirming and transforming the vision of the world and, thereby, action on the world and thus the world itself.’¹⁹⁶ Bourdieu argues that ‘different classes and class fractions are engaged in a symbolic struggle ... aimed at imposing the definition of the social world that is best suited to their interests.’¹⁹⁷ This symbolic struggle takes place ‘over the

¹⁸⁹ M.A. Finocchiaro, *Gramsci and the history of dialectical thought*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 168.

¹⁹⁰ Femia, p. 31.

¹⁹¹ Steger and Roy, p. 55.

¹⁹² C. Boggs, *The Two Revolutions: Gramsci and the Dilemmas of Western Marxism*, Boston, South End Press, 1984, p. 161.

¹⁹³ F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1988, p. 236.

¹⁹⁴ P. Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. G. Raymond and M. Adamson, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1990, p. 164.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

hierarchy of the principles of hierarchization' in which 'dominant class fractions ... aim to impose the legitimacy of their domination.'¹⁹⁸ As the power of dominant class fractions 'rests on economic capital,'¹⁹⁹ neoliberals have been able to redefine reality through the symbolic power of economic capital, with all other forms of social capital having been absorbed into this totalizing medium.

This process conforms to what Baudrillard terms 'the precession of simulacra,' in which symbols are now viewed as the primary reality. According to Baudrillard 'simulation is no longer ... a referential being or a substance. It is the generation ... of a real without origin or reality.'²⁰⁰ We have entered what he calls the 'hyperreal,' a situation in which signs and simulations have become *more* real than the reality they once reflected.²⁰¹ Baudrillard argues that 'the age of simulation ... begins with a liquidation of all referentials' into an 'artificial resurrection' through systems of signs that lend themselves to 'all systems of equivalence, all binary oppositions and all combination algebra.'²⁰² He sees simulation as starting 'from the *utopia* of [the] principle of equivalence, *from the radical negation of the sign as value,*' in which the sign has become a 'reversion and death sentence for every referent.'²⁰³ According to Baudrillard, there are four 'successive phases' of the image:

- i. It is the reflection of a basic reality.
- ii. It masks and perverts a basic reality.
- iii. It masks the absence of a basic reality.
- iv. It bears no relation to any reality whatsoever, becoming its own pure simulacrum.²⁰⁴

Symbols have become detached from reality in an increasingly complex web of signifiers. Having become completely self-referential, these symbols now shape and *precede* the world from which they came. Reflecting back at themselves, they perpetuate their own value based on the algebraic equations that conform to the rules of a particular game. For instance, in the realm of speculative stockbrokers the growth of

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 168.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ J. Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. P. Foss, P. Patton and P. Beitchman, United States of America, Semiotext[e], 1983, p. 2.

²⁰¹ A. Easthope, 'Postmodernism and Critical and Cultural Theory', in S. Sim (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, London, Routledge, 2001, p. 20.

²⁰² Baudrillard, p. 4.

²⁰³ Ibid., p. 11.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

fictitious capital is achieved according to the rules of its own game, yet it bears such little connection to reality that it periodically collapses under the weight of its own fraud. However, despite being so removed from reality, these symbols still have very real consequences as they continue to undermine their ecological origins.

The current ecological crisis demonstrates how the original referent of the earth has succumbed to the rule of capital. We are witnessing what could be termed no less than *the precession of symbolic power*. The ideological hegemony of neoliberalism has been most efficiently expressed through the symbolic power of economic capital, and this symbolic power has been reified to the point where it now precedes ecological reality. It has become its own pure simulacra without any reference to—or at least with complete disregard for—its original referent, the Earth, to which it lingers as a veritable death sentence.

The Need for Alternative Hegemony

Both ideological hegemony and symbolic power rely on active submission and large-scale acceptance in order to function. As symbolic power is defined ‘through a given relation between those who exercise power and those who submit to it,’ it is a power that ‘can only be exercised if it is *recognized*.’²⁰⁵ Similarly, hegemony is ‘a *psychological* state involving some kind of acceptance ... of the socio-political order ... arising from some degree of *conscious attachment* to, or *agreement* with, certain core elements of society.’²⁰⁶

Bourdieu maintains that ‘what creates the power of words and slogans ... is the belief in the legitimacy of words and those who utter them,’ and that ‘words alone cannot create this belief.’²⁰⁷ The degree to which we find ourselves complicit in environmental destruction rests in our ongoing acknowledgement and recognition of symbolic power, and the fact that we attribute value to it. By doing so we reinforce the ideological hegemony of the international bourgeoisie.

What Gramsci and Bourdieu’s theories both call for, then, is an active *disbelief* in the grand narratives that confer these top-down* impressions onto reality. However, equally important is the development of an alternative hegemony to not merely counter, but to replace the defective modes of thought that underlie the worldview that neoliberal economics propagates. Jameson sees the idea that the market is in human nature as ‘the most crucial terrain of ideological struggle in our time’ and ‘a

²⁰⁵ Bourdieu, p. 170.

²⁰⁶ Femia, pp. 37-38.

²⁰⁷ Bourdieu, p. 170.

* Although they might masquerade as ‘bottom-up’

proposition that cannot be allowed to stand unchallenged.’²⁰⁸ That there is no alternative to neoliberal economics is an assumption that needs to be challenged, but to do so would be to challenge modernity itself.

III: TOWARDS PROTO-HISTORICISM: POSTMODERNISM AND THE CRISIS OF NARRATIVES

I shall not be in the least surprised if ... in the midst of the future universal good sense, some gentlemen with an ignoble, or rather a derisive and reactionary air, springs up suddenly out of nowhere, puts his arms akimbo and says to all of us ‘Come on gentlemen, why shouldn’t we get rid of all this calm reasonableness with one kick, just so as to send all these logarithms to the devil and be able to live our own lives at our own sweet will?’ That wouldn’t matter ... but what is really mortifying is that he would certainly find followers.²⁰⁹

The quest to rationally organize society around concepts of modernity—around notions of linear progress, materialism, and individualism—has meant that there is an inherent impossibility within modernity to form an adequate response to climate change. According to Gare, ‘the idea of humans as complex machines, society as a social contract between egoistic individuals, utilitarianism, [and] mainstream economic theory ... are all aspects of ... this project to order society rationally.’²¹⁰ To confront climate change would require an irrationality that is contrary to all accepted forms of modernity. One such response has been postmodernism and its incredulity towards metanarratives.

Structuralism, Poststructuralism and Deconstruction

To properly understand postmodernism it is important to understand the traditions from which it has emerged. The transition from the modern to the postmodern can be traced through structuralism and post-structuralism.

Associated primarily with Ferdinand De Saussure and Claude Lévi-Strauss, structuralism was essentially an extension of the mechanical sciences into the realm of linguistics. As the ‘systematic attempt to develop ... a general science of signs,’²¹¹ structuralism was based on the belief that ‘the world was intrinsically knowable,’ and that there was a ‘methodological key to unlock the various systems that made up the

²⁰⁸ Jameson, pp. 263-264.

²⁰⁹ Dostoyevsky, p. 28.

²¹⁰ Gare, *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis*, p. 38.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

world.²¹² For structuralists like Saussure, language was seen as a system in which rules, regulations, and ‘internal grammar’ governed how language operated.²¹³ While structuralism identified that there was a relative stability to language and a degree of predictability within linguistic communities, this approach failed to accommodate chance, creativity, or the unexpected within its methodology.²¹⁴

This predictability in language extends to the predictability of narratives—to all systems—and is consistent with the linear and fatalistic tradition of modernity. The perception of language as fixed and rigid is symptomatic of the modern worldview in which everything, including human interaction, is calculable and reducible to a symbolic equivalence. From the structuralist perspective, ‘one system (or narrative) [can come] to seem much like any other ... almost as if one knew beforehand what one was going to find.’²¹⁵

Post-structuralists object to this ‘overall tidiness’ in which ‘there are no loose ends and everything falls neatly into place.’²¹⁶ They argue that the structuralist methodology is defective in that it tends to *determine* results by conforming them to its own inherent assumptions.²¹⁷ As a result, post-structuralists have sought to overcome these limitations by attacking and rejecting structuralist attempts to ‘reduce the world to an object of analysis,’²¹⁸ and have done so primarily through deconstructionism, most notably associated with the work of Derrida.

Directed against the system building side of structuralism, deconstruction ‘took issue with the idea that all phenomena were reducible to the operations of systems ... [and the] implication that we could come to have total control over our environment.’²¹⁹ According to Sim, ‘Derrida was concerned to demonstrate ... the instability of language ... and systems in general’ through his concept of ‘*différance*’—a French neologism meaning both ‘difference’ and ‘deferral’. This sought to demonstrate that in any linguistic situation some ‘slippage’ of meaning occurs.²²⁰ Derrida argues that linguistic meaning is an unstable phenomenon and that at all times a sense of *différance* applied.²²¹ In this sense, a final meaning is always deferred,

²¹² S. Sim, ‘Postmodernism and Philosophy’, in S. Sim (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, London, Routledge, 2001, p. 4.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 4-5.

²¹⁵ Ibid., p. 5.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Gare, *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis*, p. 36.

²¹⁹ Sim, p. 5.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid.

and therefore unattainable, with linguistic interpretation an ongoing play of differences and deferrals.

Symbolic systems then are not enclosed with a predetermined meaning; language exists and meaning is gauged in a space of colliding contexts and various cultural processes that change over time. Harvey argues that this ‘intertextual weaving has a life of its own’ insofar as ‘what we write conveys meanings we do not or could not possibly intend, and our words cannot say what we mean.’²²²

Gare argues that there is value in deconstruction, ‘in that it undermines what are often taken to be the absolute reference points of reality, exposing them as arbitrary signifiers ... made to seem ‘natural’ by a power group ... [who are] imposing a fixed structure and hierarchy on society.’²²³ From this we can see how deconstruction serves a purpose in confronting the naturalized assumptions, enforced hierarchies and ideological hegemony of neoliberalism, as well as the arbitrary nature of symbolic power, manifested as it has been in economic simulacra. While Harvey argues that deconstructionism is ‘less a philosophical position than a way of thinking about and ‘reading’ texts,’²²⁴ its implications extend philosophically in terms of how we understand and quite literally ‘read’ and respond to our world. Poststructuralism is therefore not only a rejection of structuralism and its methods in relation to linguistics, but a rejection of the ideological assumptions that lie behind them.²²⁵ This effectively amounts to a rejection of modernity—a rejection that is expressed more broadly in postmodernism.

Postmodernism: Incredulity, (in)Difference and Unreason

Postmodernism represents ‘some kind of reaction to, or departure from, ‘modernism’.’²²⁶ It is the ‘rejection of core tenets of modernism and the embracing of post-modernity,’²²⁷ and emerged as an attempt to break from the ‘mechanistic, objectivist and deterministic worldview of modern science.’²²⁸ Eagleton defines it as ‘a style of thought which is suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason, identity and objectivity, ... idea[s] of universal progress or emancipation, of single frameworks,

²²² Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 49.

²²³ Gare, *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis*, p. 59.

²²⁴ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 49.

²²⁵ Sim, p. 4.

²²⁶ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 7.

²²⁷ A. Gare, ‘Post-modernism as the Decadence of the Social Democratic State’, *Democracy & Nature*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2001, p. 77.

²²⁸ S. Best, ‘Chaos and Entropy: Metaphors in Postmodern Science and Social Theory’, *Science as Culture*, vol. 2, no. 11, 1991, p. 189.

grand narratives or ultimate grounds of explanation.²²⁹ It is most notably associated with Lyotard, who identifies the postmodern condition as ‘the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies.’²³⁰ This is marked by an ‘incredulity toward metanarratives’ which Lyotard sees as ‘undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences.’²³¹

Lyotard’s argument is that grand narratives and universal theories have now lost all credibility.²³² Critical of these grand theories, Lyotard instead celebrates the little narrative, or *petit récit*.²³³ Lyotard argues that the *petit récit* ‘remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention,’²³⁴ and the most inventive way of creating and disseminating knowledge and breaking down the monopoly exercised by grand narratives.²³⁵ In their function, little narratives ‘do not pretend to have the answers to all of society’s problems,’ and are instead ‘put together on a tactical basis by small groups of individuals to achieve some particular objective.’²³⁶ In this sense, little narratives champion autonomous, grass roots organization as opposed to the large-scale, overarching conformity imposed by grand narratives. Little narratives take on a provisional status, becoming ephemeral and lasting only as long as it takes to achieve their immediate objectives.²³⁷

This incredulity towards metanarratives stems from the poststructuralist tendency to ‘celebrate diversity and reject efforts to see unity.’²³⁸ Postmodernism likewise ‘stresses the relativity, instability and indeterminacy of meaning [and] abandons all attempts to grasp totalities ... in favour of more modest, specific, local and fragmented analyses.’²³⁹ The preference for little narratives over metanarratives places the emphasis on diversity and heterogeneity²⁴⁰ as opposed to the universalism of modernity, which sought equivalence and homogeneity. Through this pluralistic stance comes the postmodern idea that ‘all groups have a right to speak for themselves, in

²²⁹ T. Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 1996, p. vii.

²³⁰ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. xxiii.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, p. xxiv.

²³² *Sim*, p. 3.

²³³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²³⁴ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 60.

²³⁵ *Sim* p. 9.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²³⁸ A. Gare, ‘The Roots of Postmodernism: Schelling, Process Philosophy, and Poststructuralism’, in C. Keller and D. Daniell (eds.), *Process and Difference: Between Cosmological and Poststructuralist Postmodernism*, New York, SUNY Press, 2002, p. 37.

²³⁹ Best, p. 188.

²⁴⁰ P. Sheehan, ‘Postmodernism and Philosophy’, in Connor, S. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 28.

their own voice, and to have that voice accepted as authentic and legitimate.²⁴¹ Postmodernists have thus ‘encouraged those who have been marginalized ... to express and assert themselves,²⁴² while debunking the modernist meta-theories that tended ‘to gloss over important disjunctions and details.’²⁴³

Against these Enlightenment norms, postmodernism sees the world as ‘contingent, ungrounded, diverse, unstable and indeterminate,²⁴⁴ with a ‘resistance to totality ... to teleology ... and to closure of any kind.’²⁴⁵ Bauman stresses that unlike modernists and structuralists ‘the postmodern mind does not expect ... to find the all embracing, total and ultimate formula of life without ambiguity ... and is deeply suspicious of any voice that promises otherwise.’²⁴⁶ Lyotard encapsulates this sentiment when he advocates for us to ‘wage a war on totality ... [to] be witness to the unrepresentable ... [to] activate the differences and [to] save the honor of the name.’²⁴⁷

As a ‘negative form of philosophy,’ postmodernism sets out to undermine other philosophical theories that claim to be in possession of ultimate truth, or the *criteria* by which they can determine what constitutes truth.²⁴⁸ In particular, it is ‘the tendency to identify European notions of rationality with universal truth’ that postmodernists question.²⁴⁹ Spencer notes that it is ‘a recurrent gesture’ of postmodernism to be critical of ‘western rationality, logocentricism, humanism [and] the legacy of the Enlightenment.’²⁵⁰ Lyotard’s position can be understood as ‘a rejection of the idea that there are foundations to our systems of thought ... that lie beyond question,’ and an attack on the self-authorized truths that are skewed in the interests of those who construct them.²⁵¹ Lyotard sees truth claims as arrived at by consensus, as ‘an agreement between men ... obtained through dialogue.’²⁵² As a ‘horizon which is never reached,’²⁵³ Lyotard sees consensus as ‘an outmoded and suspect value,’²⁵⁴ which serves as a component of a system ‘which manipulates it in order to maintain and

²⁴¹ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 48.

²⁴² Gare, ‘Post-modernism as the Decadence of the Social Democratic State’, p. 80.

²⁴³ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 113.

²⁴⁴ Eagleton, p. vii.

²⁴⁵ Sheehan, p. 21.

²⁴⁶ Z. Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1994, p. 245.

²⁴⁷ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* p. 82.

²⁴⁸ Sim, p. 3.

²⁴⁹ Gare, *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis*, p. 36.

²⁵⁰ L. Spencer, ‘Postmodernism, Modernity, and the Tradition of Dissent’, in S. Sim (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, London, Routledge, 2001, p. 162.

²⁵¹ Sim, p. 9.

²⁵² Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 60.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

improve its performance.²⁵⁵ Consequently, it only finds validity as an instrument that serves to achieve its real goal, which is the augmentation of power.²⁵⁶ This reaching of consensus is something that echoes the classic liberal methodology of striking rational contracts between men, with what is deemed rational being determined by that which is in the best interests of the parties involved. This leads to confirmation biases for those who are actively reaching consensus through a privileged discourse, which has typically been from the standpoint of Western civilization. Postmodern theory can therefore be understood as the ‘deployment of philosophy to undermine the authoritarian imperatives in our culture,’²⁵⁷ with postmodernism amounting to what is essentially ‘a vote of no confidence in [the] entire tradition of enlightened philosophical, ethical and social thought.’²⁵⁸

Easthope points out that ‘to respond that there are still grand narratives’ would be to misunderstand Lyotard’s analysis.²⁵⁹ He argues that at stake is ‘not just an awareness but the active trust and belief supposed by the concept of narrative knowledge.’²⁶⁰ There is a case to be made for postmodern skepticism and disbelief, since active trust and belief is what provides neoliberalism with ideological hegemony and economic capital with symbolic power. In reference to the Velvet Revolution and the collapse of the USSR, Sim notes that ‘the populace simply stopped believing in the prevailing ideology, which then ceased to have any authority to enforce its will.’²⁶¹ Such disbelief helped facilitate the collapse of the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe; could it do the same for capitalism? Disbelief in the grand narrative of economic progress is an important first step to reimagining any alternative.

The postmodern rejection of equivalence is also an important departure from modernity. Since globalised capitalism is built on a system of equivalence, of reducing everything to the medium of economic capital, we can see how diversity can be applied in order to develop new value systems based around autonomy and ecology. Meanwhile, the resistance to totality also defies the teleological narrative of progress towards a utopian singularity, which opens up awareness for a range of possible futures.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 60.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 61.

²⁵⁷ Sim, p. 13.

²⁵⁸ C. Norris, *The Truth about Postmodernism*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1994, p. 304.

²⁵⁹ Easthope, p. 20.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Sim, p. 9.

The Role of Narratives

However, the postmodern incredulity toward grand narratives is problematic when responding to a global problem like climate change. Narratives are important because they orient us and they enable us to make sense of the world. Bruner identifies a narrative as an ‘account of events occurring over time’ that organizes our lived experience and memories into ‘stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing or not doing,’ and so on.²⁶² All individual and social actions that take place are lived stories, and it is the narrative form that enables us to formulate goals and to act on these goals. It enables us to assess where we are at in terms of narrative emplotment and to understand ourselves in relation to this fixed reference point.

Gare sees narratives as primordial ‘not only as a means to organize our experience and understand the world,’ but as the process by which human beings create themselves.²⁶³ Who we are, what we do, and why we do it, is only made intelligible through a narrative structure. MacIntyre argues that ‘It is because we all live out narratives in our lives and because we understand our own lives in terms of the narratives that we live out that the form of narrative is most appropriate for understanding the actions of others.’²⁶⁴

As such, narratives not only inform the actions we take, but also how we come to understand ourselves in relation to each other and the world. According to Bruner, ‘one of the principle ways in which we work “mentally” in common ... is by the process of joint narrative accrual.’²⁶⁵ Sim identifies that ‘one of the problems we are left with when we dispense of grand narratives ... is how to construct value judgements that others will accept as just and reasonable.’²⁶⁶ Gare maintains that this loss of any collective sense of narrative means that individuals ‘have lost the ability to construct[,] ... reconstruct or even appreciate broader narratives about society and humanity.’²⁶⁷

The Postmodern Acquiescence to the Market

The loss of belief in grand narratives has ultimately led to a postmodern acquiescence to the market. Gare argues that postmodernists who debunk grand narratives have effectively capitulated to the global market and corporate power.²⁶⁸ He sees the rise of

²⁶² J. Bruner, ‘The Narrative Construction of Reality’, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1991, pp. 4-6.

²⁶³ A. Gare, ‘The Primordial Role of Stories in Human Self Creation’, *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2007, p. 95.

²⁶⁴ A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd edn., Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1984, p. 212.

²⁶⁵ Bruner, p. 20.

²⁶⁶ Sim, p. 9.

²⁶⁷ Gare, ‘Post-modernism as the Decadence of the Social Democratic State’, p. 98.

²⁶⁸ Gare, ‘The Primordial Role of Stories in Human Self Creation’, p. 113.

postmodern culture as being ‘associated with the massive concentration of economic and political power,’ facilitating the triumph of neoliberalism.²⁶⁹

While postmodernism may have arisen ‘from the amalgamation ... of many deflections [and] diagonal gazes,’²⁷⁰ Harvey points out that ‘it is hard to stop the slide into ... myopia, and self-referentiality in the face of the universalizing force of capital circulation.’²⁷¹ The dismantling of grand narratives has meant that ‘the individual subject is no longer able to define itself reciprocally against a reliable, exterior object.’²⁷² As a result, the role of ‘object’ has been assumed by economic capital, and this now serves as the lowest common denominator for reciprocal objectivity. Individuals then come to define themselves through the conspicuous consumption and accumulation of this object in order to compensate for their lack of a fixed, meaningful reference point.

This process has seen diversity become equivalence, as ‘the common material languages of money and commodities provide[s] a universal basis ... for linking everyone into an identical system of market valuation ... through an objectively grounded system of social bonding.’²⁷³ While postmodernism ‘opens up a radical prospect by acknowledging the authenticity of other voices,’ it ‘immediately shuts off those other voices from access to a more universal source of power ... thereby disempowering those voices ... in a world of lopsided power relations.’²⁷⁴ In this capacity, postmodernism becomes ‘dangerous’ as it ‘avoids confronting ... the circumstances of global power,’²⁷⁵ and offers ‘no defence against arbitrary ... forms of doctrinal imposition.’²⁷⁶ For Harvey:

the postmodern concerns for the signifier rather than the signified, the medium (money) rather than the message (social labour), the emphasis on fiction rather than function, on signs rather than things ... suggest[s] a reinforcement rather than a transformation of the role of money.²⁷⁷

Postmodernism therefore has us ‘accepting the reifications and partitionings ... while denying that [any] kind of meta-theory ... can grasp the political-economic

²⁶⁹ Gare, ‘Post-modernism as the Decadence of the Social Democratic State’, pp. 77, 80.

²⁷⁰ S. Connor, ‘Introduction’, in S. Connor (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 1.

²⁷¹ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 351

²⁷² Easthope, p. 22.

²⁷³ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 102

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 117

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁶ Norris, p. 299.

²⁷⁷ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 102.

processes ... that are becoming ever more universalizing in their depth, intensity, reach and power.²⁷⁸

Environmentalism and Climate Science

Another contradiction built into postmodernism concerns environmentalism and climate science. As a form of narrative knowledge, climate science presents a double-edged sword for postmodern environmentalists. While scientific insights ‘have given environmentalism much of what public authority and credibility it has ... some environmentalists see science’s rationalist and instrumental conception of nature as the fundamental problem.’²⁷⁹

Aware that science and technology were the forces that made large-scale destruction of the ecosystem possible in the first place, postmodern environmentalists believe that the underlying problem is humanity’s ‘conviction of ... [the] right to use, change, and exploit nature.’²⁸⁰ Also inherent in postmodern environmentalism is the ‘suspicion that science might essentially be a tool of oppression at the service of the powerful,’ and this has contributed to a ‘gradual loss of trust’ in the sciences.²⁸¹ This skepticism is not unfounded, with science having been used routinely in the past ‘to justify sexist and racist forms of domination.’²⁸² For instance, it was not long ago that social Darwinism provided the scientific grounding for arbitrary racism, while the relatively new concept of the ‘selfish gene’ finds popularity today, despite the fact that when drawn to its logical conclusions it effectively vindicates rape. More importantly, the potential for science to wreak unparalleled destruction on the planet has a very real basis. There is a lingering perception that historically, ‘scientific insight and technological ingenuity went into the manufacture of ever more destructive weapons of war,’ ultimately leading ‘to a nuclear regime of “mutually assured destruction” [M.A.D].’²⁸³ With climate destabilization, we again find ourselves facing the most efficient and ingenious regime of M.A.D yet—the wholesale destruction of the biosphere.

Awareness about environmental degradation would not exist in its current capacity without the insights of modern science, but modern science is seen as the method by which such degradation has been made possible. How then can

²⁷⁸ Ibid., pp. 116-117.

²⁷⁹ U.K. Heise, ‘Science, technology, and postmodernism’, in Connor, S. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 145.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., pp. 145-146.

²⁸¹ Ibid., p. 147.

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Ibid.

postmodernists adequately respond to climate change? The short answer is they cannot, unless they can reconcile this contradiction. One way toward this reconciliation would be to differentiate between the autonomous fields of research as opposed to those purely in the pursuit of performative outcomes. However, as discussed in Part II, this becomes increasingly difficult when capitalism dictates how science is conducted.

The Triumphant Failure of Postmodernism

Bauman argues that through postmodernism, the ability to act collectively and globally has been ‘all but discredited, dismantled or lost.’²⁸⁴ Postmodernism presents itself as a defeatist philosophy, asserting that ‘coherent representation and action are either repressive or illusionary,’ and that we should therefore ‘not even try to engage in a global project,’ or attempt to imagine some radically different future.²⁸⁵

By discrediting the possibility of a grand narrative, postmodernism has taken away the ability for the oppressed to combine and be authors of their own destiny. Meanwhile, those already in privileged positions have been able to entrench themselves further, with their grand narrative not only unscathed by the postmodern critique, but actively reinforced by it. The result of this has seen the dominated strata fragmented and disempowered, while those who dominate ‘have never been more secure in their belief in the grand narrative of economic progress.’²⁸⁶ This dominant grand narrative is one that disproportionately benefits a select few, while condemning the majority to indentured wage-slavery and serfdom by proxy. In the process it continues to erode the ecological conditions for life on earth.

Obsessed with language games and the arbitrary nature of signifiers, these have become the only reality for postmodernists. In the same way that Baudrillard notes the iconoclasts ‘who are often accused of despising and denying images,’ were ‘in fact the ones who accorded them their actual worth,’²⁸⁷ postmodernists have come to venerate symbols by mode of their deconstruction. Through its celebration of diversity, postmodernism has effectively leveled any sense of difference. By dismantling hierarchies and putting every discourse on par with one another, it has merely achieved equivalence by a different method. Through its incredulity towards metanarratives postmodernism has capitulated to the rule of capital as the only reliable, exterior, and binding object.

²⁸⁴ Bauman, p. 245.

²⁸⁵ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, pp. 52-54.

²⁸⁶ Gare, ‘Post-modernism as the Decadence of the Social Democratic State’, p. 80.

²⁸⁷ Baudrillard, p. 9.

Authenticating a Grand Narrative

Above all else, postmodernism represents a crisis of narratives. This crisis renders it impotent to tackle climate change on two interrelated fronts; first in combating the grand narrative of neoliberalism, and secondly in coming together to act on climate change. The crisis of narratives is not that they no longer exist, but that there has been a schism between the two primary forms of narrative: the *petit* and the grand. On the one hand, there exists the grand narrative of economic progress that almost everyone subscribes to. On the other hand, there are the little narratives that serve as isolated refuges from this. That there is no continuity between the *petit* and the grand is something that needs to be addressed.

Against the grand narrative of neoliberalism, little narratives should offer a space for autonomous modes of resistance. However the challenge is to unify these little narratives into a cohesive and authentic grand narrative that can adequately challenge neoliberal economics. This can only be done from the ground up, through an intertextual weaving that binds the *petit* with the grand and provides a generative foundation for an overarching narrative that is dialectically constructed—and deconstructed—from below.

What is at stake with both modernity and postmodernity is losing sight of the interconnectedness between both forms of narrative. Without a grand narrative, little narratives lack context. Without little narratives, grand narratives lack authenticity. Gare argues that it is through the ‘inherent reflexivity of the narrative form,’ that individuals are able ‘to question the narratives they have been encultured by and socialized into.’²⁸⁸ This enables them to ‘consider alternative versions of these narratives ... [and] to construct their lives as unfinished stories.’²⁸⁹ Gare regards such people as ‘authentic’ and as ‘authors of their own becoming.’²⁹⁰ This is the process by which a grand narrative can be authenticated.

A postmodern disbelief in grand narratives is not enough. Grand narratives should be engaged with dialectically, and either *authenticated* or *debunked*. However, it should be regarded as an ongoing process of authentication, of opening up a continuous dialogue between the *petit* and the grand; they cannot be separated. These narrative forms exist in dialectical tension, mutually informing one another. As Bruner argues, ‘even our individual autobiographies ... depend on being placed within a continuity provided by a constructed and shared social history in which we locate our Selves and our individual communities.’²⁹¹ It is in this sense that we become products of the history we

²⁸⁸ Gare, ‘The Primordial Role of Stories in Human Self Creation’, p. 112.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

²⁹¹ Bruner, p. 20.

inherit and can view ourselves as the ‘bearers of tradition.’²⁹² As bearers of tradition, we have a responsibility to contribute to tradition and to play a role in re-authoring and re-creating that tradition. As emergent human phenomena, narratives are created and exist dialectically; not as stale, abiotic things that can be adopted or discarded. Narratives need to be viewed as living organisms that require continual engagement in order to be sustained.

What is required is a revival of narrative that does justice to the particulars without sacrificing the bigger picture. An authentic grand narrative would be one whose foundations are not abstract in the extreme, but connected to the earth and spiraling upwards. As a network of narratives of narratives, such a grand narrative would be analogous with a rainforest’s canopy: multi-tiered and constructed through the culmination of many individual entities that simultaneously provide and derive life to and from one another.

The Postmodern Respect for Truth

MacIntyre argues that as a story-telling creature, man is ‘a teller of stories that aspire to truth.’²⁹³ It is this *aspiration* to truth that needs to be recognized as important; narratives do not encode truth, they aim to represent it. This awareness that narratives will never be complete should be an empowering facet of postmodernism.

One of the criticisms often leveled against postmodernism is that it is a negative form of philosophy ‘more concerned with destabilizing other theories and their pretensions to truth than setting up a positive theory of its own.’²⁹⁴ As a negative form of philosophy, postmodernism is not concerned with making truth claims, but with identifying the falsified nature of all truth claims. As MacIntyre points out, ‘in *La Nausée*, Sartre makes Antoine Roquentin argue ... that to present human life in any form of a narrative is always to falsify it. There are not and cannot be any true stories.’²⁹⁵ Uttering a ‘true’ narrative would require such absolute detail, presented in the most unambiguous of terms and with such unparalleled complexity, that to do so would be almost certainly impossible. To falsify is the very nature of abstraction and there is always bound to be, as Derrida argues, some slippage of meaning occurring.

There is an inherent vagueness to reality that abstraction *cannot* capture. Perhaps it is a vagueness that abstraction shouldn’t attempt to capture, lest it make a disrespectful forgery and diminish that which it sought to reflect. It brings to mind Borges’ fable *On*

²⁹² MacIntyre, p. 221.

²⁹³ MacIntyre, p. 216.

²⁹⁴ Sim, p. 13.

²⁹⁵ MacIntyre, p. 214.

Exactitude in Science in which ‘an emperor wishes to have a perfectly accurate map of the empire made,’ only for the project to lead the actual empire to ruin as ‘the entire population devotes all its energy to cartography.’²⁹⁶ That’s not to say there is not an objective reality, but that attempting to map it exactly in abstract terms (and taking those abstract terms to be absolutes) can lead to decay. For instance, that we’ve mapped the entire world through an economic formula has led to its ruin. As we devote all our energies to accruing the universal simulacra of economic capital, the real world is being destroyed. Given the ecological ramifications of such equivalence, the question surely becomes one of diversity or death; do we come to terms with ambiguity and diversify concepts of truth, or do we strive to keep it sequestered and embodied in the economic symbolic realm?

The modern paradigm of equivalence and efficiency is one of dogmatism and hostility towards alternate possibilities. However, even possibilities that are wrong still provide value by contributing to a broader discourse. When dealing in abstractions, there are always bound to be some things omitted or misrepresented. However, it is important to make dialectical contributions despite this. In this sense, it is far better to be wrong and open about the fact, than wrong and absolutely committed to it.

We should be aware that all we can aim for is representations of imperfect and provisional truths. In different times and in different places, what is considered to be absolute truth varies wildly and with reckless abandon. Postmodernism, properly understood, should be seen as a deep respect for truth; of not taking truth for granted or reducing it to the plaything of arrogant civilizations. To make absolute truth claims *ad nauseam* is to devalue truth. Perhaps it is no mistake that Lyotard advocates—somewhat bizarrely—for justice to be upheld as a value at the end of his report on knowledge. Perhaps doing truth justice means avoiding the tendency to constantly speak on its behalf. As Nietzsche put it: ‘Convictions are more dangerous enemies of truth than lies.’²⁹⁷ This awareness that truth is always provisional is important, lest our convictions become intellectual prisons.

The postmodern respect for truth and skepticism towards grand narratives should encapsulate this. By recognizing and embracing the falsified nature of language games, and by becoming *literate* in these language games—in science, economics, philosophy and so forth—we can engage in meaningful discourse and distinguish between the authentic forms of narrative knowledge as opposed to the inauthentic, superficial, and arbitrary modes of control. In this sense, we can play a legitimate role in the formation

²⁹⁶ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 55.

²⁹⁷ F. Nietzsche, *Man Alone with Himself*, trans. M. Faber, S. Lehmann, and R.J. Hollingdale, London, Penguin Books, 2008, p. 1.

of these language games and grand narratives, and we can inform them authentically through active participation as opposed to removed disinterest. While narratives are essentially metaphorical in nature, they have transformative qualities that actively shape our world. As ‘metaphors determine ... what we can think,’ they also determine how we can act,²⁹⁸ and in this sense, ‘language does not simply reflect reality but helps constitute it.’²⁹⁹ While language games and narrative knowledge may be abstract, they have powerful qualities that are worth engaging with.

The Problem with ‘Post-’

As the etymological descendent of ‘the modern’, ‘the postmodern’ has an instinctive monopoly on the ‘alternative’ status of any anti-modern response. However, to be ‘post-’ modern merely conforms to the linear logic of modernity, and it is for this reason that postmodernism cannot represent a break from modernity. Epstein identifies that the problem with ‘post-’ is that it is ‘ambivalent and ... self-defeating’ because it has an inherent reliance on the pre-existing concept, thus presenting an inability to effectively move past this conceptual mode.³⁰⁰

Harvey maintains that postmodernism needs to be understood not so much as a break from modernity, but as a crisis *within* modernity itself. He argues that there ‘is much more continuity than difference’ between modernism and postmodernism,³⁰¹ and Epstein also points out that there is ‘nothing positively new’ in the concept of postmodernism, except for it being ‘after modernism.’³⁰² Even Lyotard believes that the postmodern is ‘undoubtedly a part of the modern,’ viewing postmodernism not as modernism at its end, but in its nascent state.³⁰³ In his later works, Lyotard confesses that his use of ‘postmodern’ was a ‘slightly provocative way of placing ... into the limelight the debate about knowledge,’ describing postmodernity not as ‘a new age, but the rewriting of some of the features claimed by modernity.’³⁰⁴ He argues that ‘a work can become modern only if it is first postmodern,’³⁰⁵ and that modernity is ‘constitutionally and ceaselessly pregnant with its postmodernity.’³⁰⁶ The ‘postmodern’

²⁹⁸ Sarup, p. 50.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

³⁰⁰ M. Epstein, *The Transformative Humanities: A Manifesto*, trans. I. Klyukanov, New York, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012, pp. 24-25.

³⁰¹ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 116.

³⁰² Epstein, p. 25.

³⁰³ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 79.

³⁰⁴ J-F. Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. G. Bennington and R. Bowlby, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1993, p. 34.

³⁰⁵ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 79.

³⁰⁶ Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, p. 25.

therefore becomes teleological as the modern *catches up* to the postmodern the moment that the cutting edge is amalgamated into the present. In this sense, ‘the postmodern is always implied in the modern because of the fact that modernity ... comprises of an impulsion to exceed itself into a state other than itself.’³⁰⁷

The Postmodern Condition: Diagnosis or Manifesto?

The question that needs to be asked, then, is whether the postmodern condition is a diagnosis or a manifesto. Marked by ‘dissent and disillusionment in equal measure,’³⁰⁸ postmodernism is an ambivalent response to modernity. Despite its redeeming features, the postmodern condition presents critical failures in addressing globalised capitalism, and by extension climate change. It recognizes that something is wrong with modernity, but is not capable of imagining any alternative.

Reacting against modernity with the effectiveness of ‘an awkward and petulant teenager, wavering between anger and revolt on the one hand and sullen reproach and refusal on the other.’³⁰⁹ Postmodernism needs to be understood as the fractured outcome of a ruthless process of modernization—ephemeral, irrational and ultimately ineffective against the overwhelming tide of sustained, organized, technocratic rationalism. At best, it presents a peculiar annoyance for the system—at worst, the perfect consumers to fuel the machinery of capitalism.

The indeterminacy of meaning, the broken chains of floating signifiers, the lack of cohesive narrative employment and the complete absence of the real, points towards what is often cited as a diagnosis of schizophrenia emerging in the wake of modernity. The ‘post’ in ‘postmodernism’ is, in this sense, analogous with the ‘post’ in ‘post-traumatic stress disorder.’ The postmodern condition needs to be understood as precisely that—a condition. Rather than a manifesto longing for some yet-to-be-realized future, we need to take Lyotard’s *Postmodern Condition* as a diagnosis of an ongoing crisis within modernity.

While some postmodern theorists ‘claim that we are in a radically new historical epoch ... determined by signs, images and simulation models,’³¹⁰ and that this is the postmodern era, we need to understand ourselves as squarely rooted in late-modernity; tethered to modernity, yet rapidly accelerating towards a post-modernity potentially devoid of all meaningful human life. If the project of modernity is the development of a metalanguage and the fulfillment of a grand narrative, then the post-modern era is

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ Spencer, p. 161.

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

³¹⁰ Best, p. 189.

what must come *after* environmental collapse. Perhaps the simplest way to identify this crisis is as ‘late-capitalism,’ with capitalism having transcended and subsumed the modern as the de facto, positivist ideology. We need to understand late-capitalism as the epoch we are enduring and as the final, unfolding stages of a modernity that is rapidly approaching its *denouement*; one that we should hope not to reach.

Proto-Historicism

With the postmodern all but inseparable from the modern, what is required is a new, non-linear, sense of narrative emplotment. Arguing that ‘we live not so much *after* ... as in the very beginning of a new epoch,’ Epstein believes that our current era should be more positively defined in terms of ‘proto-’ rather than ‘post-’.³¹¹ Rather than the prefix ‘post-’ which Epstein sees as an ‘arrogant and ... parasitic addition to the existing cultural vocabulary,’ ‘proto-’ comes from the Greek *protos*, meaning ‘the first’, and indicates ‘the potential to become.’³¹² Despite its perceived ‘deterministic and teleological implications,’ Epstein argues that the use of ‘proto-’ indicates *possibility* rather than necessity, and is therefore able to avoid the ‘fatalistic outcomes’ of modernity.³¹³ Unlike ‘post-’, ‘proto-’ possesses the ‘historical experience’ to locate itself ‘not in the distant future, but in the distant past of the future it anticipates ... not as an *avant-garde*, but as [an] *arrière-garde*.’³¹⁴

By ‘forecasting a future,’ Epstein maintains we are able to ‘position ourselves in its distant past.’³¹⁵ It is in this sense that I propose the idea of ‘proto-historicism’. By seeking to become ‘proto-historical’, we could define ourselves as neither modern nor postmodern, but as having *the potential to become history*. ‘Proto-historicism’ can accommodate the desire for continuity between epochs, by locating the present as the fulcrum between past and future, and as the generative foundation for both. In this sense, the present is not just seen as creating the future, but also as engendering the past, which is equally important. Since ‘proto-’ gives us the ability to define something in advance, with foresight rather than hindsight,³¹⁶ if we apply this notion to history, we can create a new dimension to how we view it. Instead of history being something that is merely described, we can play a role in dictating how it is actively *prescribed*—literally written—by viewing ourselves as participants in its active creation. In this sense, history becomes a frontier much the same as the future does.

³¹¹ Epstein, p. 25.

³¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 25-32.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Indicating a ‘humble awareness of the fact that we live in the earliest stages of an unknown civilization,’³¹⁷ proto-historicism should be viewed as the awareness that we are in the first stages of creating a new historical phase. Not merely as inheritors of the past, but as bearers of a yet to be created tradition. By viewing ourselves as ‘embryos of a future society ... [and] looking back at ourselves from a distant future,’³¹⁸ we can appreciate that time and narratives are not only about what comes next, but about what story we lay out behind us.

From PoMo to Proto

A switch from the postmodern to the proto-historical should not be difficult. In his later works, Lyotard argues that ‘rather than the postmodern, what would be properly opposed to modernity ... would be the classical age,’ involving ‘a state of time ... in which advent and passing, future and past, are treated as though ... they embraced the totality of life in one and the same unity of meaning.’³¹⁹ The desire for Lyotard, it seems, is to reconcile the past, present and future in a way that does not disproportionately privilege one or the other, but takes them all together as inseparable products and producers of one another. This can be achieved through a proto-historical perspective.

By situating ourselves not at the end of history, but at its beginning, we can carry with us an optimism about the future and an optimism about a yet-to-be created past; as authors of a story still unfolding. Proto-historicism could provide this new sense of narrative emplotment, allowing us to ‘rewrite history’ not by dismissing what came before, but by re-conceiving when we consider history to be. It is with this in mind that we need to look towards the present *as* the past, and to decide what kind of history we want to create. Through this we can ensure a continuous narrative that can be reflected upon by future generations.

CONCLUSION: QUIXOTIC MODERNITY: THE CHALLENGE FOR THE FUTURE

“Take care, sir,” cried Sancho. “Those over there are not giants but windmills, and those things that seem to be arms are their sails, which when they are whirled around by the wind turn the millstone.” “It is clear,” replied Don Quixote, “that you are not experienced in adventures. Those are giants, and if

³¹⁷ Ibid., p. 32.

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, p. 25.

you are afraid, turn aside and pray whilst I enter into fierce and unequal battle with them.”³²⁰

Modernity is an ascension, but to what end? The project of modernity sees us forever inching forwards and upwards, climbing towards utopia. However, in the process it seems we have found the sword of Damocles to not only hang closer, but to be much more terrifying than we had previously imagined. The end point of modernity relies on a total equivalence, an absolute, which is tantamount to nothingness—an equilibrium in which humanity reaches a plateau of inactivity. When the *telos* is reached, and we find the project of modernity exhausted, we may also find the flame of human civilization extinguished. Consciously or unconsciously, the project of modernity has provided the perfect conditions for environmental collapse. The Moderate Enlightenment philosophies, associated as they are with notions of domination, accumulation and individuality, have provided the underlying metaphysical assumptions we make about humanity, nature and our relationship with the world and each other. When placed within the overarching narrative of progress through the development of a universal metalanguage, these are the philosophies that drive Western Civilization and explain the logic that has provided neoliberal economics with its unrivaled hegemony in the twenty-first century. The universal aspirations of modernity have meant that the ascension of the domestic bourgeoisie, as experienced in eighteenth century France, has unfolded globally, with the twenty-first century dominated by private economic interests. This is the logic of modernity, and it is a logic that must be overcome in order to address the environmental challenges facing our global civilization.

In Cervantes' celebrated novel *Don Quixote* the idealistic and imaginative Don Quixote is contrasted with his realistic, simple-minded squire Sancho Panza. Don Quixote takes to jousting with windmills, believing them to be giants, while Sancho Panza tries in vain to alert his master that they are simply windmills. Don Quixote is taken to be completely mad, while Sancho Panza is celebrated as a bastion of rationality (albeit simple-minded, illiterate and unimaginative). To be quixotic is to be romantic, impractical, deluded and idealistic.

Modernity could be characterized as a quixotic Sancho Panza: idealistically committed to the perfectly calculable, clocklike nature of windmills. Completely enthralled by a mechanical worldview and oblivious to the possibility that these reified giants of modernity—these titanic, mechanical Leviathans—could or should be slain. Perhaps what is lacking with modernity is this sense of imagination to step beyond the truths and convictions that immobilize our creativity. The idea that everything is laid

³²⁰ M.D. Cervantes Saavedra, *Don Quixote*, trans. Starkie, W., New York, Signet Classics, 2001, p. 98.

out rationally, and that we need only wait to discover it, does not leave much room for human creativity. And so the future appears closed to us, and we are seemingly consigned to our fate.

What postmodernism has shown us is that it is not enough to simply be ‘anti’ modern. Deconstructive postmodernism is an important first step towards reorienting humanity, but it is not an end in itself. We cannot completely forget what came before, or how we got to where we are; what we can do is change how we proceed from this crisis. Without the possibility of finding cohesion in a grand narrative, postmodernism is not adequately equipped to confront modernity in a meaningful way. Until it does so, it will remain a mere subplot and symptom of modernity. It is in this regard that postmodernism has been a triumphant failure. It has been a superficial mode of resistance that is total in its prevalence, ineffective in its application, and illusory in its dissent.

A postmodern response to climate change is not possible. It ignores the possibility of developing a grand narrative to collectively respond, while dismissing the narrative knowledge that gives climate science its legitimacy. Without an overarching grand narrative to provide a joint orientation for humanity, it becomes impossible for us to imagine, organize, and act collectively on a large-scale problem like climate change. To do so would require an inter-generational understanding of humanity that transcends our immediate selves. Such an understanding can only be formulated and cognitively processed through the form of a grand narrative, which inevitably takes on temporal dimensions. The intellectual challenge for humanity, then, is to become the authors of an authentic grand narrative that can wrest back control of our collective destiny.

The postmodern condition can be observed in Cervantes’ character of Cardenio. Schizoid, disheveled, dejected, and out of faith with romantic idealism he is found wandering aimlessly in the wilderness of Sierra Morena. Having been spurned by promises of love and justice he is unable—or unwilling—to discuss his story. His fractured tale is one of deception and disappointment, in which his expected utopia—being wed to his beloved Lucinda—is shattered. It is done so by the calculating and self-serving Don Fernando, who tricks Lucinda into marrying himself. Cardenio is unable to grasp and articulate his trauma, instead reverting to spasmodic bouts of indiscriminate violence. This of course goes no way towards recovering any sense of justice or correcting the ills done to him.

Cardenio serves as an example of what can happen when a promised utopia is dishonestly and cruelly commandeered by the reckless impulses of a bourgeois modernity. Cardenio is eventually reconciled when he tells his story to Don Quixote.

It is through the narrative form that he is able to *recollect* the fragmented pieces of himself, place himself back in the world, and recapture the sense of reality that is required to take meaningful action.

Like Cardenio, we too need to tell our story, but in a new way. Proto-historicism *implies* a future, but it does not *demand* one like (post)modernity does. The future is not inevitable. We are not owed a future—at least not a future that includes us. The choices we make in the present will dictate whatever future—and by implication, what past—we inherit, and whether we inherit one at all. We need to rethink our grand narrative in a way that presupposes the past, the present, and the future as interrelated and co-dependent on one another. Rather than an incessant demand for the modern, or even the post-modern, we need view ourselves as actively becoming the past—as *proto-historical*. To do so would be to ensure a future by defining the present in relation to its role as the active creation of history.

As a new form of narrative employment, proto-historicism is just one aspect of a much broader challenge for the future. This challenge includes engendering an alternative and ecologically coherent metaphysics based on process, dynamism, and change. It requires a more adequate, non-reductive scientific and epistemological framework to combat the mechanistic materialist view of nature, and it requires a new ecological subjectivity to rival *homo-economicus*. From this can flow a renewed sense of ethics and politics, and these are areas that I hope to explore and synthesize in future research.

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