

In a passage reminiscent of Shoghi Effendi:

They doubt the ability of thinkers from the West either to understand the world or to prescribe solutions for it. The grand theories of the past, whether liberal or Marxist, have been dismissed as products of an age when Europeans and North Americans mistakenly believed in their own invincibility.

An important theme of postmodernism is resistance to 'metanarratives':

The metanarratives of such thought are no longer seen as 'truth,' but simply as privileged discourses that deny and silence competing dissident voices. ... Michel Foucault ... argues that discourse - a historically, socially and institutionally specific structure of statements, terms, categories, and beliefs - is the site where meanings are contested and power relations determined.

From this point of view, institutionalized scholarship can be a form of domination:

The ability to control knowledge and meaning, not only through writing but also through disciplinary and professional institutions, and in social relations, is the key to understanding and exercising power relationships in society. According to Foucault, the false power of hegemonic knowledge can be challenged by counter- hegemonic discourses which offer alternative explanations of 'reality.'

About deconstructionism:

[Attention has been directed] to the power of language/discourse and its impact on the way people understand and assign meaning to their lives. It has led to a call for the dismantling or deconstruction of language/discourse in order to discover the way meaning is constructed and used.

There is an interesting angle for those interested in Buddhism and Northern Asia thought:

Jacques Derrida in particular emphasizes the crucial role played by binary opposites. Indeed, he argues that Western philosophy largely rests on opposites, such as truth/falsity,

unity/diversity or man/women, whereby the nature and primacy of the first term depends on the definition of its opposite (other) and whereby the first term is also superior to the second.

Very heady stuff, and now very widely studied. I'm surprised that so little attention has been paid to postmodernism in a Bahá'í Studies context.

(second posting on postmodernism...)

Dear Friends:

The reason I am interested in postmodernism has to do with recent concerns about 'start-up' problems in Bahá'í Studies: issues like the polarizations that have kept Bahá'í Studies from making significant contributions, or the 'middle eastern studies' controversies.

An important question to me is how do we support and encourage promising and important scholarship of the sort we see on this list: I see our scholars, amateur and professional alike, as being a priceless treasure (as the PR folks say, an "investment in the future.")

To a significant degree, trust and communication has been lacking between some scholars and the community they wish to represent. It is the reasons for this lack of trust that I find myself wishing to understand. Learning what these reasons are is an important step towards establishing a strong, healthy, and respected Bahá'í Scholarship, in my opinion.

Traditionally, many Bahá'ís with scholarly interests have blamed the problem on anti-intellectualism. While I don't discount the extent to which anti-intellectualism prevails in the Anglo-Saxon world, I find that as an explanation of the problems of Bahá'í Scholarship, it lacks both substance and the ability to point to solutions. Rather, and here is where my postmodern assumptions come in, I see it as an attempt -- a time-honored one to be sure -- to assign blame, to escape intellectual responsibility, and yes, to try to obtain authority. It is, of course, derogatory to label someone or a group of people as anti-intellectual.

More broadly, I have come to see our scholarship problems as structural in nature: they stem from widespread assumptions in our society - assumptions derived from our pasts and still tremendously

influential in our thinking -- and the accompanying "instabilities" that these assumptions create. In particular, I am interested in the assumptions that come into play in the relationship between the "learned" and the rest of the community. And while I indeed think there is some truth to the view that non-scholars are responsible for the problems, I consider that the main responsibility for improvement lies with would-be Bahá'í scholars, as presumably they are the ones with the better education and the necessary broader perspectives.

While I certainly do not swallow the postmodern story hook, line, and sinker, I think that it offers a powerful analysis of the kinds of conflicts that beset our infant Bahá'í Studies.

Let me give an example of a postmodern analysis. It concerns discussion with a person named [...].

A number of people are misunderstanding the points that [...] is making, thereby seeming (they may not be doing this at all, I'm only talking about appearances) to suggest that his points are not logical or meaningful. Doing this -- in postmodern parlance -- is 'marginalization': the assignment of certain points of view or perspectives to the category of the 'other'. [See Edward Said and his book "Orientalism" for a thorough discussion of this. There are, however, libraries of books on this.]

[...] has made a move to counter the consequence of such 'marginalization moves' by saying that the arguments that are being made are not of universal validity, but of importance only in the limited domain of intellectual studies of religion, a nifty argument, in my opinion, and a standard postmodern move.

I take [...] arguments very seriously, as they are in conformity with much of what 'Abdu'l Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice are saying. In effect, they point directly to where entrenched secular intellectual methodologies view their authority as unquestionable, even though this leads to clashes with other forms of thought, undesirable conflict, and perhaps a worsening of the world's problems.

The House has said numerous times that there are aspects of the old world order culture which are harmful.

Perhaps the sometimes extreme claims to authority of an intellectual 'essentializing' methodology is among those aspects. I think it wouldn't hurt to consider the possibility that it

were so.

(third posting on postmodernism...)

Dear xxx:

I'm glad you are interested in these topics! You wrote:

"...What is the consensus on postmodernism in general? At times I have called my thought postmodern, but then that meant different things to different people. "Postmodern" is a difficult signifier. Foucault and Derrida don't have much use for it..."

Postmodernism as a word is a pastiche of different meanings, to give it a postmodern definition. The term is originally American, and came up from an influential book in the 60s discussing the mind-numbing effects of modern architecture, with its sterile black boxes and crime-ridden housing projects, in American cities. Mies van der Rohe and le Corbusier are the influential early promoters of these respective architectures, and their work is considered to be the epitome of "modern" architecture. (Much as Frank Gehry is now the epitome of the postmodern.) By the 70s, art critics were similarly criticizing the monumental modern styles of painting developed for museums and major corporate sponsors in the 50s and the 60s.

Finally, literary critics used the term to characterize the shift from modern styles in poetry and literature, developed in the first part of the century, to the styles then coming into favor. Thomas Pynchon, author of *Gravity's Rainbow* and *The Crying of Lot 49*, epitomizes postmodern literary style.

So, the origins are American. And when American humanities became enamored of French structuralist and poststructuralist thought, Levi-Straus, Foucault, Derrida and others, and incorporated their thought into American thinking, the term was retained, although the subject matter was altered somewhat.

Now, postmodernism has peaked and is fading. Or perhaps, the multiplicity of the different strands always present in it have become powerful enough in their own right so that they characterize themselves, and are characterized, differently. In France, structuralism and poststructuralism are passé.

"...Its center seems to be America, but those who use it often associate it with (some) French thought. I suppose it was inevitable given the modernist drive to define itself. It seems to me that more than anything, which invites the signifier 'postmodern'. In that sense 'postmodern' is a permanent possibility of modernism. I like to use

'postmodern' because it implies that the world has changed and our thought and speech ought to keep up with the change..."

I like your definition. Might I try to outline my thinking on the topic. I'll do it using what I have called Bahá'í critical thinking: i.e., the Bahá'í critique of present day society.

In Bahá'í critical thought, the world is seen as going through a period of transition from its childhood to its adolescence to its maturity. The emergence of the modern nation-state and its associated social organizations has been nearly completed and the transition to a world civilization is beginning. This transition, according to Bahá'í critical thought, is the change from the storm and drang of adolescence to adulthood: a paradigm shift of immense consequences.

I view this critical perspective as applying to modernism, the enlightenment, and postmodernism in the following way. Enlightenment thought (which I was bred and fed on) is the transition in the intellectual sphere most strongly coupled with the emergence of the modern state. (I don't think this point controversial, as it appears to have long been widely accepted).

Characteristic of this thought, perhaps even necessary to it, is a certain single-mindedness - what Isaiah Berlin and Karl Popper have characterized as "monism". In America it was labeled "Manifest Destiny," in France the "Citizen," in Germany, it was German unity, etc. In practice, it was a whole complex of institutions, education programs, modes of thought, art, and literature, science, technology, political institutions, favored principals, and such. These social complexes created the powerful nation states, and indeed, the modern world as we know it today.

It also created, or exacerbated, whole sets of problems. Modern nations are *not* the simple, "one-size-fits-all" entities of classical thinking. And nations, once established, brought themselves (and still do) into ruinous conflicts with each other.

It is this "one-size-fits-all" approach, the uniform grand idea of nation building and even enlightenment thinking about global civilization, that is usually considered to make up the "modern" in "postmodernism." It is this influence, or at least the baneful aspects of it, that postmodernists have often wished to exorcise from our psyche.

So, I conclude that postmodernism, a name which may have outstayed its welcome, is not simply a continuing effort to keep modernism advancing, but rather the first rays of the transition in the

certain intellectual and artistic spheres to a consciousness of the emerging world civilization. Central to postmodernism, and central to Bahá'í critical thinking, is an emphasis on the importance of diversity for the emerging world civilization. (Because we are moderns, I think it very easy for us to under-estimate how important this diversity is.)

Maybe, I should let Bahá'í critical thinking have the last word. Mankind's maturity requires both unity and diversity. It is the lack of postmodernism's appreciation of unity that dates it and makes it inadequate to the needs of the times.

Yours sincerely,

Stephen R. Friberg

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