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Modernity and Posmodernity

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Abstract: This article tries to explore the continuities and discontinuities of postmodernity with modernity. While affirming that the boundary between modernity and postmodernity is not clear and well demarcated, it also tries to show there is no complete transition from one to another. What is postmodern is neither a singular school of thought nor a linear historical period, but the complex of questions arising from the extolling of reason and progress the Enlightenment project of modernity. This has affected philosophical discourses and research projects both of natural and human sciences. Hence the ambivalent relationship of between postmodernity with modernity: lack on faith on the claims of modernity on the one hand, and a heightened fulfillment of modernity on the other. Thus the article explores how this intriguing relationship both of critique and of connivance affect different spheres of human life including politics and economics of our society that can be characterized, with a certain measure of cynicism, as the fetishism of commerce and of spectacle.

Key words: reason, progress, metaphysics, freedom, fragmentation, legitimization, evil and control.

Introduction

The word “postmodern” is used in art, architecture and was first used in philosophy by Jean-François Lyotard for whom it refers to a way of expressing the unrepresentable, the unspeakable while representation in its conventional sense does not allow it. Thus Lyotard gives a positive value to this term.¹ In this paper, the term Postmodern is used in a broad sense characterizing a collective social condition in the sense used by Marcel Mauss,² which includes the complexity of our contemporary situation particularly in the West even though I know that the claim to totality is always illusory. By doing so, I attempt to give coherence to what we can consider as another period of domination and the evolution of capitalism. This period is presented anew as modern and more advanced. This

obviously complicates the perception and the attempt to understand and explain why this term is not used in common parlance. However, some authors speak of our period as what comes after postmodernity, namely “supermodernity.”³

The attempt to demarcate the modern and postmodern periods is rather arbitrary. There is no clear epochal separation between the two. Here, the concept of postmodernity is an attempt of naming the experience of what changes. This is a new point of view, which has a personal aspect, a debatable projection, but also taking into account the understanding of the world attempted by others. Yves Boisvert synthesizes the question of the use of this term in the following words: “This is because postmodernists are convinced that it is no longer possible to define our world, marked by technological development, the widespread computerization and the growing hegemony of mass media, from a vision developed in the eighteenth century by the Enlightenment, they have chosen to refer to a new notion of postmodernity.

It therefore seeks to define an era of change that is ours.”⁴ The starting point of postmodernity is the recognizing the limits of the hallmarks of the Enlightenment such as reason and progress. Modernity began with the Renaissance and reached its apogee in the late nineteenth and twentieth century (the development of science, education, establishment of democratic parliamentary system, control of nature and emphasis on the primacy of the human subject). Postmodernity, as the term indicates, comes after modernity but marked both by continuity and discontinuity with modernity; continuity because our epoch flows from the previous one and discontinuity because the change is significant especially in how to justify domination and hierarchy of beings. From a metaphysical explanation or justification, we have moved on to a culture of relativism. Meanings ascribed by referring a transcendental signified such as God, nature, reason or history now seem to have disappeared and lost in the tragic vicissitudes of human history. Hence we do not employ the term postmodern in an aesthetic sense, but more in a political sense because the questions that preoccupy our mind from the 20th century are not the same as before.

A History of Rupture

We are in an unprecedented situation. Humanity is faced with a deep crisis, a rupture. With the experience of holocaust followed by World War II, the long-cherished rationality of the West and its civilization seem to have crumbled marking a definite break in human history. Adorno attempts to address this crisis through his critique of instrumental reason. The Nazis have made use of reason to organize and execute humans as an industrial technique. If reason is understood as resulting from the aberrant project of Descartes wanting humans to become “masters and owners of nature” through the use of reason, then reason has reached its apex. It is precisely why Hannah Arendt questions the meaning of politics after Auschwitz, Hiroshima and Stalin’s gulags and wants us to assume the crisis of modernity, the crisis in our culture, the problem of the banality of evil. Both Nazism and Stalinism have something in common insofar as they both created totalitarian societies, but there is a remarkable difference between these two phenomena. As Catherine Vallée observed, “Stalin betrayed his ideas by his crimes, Hitler put his ideas into practice.”⁵

Modernity itself had produced elements that have undermined its rational foundation. Max Weber speaks of the “disenchantment of the world.” During the 19th century science has redefined the limits of religion and its influence even to the point of eliminating the enchantment offered by religion. Humans find themselves in a technically effective world, but disenchanted, cold and dreary. With the development of the industry machines become important for effective work and faith has become dispensable. In the process of secularization, religion has decisively become a private affair. In the early 20th century Durkheim notes with dismay the end of community and social organization and the emergence of individual. Darwin for his part came up with the theory that humans belong to the animal kingdom; they need to assume their origin and evolution and they are not fundamentally different from other species. Then come the “masters of suspicion.” Marx questions the notion of society as a harmonious whole and affirms the divide between two classes of people who are necessarily antagonistic. Nietzsche with his famous assertion of the death of God holds that the logical categories are instruments with which life organizes and dominates the world. Freud

assumes the division of the subject and strongly limits the claim of human consciousness by highlighting the significant role played by the unconscious.

In natural science, new discoveries have led to crises so deep that the very concept of determinism is challenged. To name a few, such recent discoveries include the theory of relativity, theory laden observation, ambivalence of light as wave and particle, and the incompleteness theorem of Gödel. In art, the tendency to abstraction disqualifies the former standards of aesthetics. The idea of beauty is rethought with successive avant-garde movements such as Impressionism, Dadaism, Fauvism, Expressionism, Surrealism and Cubism that disrupt once accepted artistic codes. This set of crises leads to a general destabilization of the former rationality. At the end of the 1960s, humanities have witnessed the hostile idea of the “death of man” used to describe different approaches of structuralism including those of Foucault, Barthes, Althusser, Levi-Strauss and Lacan. The death man is a kind of echo of the death of God. It is a fundamental critique of human person understood as an autonomous entity characterized by consciousness, will and freedom. Relativity of cultures once frowned upon, is accepted with the earlier notions of universality being seen as mere masks for the ethnocentric rhetoric and logic of domination of the “white European male, an attitude of domination later came to be known as “phallogocentrism.”⁶

In Philosophy the end of metaphysics is assumed, especially with the diffusion of the thought of Heidegger who raised the question about the forgottenness of the subject thanks to the reduction of human beings merely to be entities in the modern world. The death of metaphysics is the result of the death of God; it is the recognition that transcendence of God or of the ideas having no rational basis, where rationality is understood as having a cosmic character. The problem of the foundation is shifted from other-centered to the self-centered human. The problem of rational foundation has given way to theories on existence (Sartre), power (Foucault), desire (Reich, Marcuse, Deleuze, Guattari and Lacan), interpretation (Ricoeur), everyday life (Henri Lefebvre), deconstruction (Derrida), logic, epistemology, art, and language. All these undermine profoundly and

irreversibly the conscious and voluntary subject in many ways as well as the notion of representation that Western rationality has promoted for so long, particularly in Philosophy.

On the social level, the question of progress got amplified in the late sixties and early seventies of the twentieth century. This is due to, among other things, the early exhaustion of the Fordist model.⁷ Politically the critique of progress is done both practically and theoretically. It is expressed, among other things, primarily in the shaping of ecological consciousness, with all its variants including relationship between humans and nature. The discussions about the historical subject dwell on the agents of change. For example in Europe in 1970s, the Maoist leftism has to address the question whether or not the proletariat should play the primary role in the struggle against capitalism. The question about the catalysts of change became imperative in the context of recognizing other disadvantaged social groups including illegal immigrants, women, homosexuals, the unemployed and the victims of AIDS. Some intellectual observers today talk of new terms of engagement. In 1848 communism offered hope, but in 1989 it offered frustration. The fall of the Berlin wall was a fatal blow to the Stalinist model of transforming the world in a rational way by controlling people through the exercise of the state power. This tends to devalue the idea of a possible social and political change, and has led to a strong critique on the notion of representation.

Today the term “postmodern” is often associated with relativism (“anything goes”), the confusion of genres, loss of meaning and the end of grand narratives. There is no more linearity. The postmodern attitude is characterized by the retrieval of old models but reinterpreted. This is why when we hear of postmodernity, we are confronted with complexity, absence of structure, disorder or chaos, discontinuity, random phenomena and pluralism.

The Philosophical Postulates of Postmodernity

According to Jean Francois Lyotard, postmodernity is a term that refers to “the state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature and the arts.”⁸ The rapid progress of science and technology has resulted in enormous changes that have in turn led to a new state of mind that does not fail to have repercussions on

our knowledge and culture as a whole. Therefore, a review of human knowledge is necessary. To better understand this necessity, it must be remembered that the continuity of tradition was already ruptured by modernity, before shutting itself into a new tradition. The myths of modernity, including that of triumphant technology, have become fraught with threats, and modernity gradually becomes a culture of everyday life where culture itself becomes a fad. It is in these conditions arises a conflict between science and narrative. This conflict quickly turns to the advantage of science which defines and legitimizes its own game rules. Lyotard writes: "It [science] then produces a discourse of legitimation with respect to its own status, a discourse called philosophy."⁹ Legitimization of knowledge is done through metanarratives and the term postmodern comes to designate incredulity to metanarratives.

Postmodernity presents itself as both a lack of faith in modern outlook and as an end to modernity. As the fulfillment of modernity, postmodernity is also a consequence of the progress of modern science. Its centrality may lie in the finding of a crisis of meaning that stems from a widespread disillusionment with the humanist ideals of modernity. Ultimately, postmodernity in terms of time coincides with crises and changes. Raymond Aron observed that in our time, millions of people live and suffer deep within themselves the violent separation between a culture that is dying and a culture they hate and desire at the same time because it offers the path to power and wealth.¹⁰ We can say here that postmodernity was born from the ashes of a culture at double speed where one does not know which way to turn. Henceforth emerge both a loss of meaning and a disorientation that afflict people who can no longer choose between what they create and destroy. It is unfortunate that the progress of science guarantees the progress neither of individuals nor of societies. The materialization of the rationalist project of modernity culminates in a frightening situation. And we now live in a position of permanent anxiety in which everything, even the worst is possible. This is probably what led Aron to continue the following statement: "Human life is dialectic, that is, dramatic, since it is active in an incoherent world, is committed despite duration, and seeks a fleeting truth with no other certainty but a fragmentary science and a formal reflection."¹¹ We find ourselves in a situation where everything flows from incoherence, where all knowledge is fragmented and where the

sought truth continues to elude. In these circumstances, it is the value and legitimacy of knowledge that are being challenged. Thus postmodernity clarifies itself as a consequence of modern knowledge and as exceeding the crises of modernity.

In response to questions from his contemporaries as to how to save humanity, Nietzsche replied with a counter question: how to overcome human person? By this question, the author of the *Antichrist* seems to be inaugurating a new era, a new way of posing problems and a new mindset. Overcoming human person is not to circumvent him/her, not without consequences from the philosophical point of view, since it would require an emptying of values, beliefs and knowledge. Among these moral and rationalist values, the supreme value, God, whose death announced since Hegel, has become effective with Nietzsche. We are thus placed in an immoral and irrational optic pacing towards optimism after the destruction announced by Nietzsche's nihilism.

Indeed, there is suddenly an era of vertiginous complexity where a void is gradually formed where in place of a benchmark. The parameters of modernity lose their vigor and intensity. They now oscillate at the crossroads of fear and hope, corrosion and promise. The historical experience of chaos and disruption is such that it perfectly corresponds to what is called postmodernity. The parameters are emptied of meaning, values dissipate, the principles of order are weakened; and the death of God is an important event in human history that informs that "time would be gone, and all the perishable would be but a lie?" (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*) Nietzsche teaches us that nothing is true, nothing is false but everything is permitted because we live in a malleable state where the previous state no longer has the importance it had. No value can claim a supreme role; we live in a different time in history. In this crisis of foundation, thinking has taken the first steps towards a detachment from the prevalence and irrefutable power of consciousness. Following the "death of God," Nietzsche proclaims the coming of the superman who is the expression of anti-morality, anti-rationalism and anti-dialectic, that is to say the expression of total nihilism. But what does this superman bring anew? It is likely that it would be a liberation of human vis-à-vis his consciousness and his domination. Is this

sufficient enough to move forward towards the transition from modernity to post-modernity? Does not postmodernity coincide with the outcome of the history written by the West? This history, as we know, has caused particular perception of life which has produced a world of constructing interpersonal relationships in which nothing could be described as metaphysics.

In so doing, the basic premise of anti-rationalism is due to the loss of a point of reference that has given birth to nihilism leading to the rejection of metaphysics. This reflects the reasons for a concern expressed by Raymond Aron, quoting the text of Henri Bergson: "We wish to know the reason why we have made up our mind, and we find that we have decided without any reason, and perhaps against every reason. But, in certain cases, that is the best of reasons. Because the action which we had performed does not express some superficial idea, almost external to ourselves, distinct and easy to account for: rather, it agrees with the whole of our most intimate feelings, thoughts and aspirations, it agrees with that particular conception of life which is the equivalent of all our past experience, in a word, with our personal idea of happiness and of integrity."¹² Although irrationalism in which we seem to settle may lack foundation, its justification may instead end up in our feelings, thoughts, and aspirations shaped by the results of scientific and technological progress and placed in a situation of constant fret. Time and again, science at its peak poses a threat to the human individual in his/her "being as being." Hence the true premise of postmodernity seems to be the one that is to return to modernity its own defense that there is no justification anymore.

The text of Gabriel Marcel cited by Emmanuel Levinas can be understood in this sense: "There is no doubt that we need to react strongly against the classical idea of the eminent value of [*autarkia*] or personal self-sufficiency. The perfect is not perfect because it suffices for itself; or at least the perfection of self-sufficiency is that of a system, not that of a being... Under what conditions can the relationship binding a being to what it needs have a spiritual value? It seems as though here there must be reciprocity, an awakening. The only relationship that can be said to be spiritual is that of a being with a being; ... What really matters is spiritual commerce between beings,

and that involves not respect but love.”¹³ There is a desire for a new rationality to be constructed over the tomb of the ancient metaphysics that leaves no place for relationship of being to the other. This new rationality will then be based on a language that binds two different individuals without however annihilating their differences.

In addition, we must recognize that the reason is not sufficient to exhaust all human aspirations. As noted by Arthur Schopenhauer, “With the exception of man, no being wonders at its own existence; but it is to them all so much a matter of course that they do not observe it. The wisdom of nature speaks out of the peaceful glance of the brutes; for in them the will and the intellect are not yet so widely separated that they can be astonished at each other when they meet again. Thus here the whole phenomenon is still firmly attached to the stem of nature from which it has come, and is partaker of the unconscious omniscience of the great mother. Only after the inner being of nature (the will to live in its objectification) has ascended, vigorous and cheerful, through the two series of unconscious existences, and then through the long and broad series of animals, does it attain at last to reflection for the first time on the entrance of reason, thus in man. Then it marvels at its own works, and asks itself what it itself is. Its wonder however is the more serious, as it here stands for the first time consciously in the presence of *death*, and besides the finiteness of all existence, the vanity of all effort forces itself more or less upon it. With this reflection and this wonder there arises therefore for man alone, the *need for a metaphysic*; he is accordingly an *animal metaphysicum*.”¹⁴ In other words, the metaphysical need exists in every human person, without which no belief is possible. From this point of view, reason cannot to be the basis of belief.

The concern of post-modernity takes shape by this, namely, to redefine metaphysics on irrational base unloading at the same time the burden of reason making it ineffective. It is also to get rid of the herd morality, whose foundations are considered immoral by Nietzsche. Post-modernity therefore places itself under the sign of death of all forms of unifying interpretation of the world. Post-modernity is thus characterized by anarchist traits of a polycentric world devoid of categorical differentiation that prevailed till then.

The constellation spares neither knowledge nor action in such manner so that even the concept of politics is subject to structural change. Similarly, modern knowledge developed during the reign of a reason that would make us “masters and possessors of nature,” must be interrogated not only on its own validity, but also by its implications. If the assumptions of postmodernity can be summed up in irrationalism in the overcoming of metaphysics and the questioning of the legitimacy of modern knowledge, postmodernity can find in Nietzsche a definite precursor, who vigorously spoke of transmutation of modern values with the final phase of nihilism and the announcement of the advent of the superman to address the concerns of the modern world. Nietzsche writes: “Knowledge, taken in excess without hunger, even contrary to need, no longer acts as a transforming motive impelling to action and remains hidden in a certain chaotic inner world [...] and so the whole of modern culture is essentially internal: on the outside the bookbinder has printed something like ‘Handbook of Inner Culture for External Barbarians’.”¹⁵ Modern consciousness is pregnant of an excessive historical knowledge, and has lost the “plastic powers of life” that makes men able to “interpret the past only from the standpoint of the highest strength of the present.” This “surfeit of history” is the negative effect of historical knowledge, that is, the conservative approach of history. Nietzsche argued against historical knowledge – when pursued for its own sake – because its method was dependent on a false ideal of objectivity, which neutralized the standards necessary for life, and blocked the capacity, “the strength [to] use it from time to time, to shatter and dissolve something to enable [man] to live [in the present].”¹⁶

This succession of failures that Nietzsche had encountered obliged him to choose between returning to the critique of subject-centered reason and the abandonment of the entire project. Desperate to dismiss the dialectic of reason, he gave up revising the concept of reason and chose the second option. This is why Habermas affirms that in Nietzsche’s works “the critique of modernity renounced for the first time its emancipatory content.”¹⁷ Modernity is thus deprived of its privilege and looks like a sunset in the great history of rationalization whose beginning is the end of the myth and the

disappearance of the archaic life. This is an idea that brings Nietzsche closer to Horkheimer, Adorno, Bataille and Heidegger, adds Habermas. In the light of this analysis it is worth noting that Nietzsche was a hub of postmodern debates. It is also undeniable that Nietzsche has succeeded in initiating a debate that continues to influence present day discussions. Habermas rightly notes that the Nietzschean legacy is shared and pursued in two directions: "Nietzsche's critique of modernity has been continued along both paths. The skeptical scholar who wants to unmask the perversion of the will to power, the revolt of reactionary forces, and the emergence of a subject-centered reason by using anthropological, psychological, and historical methods has successors in Bataille, Lacan, and Foucault; the initiate-critic of metaphysics who pretends to a unique kind of knowledge and pursues the rise of the philosophy of the subject back to its pre-Socratic beginnings has successors in Heidegger and Derrida."¹⁸

Economics of Control and Politics of Opacity

Postmodernity is the moment of reproduction and retrieval just as modernity was the moment of production and accumulation. The concept of reproduction corresponds to the power of financial capital in economics and to the information society in epistemology. On economic plan, profit is no longer primarily in the production but on financial gain. This explains why the value of work has no longer the same importance as before. This does not mean that work no longer exists but it is integrated into the financial system, where speculation becomes decisive. The example of Anglo-Saxon funds pensions is widely known. This aspect of the evolution of capitalism explains why commutation and communication have become fundamental to capitalism. The control center is both the mastery of power (military and financial) and mastery of sign (information and advertisement). The point of convergence between the two is money that is increasingly virtual and so is power and sign. The control of the imperialist countries, especially the U.S. imperialism is evident in money, information and military power. Services sectors (banking, insurance, software, engineering), the creation and dissemination of information (global media, advertising, telephone, computer, internet) are key sectors of capitalist domination. Hence we can say that the sign of power and the power of sign are closely linked to each other.

The way in which capitalism functions today does not care about addressing collective needs. Though this was the case previously Fordism, in Western countries, allowed for a social compromise where the rising standard of living and the increase in production went together. The gap between the common good for humanity and the capital is on the increase so much so that we often wonder why we need to run this huge machinery. Postmodernity is the crisis of meaning for everyone, the dominated and the dominant.

The attempt to demarcate the modern and postmodern periods is rather arbitrary. There is no clear epochal separation between the two. Here, the concept of postmodernity is an attempt of naming the experience of what changes. This is a new point of view, which has a personal aspect, a debatable projection, but also taking into account the understanding of the world attempted by others. Yves Boisvert synthesizes the question of the use of this term in the following words: "This is because postmodernists are convinced that it is no longer possible to define our world, marked by technological development, the widespread computerization and the growing hegemony of mass media, from a vision developed in the eighteenth century by the Enlightenment, they have chosen to refer to a new notion of postmodernity. It therefore seeks to define an era of change that is ours."¹⁹

The paradoxical authority appears less visible except in its police or military form, but maintains its power. Capital has become virtual, yet its power is undeniable. The more the capital becomes invisible and abstract (signs on computer systems) the more the authority seems to fade. It is an undeniable source of bewilderment, confusion, helplessness and loss of meaning. In addition, it is increasingly difficult to identify and challenge the political authority supposed to be responding to the social demand.

The exercise of power is masked behind laws to maintain social distinctions. Reactive power struggles, especially those of the socially oppressed, are condemned thus brushing aside the already existing social violence reproduced on a large scale. The content of the law should be regularly monitored and challenged. While equality and inclusion are often lauded in modern democracy, social apartheid

is generated and practiced in the profit driven market economy, a necessary component of the present-day democracy. Our society is incapable of articulating unity in difference. Politics has denigrated into policing.

Often questioning law only reinforces the authorities of that time, as law is promulgated from a position that claims the right to do so. Experiencing injustice is not enough to challenge domination; it may at best be translated into a demand for equality in the context of the consumer society. This demand may be legitimate without necessarily questioning the merits of social organization. Questioning law goes beyond any specific interest to show the contradictions of the system in a given situation. This, for example in the Western Europe, takes place in the struggles for housing, where the claim of the right to housing opposes private property, in the struggles of unemployment and precariousness, where the question of the future of human persons without work challenges the society that claims its foundation on work. This is also the case in the struggles of the illegal immigrants making us wonder if human beings exist only through an identity card and administrative boundaries.

Politics is transformed into a simple matter of management, mastery and distribution of powers. Political discourses lose their significance in the present day context due to varied factors such as nuclear weapons, corruption, abuse of power, incompetence, covert manipulation to stay in power, abandoning of ideals, cronyism and misuse of communication. In public opinion, politics is equated with the management of the state and the parliamentary system. For me, politics is not management, it must always be thought of in reference to the sphere that defines and directs the collective future of humanity, the common space of "being together," which traditionally has been called the common good. We can recall Hannah Arendt for whom politics is a space where the world community is established: "To be political, to live in a polis, meant that everything was decided by words and persuasion and not through force and violence."²⁰ For Hannah Arendt politics has no fixed place, it is not always present and cannot be locked into a locus specified in advance. From a libertarian point of view, politics is possible only by breaking with

the reproduction of domination. Thus politics is linked to the desire for justice and equality; it is critical freedom.

Thanks to the over-emphasis on science, modernity is reduced to a technique for the use of technical tools (mobile and computer). The best example is that of the computer in which what is more adapted to humans, more creative and the more rational choice are removed in the name of profit. We can easily observe this in the “micro-smooth” influence of Bill Gates. There is an implicit alliance between Microsoft Windows software and Intel microprocessors. This alliance also called “Wintel,” by those who struggle against the domination of Microsoft, its worldwide quasi-monopoly of personal computers. The situation is the same for the millennium bug (Y2K) in the year 2000, which was then called “the height of imprudence.” The problem once again is not the transformation of matter, the creation of new devices or objects; the difficulty comes from the lack of questioning purposes, from maintaining opacity (or clarified too much to be summed up as the pursuit of profit) that surrounds the choice of development of new machines and new technologies.

The influential members of society including celebrities of media admit the futility of what they do and sometimes the emptiness of what they are cynically. Postmodernity is often associated with a brilliant but cynical posture. Cynicism is a concept that has several meanings. In its philosophical sense, it refers to a school of Greek philosophy founded in the second half of the fourth century BCE. Its most prominent representative is Diogenes. The word “cynical” is derived from the Greek word for dog. This word is related to living the philosophy that Diogenes has proposed. He criticized the artificial way of life led by his contemporaries and often demonstrated the correctness of his thought by provocation and shocking audacity. Cynics of the time advocated an ascetic lifestyle. Thus cynicism is an attitude that mocks at certain behavior pattern. Its meaning presently is close to that of impudence. In its contemporary version, cynicism is an attitude that mocks at those who are unsuccessful and find themselves outside the hierarchy of domination. It is no longer provocation but striving for success in our postmodern world. This implies that we accept as normal to efface others to achieve success. It is the desire for success that seems to prevail in this

dynamic reproduction of domination. Thus the concept of cynicism has undergone a reversal.

In language and speech, language euphemism is increasingly employed. This is to mitigate the harsh directness of some expressions. This process is remarkable in naming the social phenomena. Jean-Paul Courthéroux has detected a certain conformism in this phenomenon because “it paradoxically helps to maintain even real discrimination by sweetening their appearances.”²¹ He notes that euphemism is a clever way to cope with a brutal reality. The link between rhetoric and politics is very old, the Greek Sophists were trading their mastery of language, in particular their skills in rhetoric. To dominate is to have effective mastery over language and speech.

Ambient Clichés: Freedom and Evil

On the ideological level, we know almost everything; nothing is hidden. The role of communication is fundamental because of the link between Information Technology and telecommunications. The omnipresence of the media in manufacturing opinion is a corollary to the disappearance of public space for discussion. The mental space is saturated with information and images, but meaning escapes us so often that we think something is hidden from us. Yet it seems that it is the contrary that strengthens domination of mind which Michel Surya calls “absolute capitalism”. As a result of new procedures of domination, not only social but also cultural and ideological, the structural weakening of consciousness is underway with the discourse of post-modernity representing its ideological expression. In other words, the post-modern fragmentation and individualism allow us to conceive the renewal of shared collectivities. Given the generalization of commodity fetishism and consumerism, the frenzy for the ephemeral and immediate, can durable political and social projects appear again, beyond moments of intense fusion without future?

Information and knowledge are confused with each other. When the media extols freedom, it does so only when it comes to market economy or liberal politics. Human rights are constantly evoked, but the political leaders let barbarism continue. The discourse of domination gets adapted to a world of uncertainty, and menacing anxiety. Management becomes the only eligible horizon, Science

becomes omnipresent and the experts are called for help, while reason is regularly brought under erasure by maintaining the absurdity of the world. Freedom cannot be achieved only in the pleasures of objects made available by the system, but also in saying no to capitalist barbarism, an important aspect of freedom that involves a shift from the consumerist pleasures. This aspect of freedom is critical as it refuses to endorse a system that hurts and destroys people. Ours is an epoch where domination is exercised on mind through a continual process of indoctrination often championed by modern technology and media in terms of proliferation of information on consumer goods suggesting and even offering a free world while in reality we are “massified” by strong constraints of market economy even if the modalities of such constraints evolve.

The great human ideals are very useful for voluntary submission. They allow for a rationalization once humans are engaged in a process of submission to an authority. The work of Jean Léon Beauvois on “liberal servitude”²² is pertinent in this regard. It complements what Freud said about reason which can justify all kinds of behavior and serve as a defense mechanism to the subject to face his fears and guilt feelings. In the postmodern period, this aspect of ideology is powerful, especially in the domain of human rights. This is because we cannot supposedly do otherwise because on the one hand the reality principle implies submission to markets and allied institutions and on the other, the great ideals on humanity give a good conscience at little cost.

The great human ideals of care, justice, common good, and empathy exist in human culture. They have great symbolic value and they even shape our moral conscience. These great human ideals are often assimilated into our meaning making processes. Meaning is related to the great human ideals, but to put them into practice involves the struggle to end social, political and symbolic domination. It makes a demand on us to fight for equality and justice without which we would continue to maintain an absurd and destructive system. The great human ideals are in accordance with meaning only when we try to answer the question “what does it mean to be human?” It is perhaps impossible to formulate a precise and definite answer, but the fact of the question and the refusal to accept the

present situation as normal add another dimension to the meaning of great human ideals within the perspective of emancipation in human history.

The notion of the banality of evil of which Hannah Arendt speaks places us at the heart of the link between theory and practice. The concept was created and used to describe and understand an aspect of Nazism: the technician bureaucracy in the service of barbarism. Here, it is used to name the operation or the consequences of the operation of capitalism. Without confusing Nazism and capitalism, you can use this concept. Its validity comes from both its practical power and its theoretical strength. Specifically, the banality of evil is well suited to account for the real suffering that generates oppression, exploitation contained in capitalist domination. Theoretically, we can consider a concept that is able to characterize Nazism can be used to describe something smaller: who can do more can do less, at least in principle. Some people reject the use of this concept in the context of contemporary society, arguing that it would put on the same plane the Holocaust and the evils of contemporary society. This rejection is a refusal to see and describe the damage done by the capitalist system and minimize the suffering experienced by millions of people around the world in the name of defending democracy. It is always difficult to quantify or qualify evil. Debates on the “absolute evil” show the difficulty of this question. The argument of the “lesser evil” is misleading and dangerous. General acceptance of the lesser evil can accommodate fatalistic way of oppression, exploitation and exclusion. This notion is also a justification of many social and political injustices. Rejection of evil requires us to think differently of evil other than a mere lack of being or of good. The reality of evil is widespread, yet it is often denied. It is so trivial as to be invisible, it no longer shocks, does not cause any surprise. If we reflect on this phenomenon, the notion of the banality of evil, as suggested by Hannah Arendt, seems justified.

In our society material goods, ideas, techniques – all of these seem to be at our disposition. Difficulties of implementation, however, exist at all levels. The feeling of not rising to the heights and hence a sense of helplessness is very common. Alain Ehrenberg speaks of depression as a common disease of the century, the symptom of

which he calls the “fatigue of being oneself.”²³ Faced with the injunctions of success provided by the system and its negative effect, the guilt, the world of the possible seems quite limited, which in turn augments a sense of triviality of the self. The personalized contract of the employment only increases the need for a narcissistic ego in a competitive corporate world. This phenomenon is further strengthened by catchwords such as efficiency and competence. The management objectives become so important that the human subject has to prove his/her worth in terms of achieving the target set by his/her sector and his/her adherence to the set goals of the company in which he or she is an employee.

Suffering today is that which often affects the human psyche; it disturbs the mind more than ever before. This is visible especially among the less privileged people of our society. Loneliness, feeling of isolation, loss of collective confidence, and failure to make connections in society are often related to a failure in behavior, a sense of self-deprecation, and a loss of self-esteem. The anguish of the poor is obviously related with their living conditions, but their difficulty is not analyzed as social, rather associated with privation of individual capacities. Existential despair is reinforced by the paradoxical injunctions that require success in work and by labor. It is clear that there is not enough employment opportunity, or when it exists, it is precarious, poorly paid, without minimum guarantees, and without the possibility of progress. The reality of this suffering and distress was studied in France and an official report on this suffering and its impact on family life was published already in 1995 under the title “*Cette souffrance que l’on ne peut plus cacher!*” (“This suffering that cannot be hidden”). Reports of this kind seek solutions without changing the essential problems such as the social apartheid and the social relations linked to capitalism. At the end of the nineteenth century, suffering was probably more physical, it was due to the misery of that time, long hours of work, the drudgery of the hard labor of that epoch and some physical ailments for which medicines were not available. The symptoms of suffering today are varied and can be both physical and somatic. But the deep source of suffering is in today’s lifestyle, in the loss of meaning, in isolation due to the exclusion from employment and more importantly in the feeling that

there is no escape from this misery and any effort to build meaningful relationships is useless.

The patriarchal domination is equally present today; the status of women is still not equal to that of men. The oppression of women is both real and symbolic. In the postmodern context pornography and advertising are both modalities and consequences of this phenomenon. In both cases, there is an eroticism of the female body and its use for show and merchandise. In commercial advertisements, the image of women is widely used; desire is staged to sell products through the diffuse of images. In pornography, several phenomena related to one another seem to be involved. Several arguments are invoked to explain this. The most important of all is the affective misery among men that causes excitement in them while watching an erotic scene. Another explanation is that pornography offers the possibility of domination over women and the pleasure of assuring to oneself that women are to be subjugated. In prostitution, it is possible to buy a woman while in pornography it comes to buying of the image of women, but the basis is the same: the buying and selling of human body. There is a well-organized industrial reality committed to the production and commercialization of porn videos and images. The female body is a commodity, a consumer good alongside other such goods. In this process of commoditization the human body is reduced to the genitals, it is fragmented without a "face." Passive woman is an available commodity, an instant consumer good that generally likes to be dominated. There is no relationship between two people who desire one another for mutual happiness as an act of love, but a merely mechanical activity between two people which is nothing short of an instrumental relationship that reduces the female body to a use value.

Conclusion

Lyotard has rightly expressed concern about this moment in history where everything is fragmented and specialized. We are in a time that seems to coincide with the end of the history described by the West, a history that has generated a particular perception of life and produced a method of construction of interpersonal relationships that can even be described metaphysical. These interpersonal relationships carry with them the imprint of individuals who are

themselves fragmented. Knowledge is fragmented and specialized too. Under these conditions, the very validity of knowledge is still problematic because having lost its center of gravity by its fragmentation, knowledge is no longer easy to apprehend and its legitimization becomes a major preoccupation. What makes the postmodern undertaking problematic is the abounding of utopias on account of what might be called the characteristic features of a postmodern inconsistency.

Taking clue from Debord, some affirm that the postmodern society has a strong tendency to be false and forge. Reversing Hegel's assertion "the false is no longer a moment of the true," he holds that "the true is a moment of the false."²⁴ Debord denounces the fetishism of ²⁴ Guy Debord. *The Society of a Spectacle* (London: Rebel Press, 2005), 9. commerce and of spectacle, which is typical of our society. For him, the false is the common rule, an alienated activity that is everywhere. There are no good or bad performances; everything is included in the "integrated spectacle." These claims, though cannot be made absolute is not without relevance. From this point of view, postmodernity as a process appears to be a perception of life, a point of departure and of arrival. Therefore, the rationality of knowledge, the effectiveness of technical production, performativity of knowledge and the persuasive power of religious, artistic and social principles are presented as ordering the history of metaphysics. But how are we to deal with inconsistencies of postmodernity? No discourse has so far been effective to account for the challenges presented by the transition from modernity to postmodernity with its discontinuity and continuity as well. We must therefore shift attention to other horizons. This could be possible by developing a "new theory of language" that can take a critical look at the past to invent the necessary philosophical paradigm to address fragmentation in knowledge in order to facilitate the advent of better future.

Notes:

1. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained to Children* (Sydney: Power Publications, 1992).

2. Marcel Mauss (1873-1950) French sociologist, close to Durkheim, famous for his *The Gift*, originally published in French in 1925 and translated in English in 1954, in which he studied the *potlatch*, that is, the ritual exchanges between leaders and members of clans in primitive societies in pacific islands. The gift assures prestige, power and symbolic position.
3. Marc Augé, *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1995).
4. Yves Boisvert, *L'analyse postmoderniste, une nouvelle grille d'analyse socio-politique* (Montréal: Éditions l'Harmattan, 1997), 58, translation mine.
5. Catherine Vallée, Hannah Arendt, Socrate et la question du totalitarisme (Paris : Éditions Ellipses, 1999).
6. "Phallogocentrism" is the name given by some critics to a certain approach of Western philosophy based on the logos (both as discourse and as logical reasoning) of white European male. This term has been particularly used and developed by some feminist thinkers.
7. Fordism, named after Henry Ford, is a capitalist mode of development based on mass production, the rising of living standards and mass consumption.
8. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xxiii.
9. Ibid.
10. see Raymond Aron, *Mémoires: 50 ans de réflexion politique* (Paris: Julliard, 1983).
11. Raymond Aron, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History: An Essay on the Limits of Historical Objectivity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 347.
12. Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), 170.
13. Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: Thinking of the Other* (London: Continuum, 2006), 54.
14. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World As Will And Idea*, Vol. 2 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1909), 350.

15. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980), 24-25.
16. Ibid., 21.
17. cited by Fred Dallmayr, *Margins of Political Discourse* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 51
18. Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1987), 97.
19. Yves Boisvert, *L'analyse postmoderniste, une nouvelle grille d'analyse socio-politique* (Montréal: Éditions l'Harmattan, 1997), 58, translation mine.
20. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 26.
21. Jean Paul Courthéroux, "Sur les euphémismes des professions et de la société," in *Revue Droit Social*, 7/8 (July 1998): 23, tra
22. see Jean Léon Beauvois, *La servitude libérale* (Paris: Éditions Dunod, 1994).
23. see Alain Ehrenberg, *La fatigue d'être soi* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1998).