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Postmodern Consciousness

ABSTRACT

The article exhibits the Postmodern consciousness and changes that are still taking place within the Western societies. The last four–five years had brought new challenges to the political system and these had been surprisingly supported by the significant portions of population, the event deemed impossible only six–seven years ago. The slightly similar in its surprising success change was the accent of Neoliberalism, the theory of which, previously had been perceived only as a theory but suddenly there was "No Alternative" as was famously put by Margaret Thatcher, the "Iron Lady". This event, came as a surprise as, for instance, not many expected the success of Neoliberalism due to the public outcry. However, the outcry had not been wild at all. In contemporary time, however, the change is coming from the substantial part of the populace which was indeed surprising. The article, therefore, aims to bring to the fore the Postmodern consciousness that might have played a decisive role in the social and political turbulence of last years and is correlated to the rise of the right and the rise of populism. The article also sheds light on the scientific discourse within Political Sociology on Postmodern trends in the Western societies.

Keywords: anti-utopia, artificial, change, consensus, consumption, culture, deconstruction, democracy, hierarchy, hipster, hyperreality, history, idol, image, industrial, knowledge, Modernity, new, oppression, postindustrial, Postmodernity, politics, reason, sign, simulacrum, social group, social movement, society, symbol, truth, utopia

INTRODUCTION

In one of his poems, Vladimir Mayakovsky wrote about the October Revolution in Russia describing that on the next morning the streetcars were already driving under the socialism, however, the advent of the new epoch remained unnoticed by the majority

of citizens. In the contemporary West, the situation, however, is different. In recent decades, beginning from the 1960s on, the social change that took place is undoubtful. The tremendous cultural rupture of the 1960s produced multiple social movements/ groups, and the turbulence that shook the political and economic systems of the Western World followed. This can be correlated with the accent of Postmodernity that is still a dubious term but the trends that potentially might have a political reverberation can be summarized. The scientific discourse in this area is rich, however, the contemporary postmodern consciousness has not been thoroughly studied in connection to the political turbulence of recent years (the rise of the right, populism, etc.).

DISCUSSION

Postmodernity perhaps can be better understood in comparison to Modernity of which it is a derivative. The Postmodern age, starting at the end of the 1950s – beginning of the 1960s [Lyotard 1983: 3], did not, however, fully supplant Modernity, but rather took the lead and set the trends. Industrialization is one of the inherent parts of Modernity designating the transition from the agrarian to the industrial society [*Industralization and the…* 2013]. Industrialism embraces the economic ties (e.g. Fordism), social, political and cultural ones, changing them, facilitating the development of democracy in its widely known political form and democracy in social relations, mass education and the dominance of universal over the local [Sen 1999]. Modernity and its thinkers clearly indicate the priorities; science is greatly praised during Modernity, philosophy booms, Grand Narrative exists and the person is free within the framework of law where the "New" is incorporated into the established rules [Lyotard 1983: 43]. Modernists glorified reason and its power, they exalted the notions of progress and believed that the latter will make the future a brighter and a better place. If the Modern society is an industrial society, then the Postmodern society is a Postindustrial one and according to Jean-François Lyotard, the transition of the Western societies into the Postindustrialism coincided with or was the cause of the cultural transition to the age of Postmodern since the end of the 1950s [Lyotard 1983: 3]. The Postmodern age, starting from literature, architecture and spreading to every social and political aspects of life, differs strongly from Modernity while it is based on the functioning of the Open Society with the culture of abundance, characterizing the oversaturation, lack of judgment values and the lack of clarity of personal perspectives/high unpredictability [Lyotard 1983: 71–82]. The concept of Postmodernity is not a clear concept (in contrast to Modernity) and has multiple interpretations and descriptions, perhaps by its own virtue. The movement broke the Modern philosophical traditions, rationalism, ideas of hierarchical order and categories as well as the notion of power and reason [Duignan 2019]. The latter two are, at times, seen as the tools for oppression and hierarchies are rejected due to the values that each hierarchical component possesses [Duignan 2019]. Apart

from that, the ideas of objective knowledge and the power of reason are considered as the social constructs and, therefore, the interaction with the world using the power of reason might prove deceptive, thence the interaction shall be conducted by means of feelings and emotions. Friedrich Nietzsche mentioned that the power of reason can be measured by the amount of truth it can absorb [Nietzsche 2003: 53] and Postmodernity rejects Truth as a universal idea adopted during the Enlightenment. These changes endanger and indeed change the consensus finding mechanisms which were embedded into democracy, e.g. of the Keynesian systems, thus crippling and at times rendering inefficient the conflict settling mechanisms of democracy, e.g. the growth of the Left's intolerance [Byas 2018]. Lyotard also notes the "Loss of Meaning" in Postmodernity where the knowledge is no longer narrative but rather becomes a sporadic information, therefore, becoming information as such and information becoming knowledge [Lyotard 1983: 26]. This is reinforcing the Postmodern idea of "New" changing the rules of the game rather than being incorporated into the established rules like in Modernity [Lyotard 1983: 52–55]. The loss of narrative knowledge leads to further thoughts on the contemporary Internet Generation and the "World of Artificial Images" in which it dwells [Debord 1994]. Guy Debord mentions that mass media become one of the main instruments of socialization. However, in contemporary time of rampant technological progress, the decentralized and privatized media platforms reinforce this notion as well as the notion of the "Artificial World of Images". It is viable to note the parallels between the consciousness of contemporary Internet Generation (Millennials) and the structure of the most Media/Social Network Platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube and many others) where the "absence of hierarchy, disorderly notion of order, lack of topic oriented order but rather the collection of fragments of ideas, pictures, news, thoughts, creations with various meanings" take place. To deviate slightly from the main discussion, it is interesting to note that Facebook is losing the popularity among younger generations in the UK and the USA to Snapchat and other newer platforms, for Facebook is used by the parents of the teenage users who already consider Facebook unacceptable and obsolete [Sweney 2018]. This creates further atomization in the field of Internet Generation. This type of consumption is purely symbolic and Postmodern, which had been brilliantly noted by Jean Baudrillard in his works *The System of Objects* [1996], *Symbolic Exchange and Death* [2016], and *Simulacra and Simulation* [1995]. Baudrillard states that the consumption is a systematic manipulation of symbols and in order for the product to be consumed it must become/create a certain symbol/sign or aura around itself [Baudrillard 1996: 17–21]. In the age of Postmodernity, the products are consumed in many cases for their bearing of the signs of prestige, wealth, well-being, or affiliation to a particular group (rock music followers are dressed in a certain distinguishable way, hipsters, hippies, radical feminists also and so on and so forth). Signs/symbols are being consumed whereas the product itself does not bring any wealth or prestige but only symbolizes them. Furnishing themselves with various symbols and signs, the products can tell much

about their bearers and this, in turn, harms social connections when other people can read the person through the symbols/signs one is carrying and marginalizing those who do not fall under the category of acceptable signs. Consequently, it is important to refer to Jacques Lacan who stated that the "subject is forever divided and will not be able to achieve unity or identity while the subject of desire remains perpetually incomplete", meaning that the human desire aims to possess, to occupy or to be that symbol in a constant state reshaping and change (the contemporary idols, be that actors, singers or YouTube/Instagram stars are themselves symbols and signs) [Miller (ed.) 1991]. The similar ideas are presented also by Martin Heidegger [1996] in his concept *Dasein*. Debord, likewise, notes the impossibility to achieve proper individuality when an individual observes too much and even the actions of an individual do not belong to him/her anymore but to those who offer such patterns of behavior or desires and needs (the contemporary idols). The real world, thus, is replaced by the images on various screens, the person feels that he/she lives through these images but in reality they observe how the others live imitating life through these images. The constant observation is in itself a simulation of life and absorption of signs, symbols and images. In his work, Debord hints that the "Hyperreality" is not an addition to the real world, but "on the contrary, it is the very heart of society's real unreality" [Debord 1994: 5]. Therefore, there is a constant Spectacle around the observer and in the "Society of the Spectacle" the historical consciousness retreats heavily along with the historical cognition [Debord 1994: 22]. The past as an objective history is not possible, while it is believed that the history is an artificial construct and, therefore, there is no historic reality. The retreat of the historical consciousness comes along with the Postmodern praise of the very average (averaging of everyone and everything, e.g. the Hipster movement which is a supra-movement in itself and promotes the very average with the strong negation of power and any signs of domination) and rejection of hierarchies. However, the retreat of the historical consciousness might be partly welcomed by Karl Popper who argued vehemently against historicism in social sciences [Popper 2013]. Furthermore, "the idea of history as a unitary process is rapidly dissolving" and the general development is not seen through historical lenses but rather as a localized matter flattened in time. In other words, events and historical processes are not conceived as a unitary process but rather perceived contemporarily and as local happenings. For instance, Brexit or the strife for the Catalonian independence are historical processes but randomly are perceived in this manner with the populace being driven solely by the contemporary, narrow-minded, local and flattened in time perception with no regard of historical consequences. This, as well, signifies the absence of the Grand Narrative and the "collapse of the past and the future into the present" [Perniola 1995: 74]. Therefore, Postmodernity makes unacceptable the rules and principles that claim to be universally true [Lyotard 1983: 43]. Thus, one position cannot be absolutely dominant, for there is a plurality and equality of positions and if one position begins to dominate, this leads to oppression. Another important aspect of Postmodernity is "Deconstruc-

tion", defined by Jacques Derrida. "There is nothing outside the text" states Derrida and the text can be attributed to arts, politics, social sphere, culture, etc. [Derrida 1998: 45]. Deconstruction presents itself as a critique of the traditional thinking based on binary opposition to which, according to Derrida, the third, fourth, fifth and so on, meaning can be added. One text is complemented through another, etc. [Derrida 1998].

The idea of Truth as universal, that helped to sustain perhaps, the futuristic idea of Rational World and Bright Future, enabled people to believe in progress and better future, during Modernity. However, the notion of Bright Future is fading away from the consciousness of the masses, and the anti-utopia becomes a more popular concept, let alone the popularity of the films of this genre generated by the culture industry. The latter deserves a particular attention in terms of generating idols for the mass consumer as was shown in *The Meme Machine* by Susan Blackmore [1999]. However, the technological progress as well as Postmodernist trends such as rejection of authority and general decentralization, create private cultural gravitation points through social/video networks, e.g. ordinary, previously unknown, people that chose for themselves a particular sphere of occupation and became increasingly popular, rich and influential with millions of followers on various Internet platforms. As the Social Constructs are perceived as a dominating idea, the circumstances, objects, etc. are perceived less dangerous and their essence is comprehended as subjective. This, in turn, does not help altogether when there are inter/intra social group differences or general differences and it is necessary to find a consensus. It jeopardizes the consensus finding and problem solving mechanisms as reason is put aside and emotions are elevated (e.g. the multiplicity of the followers of the Left present an increasingly intolerant attitude towards different points of view). The observation of Alexis de Tocqueville proves to be correct in contemporary society: "Tyranny leaves the body free and directs its attack at the soul. The ruler no longer says: »You must think as I do or die«. He says: »You are free not to think as I do; your life, your property, everything shall remain yours, but from this day on you are a stranger among us«" [Mariotti 2016: xii].

However, it is necessary to jump back to one of the cornerstones of the ideas on Postmodernity and Baudrillard's theories, namely "Hyperreality". By latter, the simulation and the removal of the differences between the real and unreal is implied where the real and fiction blend together in simulacrum. In other words, Hyperreality is created by Simulacra which are sign, symbols and images of reality [Baudrillard 1995: 22–23]. According to Baudrillard, Hyperreality happens when there is more and more information and less of the meaning. The ideas coining the term "Simulacrum" had been thought over for thousands of years, dating back to Plato when he talked about "copies of original and copies of copy". Baudrillard distinguishes three Simulacra orders (however, four in total) that cover the epochs from Renaissance to the Post-Industrial era. These Simulacra evolve from the reflections of basic reality to the perversion of reality and then to the absence of the latter with signs being "faithful

copies" with lack of original. Baudrillard gives the following definition to the term "Simulacrum": "The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth – it is the truth which conceals that there is none" [Baudrillard 1995: 1]. In the contemporary "Society of the Spectacle" the simulacra takes place constantly and the events are covered by media or private platforms but all take a role of a spectacle with the information mixed and chaotic. For instance, the news about the tsunami in Indonesia might be interrupted at any given point of time by the advertisement of a soda drink, new game, gadget or sex toys. The internet social, video, photo platforms also contain the abundance of thematically unconnected information. This opens the door to Baudrillard's discussion on temptation under which the contemporary individuals find themselves, being constantly "harassed" by the information flows, advertisements and a permanent barrage of the positive symbolism of various goods. Therefore, the constant temptation comes to the fore bringing with itself the feeling of satiety and discontentment when the short-lived satisfaction by the procurement of one good is annulled and the temptation is renewed by yet another barrage of information about the new product/service that brings with itself new signs and symbols [Baudrillard 1996]. Thereby, the values are replaced at an ever-faster pace by the bright but quickly interchangeable values and simulacra. The latter, according to Baudrillard also emphasizes the oversaturation with aesthetics, e.g. the presence of various cultural (Asian, African, American, etc.) symbols/signs in the West (and general simulacra of varied cultures in many areas of the globe). This cultural "presence", however, is mostly a simulation that allows the spectators to have a glimpse into the simulated cultures. The other aesthetics of simulacra is the annulment of (binary) oppositions, e.g. masculine – feminine, beautiful – ugly, white – black and many others. For instance, the expression such as "the orange is a new black" (and many others, like Conchita Wurst or Michael Jackson in whom the oppositions are annulled) serve to indicate the annulment of the binary oppositions.

It is worth noting that one of the first significant social events that happened during Postmodernity was the events of 1968, the beginning of which were marked by the student unrest in France. Many of those students were future Postmodernists, but at the time of the unrest they wished to overthrow the ruling bourgeoisie and to establish the revolutionary order. They also demanded more practical fields of study instead of those imposed by the system. The movement, however, did not reach its goals and revolutionary order did not take place which, in turn, for instance, shook the belief in Marxism and in revolution of the working classes as such. "A truly new culture (or much desired change in the system) can emerge only through the collective struggle to create a new social system", said Frederic Jameson [1991: xii]. Under Postmodernity, however, the collective struggle is deemed impossible for the society is heavily atomized and the ideals are vague, as well as moral principles and social progress. The Hedonism steps forward along with the indifference of the masses, and the society is dominated by the repetition and copying, by the personal independence above all and dissociation between the future and progress [Adorno 1991].

The individual needs are of more importance than those of the class or of the group. The society, however, is broken down to multiple social groups and individual needs mostly correspond to the needs of the particular group (be that hippies, feminists, anarchists, rock music followers, hipsters, pacifists, etc.). For instance, during the G20 summit in Hamburg in July 2017, the city had been rocked by multiple violent protests triggered by the summit. Various supporters of social movements had been present and distinguished. For instance, the anarchists, feminists, anti-capitalists, right movements' followers and some other particular groups showed that they aggressively revolt against the system but did not actually propose anything reasonable. They expressed their feelings in an aggressive or creative way which was mostly the expression of feelings and emotions. The protests showed the collective struggle, however, this struggle was far from constructive and rather divided inside by various participating groups. For instance, the Hipster movement, that originated to some extent in the 1990s and 2000s having mixed with various groups such as environmentalists, anarchists, numerous music communities and even feminists and anti-capitalists, now presents itself as a significantly big group or rather a supra-group formation. The Hipster movement also engages in mixing the groups together and creating green-anarchists, freegans, and many others with constantly upraised middle fingers to express their protest (and perhaps intolerance) against the surroundings that contradict the Hipster idea which is a pacifist, urban, friendly (but in a best tradition marginalizing those who do not agree), simplified world-view (e.g. riding predominantly single-speed bicycles), organic in terms of food, greatly stylized (creating their own fashion movements) and hedonistic as well as anti-reason, environmentally-/animal-friendly and basically alternative to everything community [Rasmussen et al. 2012]. It is important to highlight that the Hipster movement is generally about alternatives and it is creating a certain fashion of being insignificant but different from the rest which leads to the advent of non-mainstream mainstream community. In this sense, the culture and culture industry present themselves as copy-generating machines in terms of products and groups they produce as well as in terms of their influences on the end consumer. According to Theodor W. Adorno, people become copies of each other and less significant where the real change is not welcomed either and the culture industry generates similarity of products and demands [Adorno 1991]. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche also expressed similar ideas but in the religious framework. However, contemporary social groups might also provide their members with partly similar visions and life goals. The culture industry in its turn also "sweetens and distorts" the truth in order for the end consumer to absorb it [Nietzsche 2003]. In parallel, Capitalism works as a dream machine that is generating dreams for end consumers and creating a certain "imaginary dimension as well as the imagined future" [Deutschmann, Münnich 2016]. This, links with the symbolic consumption of Baudrillard where capitalism continues to generate dreams for the consumers, but the stagnation and even contraction of middle class, supplies frustration and disappointment, for the consumers are at times unable to acquire provided dreams.

The Political sphere also has market traits where the political consumption becomes inherent and where the political parties are in a certain way selling themselves, their agendas and programs that are products to the consumer. The latter are, however, increasingly hard to satisfy due to the ever increasing plurality of Postmodernity and deconstruction of meta-narratives and consumer belonging to a certain social group the ideology of which might differ from other groups. Therefore, the political discourse is rather torn apart by numerous social gravitation points.

CONCLUSION

The above discussion highlights the Postmodern decentralization of society and further atomization of the masses, coupled with the retread of "Grand Narratives", historical consciousness, alternation of the notions of truth, objective knowledge and reason. The society sees the emergence of numerous social groups and movements with their own ideologies (with their own lifespan and tendency to radicalization which is the case with some of them) that make the societies more and more heterogeneous in terms of ideas and consensus finding mechanism which undergo change, as well as does the democracy. The Western societies are undergoing through substantial conflicts within themselves and it is stated that "there are no conflicts in democratic societies, only disputes" [Shonholtz 2003: 1]. The societies and social groups within them, however, are becoming increasingly intolerant towards real differences as Postmodernity postulates that there is no objective knowledge and there is no universal truth, therefore, every piece of knowledge might be considered true. The latter is decided by a commitment to a particular social group which has its own idea or ideology behind it, e.g. there is different truth for an environmentalist and a fashionable hipster who considers consumption of fashion article a healthy lifestyle, or between hippies and followers of such idols as, for instance, Kim Kardashian and the like. Thus, the Postmodern societies become more volatile, coupled with the increasing pace of change that is taking place and its somewhat devastating effect on the resilience of the political system, which, in turn, gave way to the rise of the right and the rise of populism. This has been possible due to the changes described above with the willingness of the people to flirt (at this point of time) with rather dangerous echoes of the past. The past, however, is not conceived dangerous as the historical consciousness is practically absent in the mindset of the Postmodern person and the events are perceived external to the historical time. The generation of dreams by the Neoliberal system and its relatively recent failure to enable the masses to achieve their dreams, played a cruel joke on the middle and lower classes, correlated with the fading beliefs in the brighter future and coming forth of anti-utopias. The economic system is rather seen as a concentration of power that also subdued the political system which, in turn, does not have the capacity to produce the strong characters able to promote change desired by population but the one that creates only positive

images for all progress which in reality are only hyperreal images in themselves. Thus, the politics has become the market-driven and market-oriented space where the symbolic consumption is taking place and the population is willing to risk as it feels that the objective knowledge does not exist, history is a social construct, reality is an image on the screen and there is no universal truth.

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