

Summary
Goodbye Mr. Postmodernism.
The Late Left, its Thinkers
and Social Theories

The notions of postmodernism and postmodernity initially, over the last two decades of the twentieth century, stirred much controversy and were prone to extreme interpretation. Only recently have they finally become ordinary part of contemporary humanities – with rather marginal potential to arouse anyone’s morbid curiosity. To put it in other words, their reality has finally aged enough to judge with appropriate detachment the essence and nature of these outrageous (or exciting, depending on whose cause you initially happened to support) postmodern “developments”.

Thus, the book tries to trace the outlines of the notions of postmodernism and postmodernity. I define both of these categories in a generally accepted way. “Postmodernism” refers to cultural phenomena, new kinds of artistic and philosophical expression, which started to shape the Western cultural landscape from the late 1960s onwards. “Postmodernity”, on the other hand, describes a whole social formation or epoch, which, as indicated by the name itself, entered the historical stage with the end of modernity.

The moment to reflect upon these issues seems especially favorable in Poland, since the thinkers who have most extensively and, as the book argues, also most comprehensively treated the topic of postmodernity are English-speaking Marxists, whose work after the collapse of the Eastern bloc has been in Poland unfairly (yet for understandable reasons) neglected. Hence, the second aim of the text, namely the attempt to introduce their work to the Polish humanities.

This group of the ultimate postmodern thinkers consists in my opinion mainly of: Perry Anderson, a British Marxist historian, the author of *The Origins of Postmodernity* of 1998; David Harvey, a British geographer, long-time professor at the Baltimore University, and the author of *The Condition of Postmodernity* of 1990; Fredric Jameson, an American literary critic, the author of the breakthrough essay and book *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* written in 1982 and 1991 respectively; and finally,

Terry Eagleton, a British literary theorist and philosopher, the author of *The Illusions of Postmodernism* of 1996. In my book I try to reconstruct and put to work the ideas of the group, stressing especially those parts dealing with postmodernism and postmodernity.

Since what these authors have in common, over and above a set of similar theoretical propositions, is the leftist political outlook, the book tries to provide a rough outline of the political future their theories seem to prefigure and anticipate. This makes up for the third goal of the book and is responsible for the presence in the text of Slavoj Žižek, the most prominent representative of the contemporary “radical current” in social theory. Hopes as well as certain preoccupations and biases of the today’s Left assume in Žižek’s works most explicit, and as some could justly claim, well-nigh grotesque expression.

All chapters begin with an introduction presenting the scientific profile of a given thinker, gradually proceeding towards the central thread of the book, namely the subject of postmodernity. The order of the chapters, as well as the specific breakdown of emphases within each, stem however solely out of regard for the narrative or the story I am trying to tell in the book.

The division of roles in the text is the following: Anderson, a historian, delivers the political calendar of postmodernity; Harvey, a geographer, sketches its map; cultural theorists Jameson and Eagleton carry the argument over to the plane of the subject, showing how the geopolitical reality of the epoch is forged into the lifeworld (as seen through the lens of cultural analysis) of the postmodern subjects. Žižek completes the account with the conceptual tools of contemporary psychoanalysis that allow to grasp theoretically the entanglement of the postmodern subject in the system, diagnosed in the work of Jameson and Eagleton.

The postmodern landscape is supplemented or, rather, “superimposed” in the text by the dramatic structure engaged to develop the political part of the narrative.

Chapter one, as a result, chronicles the gradual withering away of the leftist doctrine, both in its old- and new-leftist variants. The last note of this story is the triumph of capitalism in its neoliberal mutation, i.e. postmodernity.

Chapter two diagnoses the same political closure in the geographical dimension. Not only we lack alternative ideas to furnish the world, but we also ran out of the non-capitalist space where they could be seen in action or implemented.

In the third chapter the ideological closure appears once more, this time on the level of the subject, where it assumes the distinctive form of

a fierce social critique troubled by the fear of losing the libidinal benefits stemming from our involvement in the system. It is a kind of double-bind situation, naturally leading to His Majesty, Our Gracious current political or post-political stasis.

Beginning in the middle of the third chapter, where the concept of utopia is brought into focus, the argument starts leaning towards the thesis that social hope, with a distinctive socialist tinge, is nevertheless alive, although it now leads an illicit life, repressed and walled in the collective unconsciousness of the epoch, where it must be traced and retrieved by the work of cultural theorists. From that moment on, that is, more or less in the middle of the book, the temporal horizon of my argument changes. Out of the present, without abandoning its extensive description, I now allow myself to take more and more daring excursions into the future.

Chapter four concludes the critique of postmodernity with the story of the battle of two quasi-mythological powers: the capital-infested will and the body, closely allied on its part to socialism. The utopian vision of the socialist future gains here a more concrete direction, as a vision of a new, ethically sensitive culture – a culture diametrically different from postmodernism – with “political love” as its preferred catchphrase and ideology.

Finally, chapter five attempts to answer the question “what is to be done”, if we are ever to end up in this utopian future. Following the example of the two preceding chapters it focuses on the human subject – singled out by the contemporary Left as the proper source and “leverage” of a radical political change.

The book posits five “postmodern” theses as common to the thinkers of the contemporary Left.

1. We live in postmodernity. Therefore, instead of multiplying one impressive notion after another – such as the “society of spectacle”, “consumer society”, “post-industrial society”, “information society”, “McWorld”, “flat world”, “liquid modernity”, “Empire” – we are better off in our attempts to understand social reality when we apply to its descriptions the Ockham’s razor and settle for the notion of postmodernity.

2. Postmodernity itself, as Anderson, Jameson, Harvey, Eagleton and Žižek claim unanimously, has always been about capitalism. Postmodernity is simply the newest episode within the well-known and more or less two hundred years long history of capitalism. Herein lies also the answer to the question about the fundamental nature of postmodernism. Postmodernism, in accordance with the title of Jameson’s most important book, is the cultural logic of late, consumer and financial, capitalism. The capitalism whose origins date back to the oil crisis of the 1970’s, and whose reproduction not

only is not hindered by the domain of culture but holds culture as the main tenet of its existence.

3. Since postmodernism remains bound to the late capitalist economic base, its “annulment” has to be accompanied by the change of the dominant mode of production – from capitalist to non-capitalist – *resp.* by another qualitative shift within capitalism.

4. The preferred way out of postmodernity is socialism.

5. Lastly, its constitution has to be grounded in a proper theory.

This particular – not even so much critical, as completely disillusioned attitude towards postmodernism – delineates the political profile of the contemporary leftist theorists, whom I place in the book under the common denominator of the Late Left.

In contrast to the Old Left which, following the orthodox Marxist presuppositions considered culture a function of a certain economic base, the Late Left stresses the importance of culture to the reproduction and potential transformation of society. Contrary to the New Left, however, which considered culture, or rather counterculture to be the most promising vehicle of social change, the Late Left insists that economy and culture are one. Culture cannot therefore count on some splendid isolation that would allow it to harass the unjust system from a safe and morally superior distance. Ultimately, the Late Left (just like the Old Left) considers economy the crucial area of political struggle, but at the same time it tries to bear in mind the uniqueness of the postmodern economy, namely the knitting together of the base and superstructure, the dependence of this economy on the work of cultural spin doctors (something that makes the Late Left seem a natural bandwagon partner of the New Left).

Let us consider a short example. Freeing oneself from false consciousness – since that kind of language is still viable for the theorists of the Late Left – is no longer about holding a certain set of proper views regarding reality. These views are often common knowledge, but at the same time in our personal life they are virtually devoid of any practical consequence. Our typical everyday attitude is cynicism. “I know perfectly well what I’m doing, but I’m still doing it”. “I know perfectly well that none of the things I am going to buy will bring me lasting satisfaction, but I know that I will buy them nevertheless”. As a result, the problem with political emancipation comes down to letting go of one’s cynicism and finding a way to end this pitiful libidinal and esthetic entanglement in the system that has been made possible by the seduction through the postmodern culture. This goal can be achieved only by creating a new alternative culture, by breathing new life into the leftist way of thinking that would substitute the penchant for

colorful margins (common to both postmodernism and the New Left) for the ability of a sound and ethically responsible reflection.

There are also certain practical guidelines stemming from what the book reconstructs as the Late Left body of thought (*resp.* the reconstruction provides the opponents of the Left with significant theoretical arguments). Keeping intact the utopian or even eschatological potential that has always been part of the socialist politics requires that the Left sheds off the illusions it had inherited absent-mindedly from Marx, which make it an uneasy accomplice of neoliberalism. The socialist society of the future must not succumb to the Marxist-capitalist ideal of the ever-rising economic efficiency. As the book argues, it is impossible to keep – or even enhance, as Marx presupposed – today's economic productivity while simultaneously fulfilling the leftist principle of social justice. Social inequality not only does not stand in the way of realizing the full productive potential of society but it constitutes its necessary condition. The Left can therefore promote further rapid economic growth and social justice only at the cost of hypocrisy, or when it suitably waters down its expectations regarding human potential for justice.