

A city full of idols?

Life in a postmodern society

Opening observations

Philosophers, preachers and theologians of all kinds like to think that what people believe affects how they behave. However, in many cases, it is the change in social circumstances that compel a change in behaviour. The protagonists in the film “The Full Monty” are forced to find new ways of making a living not because they have chosen to do so, but because they have been forced to do so by their external circumstances (in their case, the closure of the steel mill in which they worked).

As we engage with postmodernism, we should be aware that many of the ideas and themes that we characterise as ‘postmodern’ are fairly esoteric concepts to the average person. But changes in society, and the messages that people receive through the media and the environment in which they live and work, serve to create and reinforce behaviours and beliefs that can be accurately characterised as postmodern, even if the people holding them have no idea what the word means, if they have even heard of it.

The concept of ‘postmodernity’ (as opposed to ‘postmodernism’) is a useful one in this case. The term describes a condition, a way of being, and it functions as what Lesslie Newbiggin called a ‘plausibility structure’, i.e. an environment that makes certain ideas and concepts acceptable, and rules others out of consideration from the very start. For example, a radical feminist environmentalism is unlikely to arise, or be given any credence whatsoever, in a fundamentalist Muslim society. Likewise, the mere idea of freedom of belief finds less acceptance in any culture which ties religion closely with identity, such as Iran or Thailand. And in our context, the idea of a single universally-applicable truth and belief system struggles to get airspace in a culture that is not only physically diverse, but in which the concept of consumer choice is embodied as an absolute good.

In this lecture, we will look at how postmodern concepts are being embodied socially and conceptually in our society, and consider what this means for our understanding of human identity, personal reinvention, and conversion.

Let’s begin with a few examples of how our society reflects postmodern rather than modern ways of thinking and behaving

- From manufacturing industries to service sector jobs
- From the factory gate to the shopping mall
- From the production line to workstations in cubicles
- From machine tools to information technology
- From terraced housing to executive homes
- From “one size fits all” to “mi adidas”

Vive la différence

One of the core concepts of postmodern thinking is the celebration and promotion of difference, pretty much as an end in itself. Michel Foucault was particularly concerned with this. He argued that any attempt to define what is ‘normal’ is a use of power that marginalises, excludes and alienates those who do not fit the prescribed definition. He did not think of power as something used by the strong to dominate the weak, but as a phenomenon of all human relationships”

“Power is not something present at specific locations within human networks, but is instead always at issue in ongoing attempts to (re)produce effective social alignments or to avoid or erode their effects, often by producing effective counteralignments”

He proposed the “power/resistance” matrix, in which one asks “who says it has to be that, and not this?”. He proposed that difference should be articulated simply to challenge that which is considered normal, not so that some combination or compromise of the two might more closely approximate to truth or reality, but simply to reveal that arbitrary nature of that which is considered normal.

From mass production to mass customisation

Henry Ford, the American car maker and industrialist, is famously credited as saying of his famous Model T, “You can have it any colour you want, so long as it’s black”. Standardised production techniques helped to produce the first car ownership boom in 1920s America, bringing it within the reach of those on even modest incomes.

How far have we come from this situation?

The Nike iD service at nike.com/europe allows you to customise a pair of football boots or running shoes. You choose from a variety of colours, select your shoe size, or simply input the length of your foot in millimetres, and your name and number can be added to the boot tongue and heel. The boots are then made to order and shipped directly to your home.

My Adidas

Nike’s great rival in the footwear stakes, Adidas, have gone even further. In 1986 hip-hop pioneers Run DMC sang about “My Adidas”. The shoe firm neatly exploited this by giving the band free pairs of sneakers to throw into the audience at their gigs, thereby reinforcing brand loyalty and their ‘street-cool’ image in one deft stroke. They have now taken this theme one step further, with a ‘mi adidas’ custom shoemaker. This includes a device to measure foot length and width, and an running track that computes the amount and type of support needed. Outsole, design, size, colour and logo are then decided on and, \$120 later, the perfect shoe arrives on your doormat.

Mark Parker, co-president of Puma, recently commented,

“The future for us isn’t going to be, hey, here’s better shoes, better apparel, better product. It’s going to be a lot more dimensionalised Customisation and the personalisation of products and services are going to be a bigger and bigger part of our future”.

The mass-customization of product is now well established in the car industry. At the fordconnection.com web site you can design your preferred car online, including the trim, a variety of other specifications and all optional extras, which will then be built to order. It’s great to play with – I’ve designed a number of cars I’d love to buy, only to fall at the final hurdle – the payment fence. Most car parts now being assembled on a Ford production line have the customer’s name already attached to them. It makes Dell’s PCs-made-to-order approach sound slightly less impressive when you realize they’re doing it for cars as well.

This mass-customization of society has moved beyond the products that we buy to the information and knowledge we receive. Talk of an ‘information explosion’ is common, through the development and expansion of satellite/cable/digital TV, the

now-ubiquitous CD-ROMs and DVDs, and, of course, the Internet. In response to this, we see the development of tailored communications. 'Old' media, such as newspapers and music producers, are having to adapt to the demands of the consumers of 'new' media, such as the ability to interact with web sites and to personalize both the services and content received. Similar 'tailoring' can be seen in the propensity to talk of 'narrowcasting' rather than 'broadcasting'; in direct-marketers working with smaller and smaller segments of the population; and in the use of 'cookies', which allow web sites to identify return visitors, to retain their personal information for future use, and to offer services such as those provided by the Amazon web sites, such as 'recommendations' (based on your previous buying patterns), and 'people who bought this book also bought ...'

This is the key theme of much marketing in the West – whatever suits 'you'. The celebration of difference and personal individuality, and customization to that individuality, is the order of the day.

Brands, identity and personal reinvention

The above examples all provide us with an idea of what postmodern*ity* is all about: the expansion of choice and the tailoring of those choices to your own personal needs, wants and whims create an experienced world where postmodern ideas seem to make sense and so are more widely accepted. In short, they provide a 'plausibility structure' for those behaviours and associated ideas to thrive.

The idea that human identity is not a given, but is something that we make, is termed 'constructivism'. All culture is learned – every human baby is born a 'clean slate'. But in most places, for most of human history, who that child grew up to be and what he or she grew up to believe was to a large extent determined by the context in which he or she lived. Culture gives a child the tools and the framework needed to develop his or her own identity (so constraining and limiting the options). It has, of course, always been possible to change one's identity to some degree (the Christian notion of conversion is based on just such a possibility), but it is probably fair to say that there are now more options available to more people than has been the normal experience of humanity throughout history.

So we face an array of 'off-the-peg' and 'bespoke' identities, each presenting itself to us as an option. The result? We try to wear several of these outfits at the same time, adopting a chameleon approach to life. We have no choice but to make a choice (or choices).

And this leads to another problem. For there you are presented with an array of choices. Many of those choices can be tailored to fit exactly who you are. But who is the 'you' that the products are being tailored to fit? In a developed consumer society, much of our source of identity comes from the brands we identify with. So now the brand is being tailored to fit the person who defines him or herself by what the brand 'says about him or her'. And so we disappear up our own ... created selves.

The inherent flaw in the notion of self-reinvention is illustrated by the differing approaches of two of Douglas Coupland's novels that deal with this subject. His 1995 novel *Microserfs* focuses on a group of friends who work for Microsoft and who decide to escape the faceless conformity of working for a major corporation by pooling their skills and (limited) financial resources in order to start a small software

company.¹ It is a hopeful story that embodies the optimistic wish to 'start again', and, despite setbacks and challenges, it ends on a positive note. Coupland's *Miss Wyoming*, published in 2000, also deals with the topic of self-reinvention. One of the two main characters, Susan Colgate, is a former child TV star and winner of many teen pageants who takes the opportunity of being the only survivor in a plane crash to disappear and reinvent herself. She ultimately fails, and (somewhat cheesily) only finds happiness when she meets the other protagonist, John Johnson, a fading former action movie star who has also tried to disappear. Both find redemption in the other: someone who accepts the other for who they are, not who they try to become.

The emptiness of self-reinvention without any basis in reality and the loss of personal cohesion and a central anchor of identity is summed up in the pitiful figure who encountered Jesus in the region of the Gerasenes, across the Lake of Galilee. 'My name is Legion ... for we are many' (Mark 5:9). As Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh comment: 'Controlled by many spirits, the man in the biblical story was tormented, homeless and in need of healing. So, it seems to us, is the contemporary postmodern psyche.'

Speaking personally, becoming a Christian was about finding myself a place and an identity in the universe, and perhaps this is part of the good news of Jesus Christ to postmodern people. It's about finding a place where they can begin to know who they are.

So where has this taken us?

From postmodernism we learn the principle that identity is produced by difference. The trend towards mass-customization and personalized consumption reinforces this highlighting of difference. The outcome is a strong and growing concern for individuality and the emergence of bewildering diversity. Increasing choice opens our eyes to the possibility of reinvention, though we have noted some of the limits to the success of such attempts.

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Extract from "World of Difference : global mission at the pic'n'mix counter"
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¹ By way of an aside, it's interesting to note that, had the novel been written four years later, the protagonists would have set a dot.com business. The characters in the novel use e-mail, but there's no mention of the Internet, which didn't exist in any meaningful way to most people when the novel was being written.