

Polanyi and Post-modernism

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ABSTRACT

Post-modernism is receiving much attention, but it is often seen as merely an extrapolation of modernism. Michael Polanyi's post-critical epistemology offers a useful way of understanding post-modernism. The modern objectivism of critical thought leads to a dead-end dehumanization. Polanyi offers a recovery of the human dimension by demonstrating the ways in which all knowing, especially scientific discovery, requires human participation. An analogy is drawn with post-modern art and architecture, which similarly attempt to recover the human form and traditional or classical ornamentation in a way which goes beyond the sterile abstractness of modernism.

As we near the end of the twentieth century, we are increasingly hearing references to something called “post-modernism.” Presumably post-modernism is something beyond modernism. The modern age, which had become so familiar to us, is now history. It has passed almost unheralded, and now we must adjust to something new. Whether this is a source of lament or rejoicing depends on how we understand modernism. Our quest for cultural self-understanding forces us to come to terms with the issues that Michael Polanyi, almost half a century ago, insisted were of greatest urgency.

The quest for a definition of post-modernism may remain as elusive as an attempt to get a clear picture of the future by gazing through a crystal ball. What the future will hold must be more than an extrapolation of present trends. We must understand our present situation in historical context, and unless we are to be passive victims of our future, we must work to shape our vision of destiny according to values and ideals which we freely and deliberately choose and openly acknowledge. In order to understand post-modernism, we must get a bearing on modernism. Indeed in the words of Fredric Jameson, “It is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place”(73).

The quest for a definition of post-modernism is a bit like trying to find one's way out of a fog without navigational aids. The vision of reality offered to us by the modernist accounts of objectivity show us only the fog and not our location in it. It is these accounts of objectivity offered by critical thought which Polanyi explicitly repudiated in his post-critical epistemology. I therefore suggest that using the clues Polanyi offers us, we should be able to see clear of the cultural fog of the false objectivity of impersonal knowing. Polanyi's post-critical epistemology offers us a coherent vision of what is now being called post-modernism. For Polanyi, knowledge is not an impersonal undertaking but a very personal affirmation of that which we claim to know. Critical thought, which we equate with modernism, attempted to distance the knower from the known. Polanyi's post-critical knowledge recovers the human dimension of knowledge by demonstrating that even in science, held to be the most precise form of knowledge by the modernists, the scientist relies on tacit unspecifiable clues in pursuit of discovery and any claim to knowledge must be accredited by the community of knowers.

We may hope that the future is a fiduciary program based on trust (or faith) and human understanding, not an attempt at control of the human and natural worlds according to some covert and unacknowledged ends, as has been the case with modernism. We hope that science will be used as a human tool to achieve human ends rather than a mechanism pretending value neutrality and subverting humane goals. We especially hope that politics will be truly political and not merely a facade hiding totalitarianism cleverly masked in the false objectivity and pseudoscientific morality of Marxism. Now that we have at last witnessed the collapse of Soviet Marxism, it is most appropriate that we take a look at the concerns Polanyi expressed in his post-critical philosophy. For there can be little solace in the suffering of the former Soviets, taken glibly as a triumph of capitalism, when the familiar errors of modernity remain as entrenched as ever in Western thought. This I take to be the lesson of the Hungarian Revolution, which Polanyi called to our attention in his important 1966 essay by that name. If we read the lessons of history correctly, we are not just witnessing the collapse of an economy but also the collapse of an ideology.

Most accounts of post-modernism, shrouded as they are in the cultural fog of modernist objectivity, seem to grope for signs of change, something slightly different, a harbinger of what is perhaps yet to come. Polanyi's radical traditionalism offers a clear view on modernity and thus a prospect for understanding post-modernism. Before elaborating that vision I will sketch some of the attempts of various disciplines to come to terms with post-modernism. While my brief sketches remain incomplete, I hope they are suggestive.

TOWARD A DEFINITION OF POST-MODERNISM

The first harbinger I recall of post-modernism as a cultural phenomenon comes from the late novelist Walker Percy. His *Love in the Ruins* (1971) referred fondly to the "old modern age" with a sense of irony which gave perspective on the present as a historical phenomenon. His old modern age was shockingly familiar, a culture centered around the automobile with residential communities of imitation plantations surrounding a golf resort. There is a love clinic for couples who have become bored with their affluence and each other. And with the shocking brand name recognition which brings familiarity up close, the major landmark in this culture is the local Howard Johnson motel, where much of the action takes place.

Percy's technique is in many ways Kierkegaardian in his exaggeration of the familiar in order to call attention to that which has become all too jaded much in the same way that Soren Kierkegaard exaggerated the themes of Christianity to remind his nominally Christian Danish countrymen what it meant to be Christian. This must be what Jameson means when he says, "It is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place" (73)

This must be what the literary critics are attempting to do when they "deconstruct" familiar realities. It is only possible to get a grasp on the assumptions that inform the construction of reality when those very assumptions are challenged. It is necessary to wonder, yet simple deconstruction does not in itself constitute a vision of reality. This is groping in the cultural fog.

In *Joseph Heller*, Ruderman has described a concern in literature in distinguishing fact from fiction such that the only certainty becomes the writer's own consciousness. The distinction between those writers who are concerned with external reality and those concerned with internal realities (the wave of the 1960's, Vonnegut, Updike, Heller) has been identified as a distinction between modern writers and post-modern writers.

Adams has written about the distinction between modernism and post-modernism in art and theology. He sees in the work of artists such as George Segal a reintroduction of human forms and themes in art following the modern tendency toward abstract expressionism. Indeed,

Segal was particularly resentful of the dualistic dictum that linked abstraction to transcendence. Spirit, he was convinced, was not to be achieved at the expense of the body: both his Jewish heritage and sensual temperament dictated that universal emotion and psychic or sacred ideals could only be conveyed through “the reality of what I could sense, touch, see” (13).

One might therefore see on a Segal canvas a white plaster construction worker or a painter on a scaffold in front of the canvas. Notable is Segal’s *The Holocaust*, (at San Francisco’s Legion of Honor) in which ten figures are sprawled on the ground and one is standing behind a barbed wire fence on a promontory overlooking the Golden Gate and the San Francisco Bay. Not only are there human figures in the sculpture, but the viewer becomes part of the picture and must make choices and reflect on those choices. Does one stand, for example, behind the fence or outside the fence?

Adams contrasts Segal’s affirmative view of history with the theology (or a/theology) Mark Taylor has identified as post-modern. Based on de-constructionism, Taylor’s work begins with the modernist elimination of any meaningful sense of place or time; and so history becomes a/history and theology becomes a/theology. Notes Taylor:

postmodernism opens with the sense of irrevocable loss and incurable fault. This world is inflicted by the overwhelming awareness of death--a death that “begins” with the death of God and “ends” with the death of ourselves. We are in a time between times and a place which is no place (quoted in Adams, 43).

I would say Taylor’s view is post-modern only in the sense that it is ultra modern, whereas Segal recaptures something of the humanistic tradition that has been lost in modernity. Furthermore Segal’s repudiation of Cartesian duality--mind and body or mind-spirit and body--helps us appreciate what in particular has been so troubling about modernity. The Cartesian kind of objectivism is objectionable precisely because it repudiates the self or any form of sensory experience as a valid form of knowledge. Yet we know what we experience even if it is not given objective credibility. Thus post-modernism reaches beyond modernism by reaching back to a more classical or historical or personal view of reality. Those familiar with the work of Michael Polanyi will quickly recognize that this was the project that Polanyi set about in his post-critical philosophy.

The situation of contemporary psychiatry provides yet another example of the evolution from classicism to modernism to post-modernism. Classical psychiatry involved description and interpretation. Psychoanalysis would be placed in the era of classical psychiatry and its emphasis has been on history, narrative, memory and interaction of the doctor and the patient. Modern psychiatry has sought to explain psychopathology on brain neurochemical mechanisms, often ignoring human experience and history. The integration of neurobiology and the psychosocial approach could be described as post-modern in the sense that post-modern art and architecture has recaptured the human dimension and form.

Recently, I came across an article on post-modern ski technique, which carefully traced the evolution from classical to modern to post-modern changes in shifts in body weight and evolving technology of the equipment itself.

Post-modern anthropology acknowledges the effect of the anthropologist on the culture and sometimes the response of those studied to the writings about. In this sense psychoanalysis is quintessentially post-modern in its focus on the personal role of the analyst in the understanding of the analysand.

In warfare we see a similar evolution from classical hand to hand combat to the sterile, impersonal, technological efficiency of the Persian Gulf conflict. We might conclude that terrorism is a post-modern extension, a return to the personal dimension of historical means of settling conflict. But my conclusion is that terrorism is in fact a paranoid corruption of modernism in its use of immoral means to achieve ends claimed to be moral. I mention this conclusion briefly here in anticipation of remarks I will make presently about Polanyi's concept of moral inversion. Terrorism is a moral inversion in that it claims a moral legitimacy for something that is quite immoral.

Finally, before turning directly to Polanyi, I offer comments on one more field, architecture. In architecture we see the most tangible vision of post-modernism. In architectural writings, we see the most clearly articulated statements of how post-modernism goes beyond modernism. In art and architecture, post-modernism signifies a reintroduction of the human form and scale after the sterile era of modern abstract expressionism.

Classical architecture from Greek times to the twentieth century involved various forms of ornamentation. Buildings were adorned much as the human body has been adorned. Modern architecture stripped away all ornamentation. It was utilitarian. "Form follows function" became the rallying cry. The steel and glass box became its most familiar manifestation.

Post-modernism involves a reintroduction of the human form and scale. It is a hybrid classicism, a return to what was familiar and comfortable, even as buildings became gigantic and often inhumane. Oversized arches and palladian windows recall a time when such elements were used to highlight human forms, as in a doorway for example. Post-modern architecture is an attempt to re-humanize architecture. Postmodernism appeals to a popular discontent with modernism and to nostalgic longings of various kinds.

In simplistic terms, according to architect and critic, Charles Jencks, "postmodernism is the replacement of the mechanistic paradigm by the biological and organic world view. The new biology and also a more sophisticated cultural model for understanding how nature and society work, are replacing modern paradigms" (40).

Assuming Newtonian science to be modern, Jencks suggests that "the modern world is drawing to a close in all areas--even modern science is over." He contends that

the world view that comes from modern Newtonian science--the mechanistic, reductive, deterministic world view--is over. The idea of mechanism as the driving metaphor for our culture is finished. It's had it. The future, as far as metaphor is concerned, is all biology, information and semiotics--the Age of Meaning (40, see also Jencks, 1991).

There is a sense in which post-modern architecture may be seen as a compromise, providing a kind of cultural balance between the new and the old. The new Sainsbury Wing of the National Gallery in Trafalga Square is an example. Various modern plans had been rejected under protest. Prince Charles reportedly decried one design as a "carbuncle on the face of a much beloved friend." The post-modern design of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown harmoniously

extends the classical elements of the original facade without being an imitation of something old. The new facade is clearly new, yet its playful use of columns and windows relates to its neighbor, calling attention again to the classical elements which had become so familiar as to go almost unnoticed. Venturi and Scott Brown succeed in much the way Kierkegaard or Walker Percy succeed in getting us to notice what had become so familiar as to go unnoticed. Polanyi does much the same in getting us to think about what we claim to know.

Several new hotels have adopted post-modern architectural themes as a way of making guests feel more comfortable. Modern boxes required the guest to adapt to their environments. Post modern hotels, such as the Marriott in San Francisco or the Grand Hyatt in Washington, use classical elements such as oversized palladian windows, triangular or arched pediments, interior courtyards and gazebos, to recall the human scale of a small village.

The New York State Empire Collection provides a striking collection of modern art of the “New York School” in which we see in particular the workings of abstract expressionism. However we also notice that for all of the attempts to eliminate any explicit reference to the human form, biological themes emerge repeatedly in such structures as the egg-shaped auditorium (called “the Egg”) and in numerous other sculptural forms suggestive of the vertebral column, a snake, etc.

POLANYI’S POST-CRITICAL PROJECT

Polanyi’s rich and textured philosophy offers much and warrants close study which is amply rewarding. For the purpose of understanding post-modernism, I wish to focus on Polanyi’s critique of Soviet Marxism. I do this for two reasons. First, I think the events of the past year or two vindicate Polanyi’s rather unique perspective on this cultural phenomenon and deserve to be highlighted. But, secondly, I think the shift to a post-modern culture is accelerating and we need our bearings to navigate the changes we face.

Polanyi was concerned that the central planning of the Soviet economy according to explicitly stated goals was a false and impossible task. It was doomed to failure he believed because it did not allow for the personal freedom needed to be creative and responsive. His insight was based on an understanding as a scientist of how scientific discovery inevitably must proceed, namely according to hunches and intuitions, tacit understandings of someone immersed in the search for discovery. These understandings can never be made completely explicit: “. . . we know more than we can tell and we can tell nothing without relying on our awareness of things we may not be able to tell” (*PK*, “Preface to the Torchbook Edition”, x), Polanyi reminds us.

Polanyi also tells us (*PK*, “Preface to the Torchbook Edition”, ix) that his project began with an opposition to the view, derived from Soviet Marxism, that the pursuit of science should be directed by the public authorities to serve the welfare of society. Polanyi held that the power of thought to seek the truth must be accepted as our guide, rather than be curbed to the service of material interests. He noted that such a defense of intellectual freedom on metaphysical grounds was no more acceptable to the dominant schools of Western philosophy (namely positivism, or the Cartesian epistemologies) than to the Marxists. It is well worth noting that the mechanisms for disbursing federal funds for research in the United States are centrally planned on more or less explicit goals sensitive to the political process and material interests rather than a less easily definable search for truth and knowledge. Does this explain at least in part the decline in American technological innovation?

Polanyi notes in his essay on “The Message of the Hungarian Revolution” (1966) that the Petofi circle, which repudiated Marxist-Leninist dogma, was a group of Communist party members who had become disillusioned with the doctrine that public consciousness is a superstructure of the underlying relations of production. They rejected the idea that public thought under socialism must be an instrument of the Party controlling Socialist production. They affirmed instead that truth must be recognized as an independent power in public life. The press must be free to tell the truth. Murderous trials based on faked charges must be publicly condemned. And above all, the arts corrupted by subservience to the Party must be set free to rouse the imagination and to tell the truth.

Polanyi makes much in that essay of a comment made by Professor Richard Pipes, then Director of Harvard’s Russian Research Center:

Four years ago, when writing an essay on the Russian intelligentsia . . . , I wanted to conclude it with a brief statement to the effect that the modern Russian intellectual had a very special mission to fulfill: “to fight for truth.” On the advice of friends I omitted this passage since it sounded naive and unscientific. Now I regret having done so. . . (*Knowing and Being*, 26).

The Hungarian intellectuals, like a scientist, were in search for truth and that search required a freedom not admitted in socialist society. Yet a Western historian was also afraid to speak of truth for fear it would sound “naive and unscientific.”

In *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi has a very powerful section called “The Magic of Marxism” in which he identifies “the dynamo-objective coupling.” Marxism is based on a self-contradictory principle, a prophetic idealism spurning all reference to ideals. It has (or had) such extraordinary appeal because it allowed

the modern mind, tortured by moral self-doubt, to indulge its moral passions in terms which also satisfy its passion for ruthless objectivity. Marxism, through its philosophy of ‘dialectical materialism’ conjures away the contradiction between the high moral dynamism of our age and our stern critical passion which demands that we see human affairs objectively, i.e. as a mechanistic process . . . (228).

Thus we see a coupling of the moral force or dynamism and the objective view of reality, each repudiating association with the other. Any opposition to Marxism or the central government on moral grounds was repudiated by the objective view of reality, dialectical materialism, yet any presentation of contrary facts, was repudiated by fierce but unacknowledged moral passion, hence the dynamo-objective coupling.

The dynamo-objective coupling could be used for a moral defense of immorality, what Polanyi calls the moral inversion, of which Marxism is but perhaps the most interesting example, but which we find in evidence throughout modern culture, from *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* to *Bonnie and Clyde* to Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange* to Gide’s *Lafcadio’s Adventures*. We must be sensitive to moral inversion and dynamo-objective coupling because they provide clues to modernism gone awry. It is our modernist inability to acknowledge and reflect on our own moral commitments.

Here we see perhaps most clearly the shortcomings of modernist epistemology, the split between our false objective view of reality and our moral passions. But Polanyi does not stop with a diagnosis of our problem. He offers us a solution

which he calls post-critical and which we can well understand as post-modern.

Polanyi returns to the enduring classical themes of Plato and St. Augustine. Polanyi believes he can provide an answer to the paradox Plato posed in the *Meno*. How can one pursue a discovery if one does not know what one is looking for? Polanyi answers this not logically but psychologically. The scientist in pursuit of discovery does in fact “know” what he is looking for but the awareness is tacit, not completely specifiable. The insistence on a human or psychological dimension to scientific discovery puts Polanyi’s post-critical epistemology at variance with the more modernist accounts of science which focus on the discovery more than the discoverer.

Polanyi saw in St. Augustine the first example of post-critical thinking, bringing the history of Greek philosophy to a conclusion. We might say Augustine is classical (or pre-critical if we date modern critical philosophy from Descartes or Kant). In confessing his own beliefs and acknowledging them as his own, he taught that all knowledge was a gift of grace for which we must strive under the guidance of antecedent belief: *nisi credideri tis, non intelligitis*, “unless ye believe, ye shall not understand (*De libero arbitrio*, Book I, par. 4). According to Polanyi,

Here lies the break by which the critical mind repudiated one of its two cognitive faculties and tried completely to rely on the remainder. Belief was so thoroughly discredited that, apart from specially privileged opportunities, such as may be still granted to the holding and profession of religious beliefs, modern man lost his capacity to accept any explicit statement of his own belief. All belief was reduced to the status of subjectivity: to that of an imperfection by which knowledge fell short of universality (*PK*, 266).

So accustomed have we moderns become to the separation of faith and knowledge that it is difficult even for believers to appreciate that knowledge itself depends on faith. Polanyi is particularly persuasive on this point because the data he draws on is the data of science itself and the data of political experience. He suggests that, in order to remind ourselves that all knowledge depends on our belief in it, we should preface each declaratory sentence with the words “I believe that”. “Snow is white” is really equivalent to saying “I believe that snow is white.” And anyone who thinks this is a spurious challenge to empirical, objective reality need only be reminded that Eskimos, the true connoisseurs of snow, have twenty different words to distinguish snow.

CONCLUSION

Polanyi’s view of post-modernism is an optimistic view. If we go beyond the limitations of critical thought and the damage it does to human experience, the recovery of the personal in knowing and being suggests for us the possibility of a positive future. Post-modernism can then be seen to be a recapturing of the human dimension of life and an integration of the bifurcated legacy of modernism, a re-weaving of the treads of faith and knowledge of mind/spirit and body.

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