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The Postmodern Moment in Political Thought¹

Since the late 1970's the term "postmodern" has established itself in the vocabulary of cultural analysis. For the postmodern turn political thought has appeared as a crisis area because it is here that the postmodern challenge has been contested for both its meaning and its signification. Some critics claim that the concept has no bearing on political thought and some contend that it has outright negative implications in this area. The criticism is usually targeted at the Nietzschean undercurrent in the work of such authors as Michel Foucault and Jean-Francois Lyotard. Foucault's ideas of constructedness of individuality and all-pervasiveness of power as well as Lyotard's idea of politics as a permanently agonistic space without the horizon of agreement have attracted a lot of critical attention. Ideas such as these are deemed dubious for purportedly erasing the possibility of moral-political judgement.

My contention is that the postmodern is highly relevant for political thought, to the degree that the term "The postmodern moment" is justified. More specifically, I claim that the postmodern challenge implies a rejection of both the liberal and Hegelian-Marxian political ontologies which are the two powerful traditions of modern political

thought. These political ontologies both build on a foundationally conceived subjectivity, agency or self which the postmodern effectively calls into question.

I will begin by specifying what I mean by the postmodern, and by the two distinct political ontologies, and then continue by exploring their common denominators.

The modern/postmodern distinction, for me, is a distinction of two modes of thought and as such is not to be confused with sociological notions of postmodern society or postmodern culture. Also, I do not apply these terms as referring to periods of history or historical epochs and I entirely refuse questions of timing. In general, I think the meaning of the terms "the modern" and "the postmodern" is a product of discourse and I reject questions of referential nature in this respect. My way of defining the two concepts is not unrelated to the recent discussion around them, yet I do not try to sum up this discussion in order to arrive at an overall meaning of the postmodern, much less to determine its referent. I rather venture into defining them in a way which my analysis appears to warrant.

As modes of thought the modern and the postmodern differ in their relationship to foundations. The modern is characterized by the search for a foundation, a basis or a core of whatever is the subject of study. The modern purifies. Moreover, this search in the modern is conducted so that the emphasis is not on establishing these foundations, but on constantly contesting them in order to find a more basic core. The postmodern, on the other hand, is characterized by the recognition of the repetitive gesture in the modern, and of a refusal to carry on with it. In other words, the modern strips off layers in the belief that there is a naked core to be revealed, whereas the postmodern does not believe in the core: you can peel one layer after another without discovering a hard core, just new layers. The postmodern interest focuses on the layers instead of pursuing foundations.

The two models of thought offer very different approaches to any conceivable subject matter, including the highly prominent question of self, agency or subject which I will come back to later after taking up an idea central to my understanding of the postmodern. This is the principle of genealogy, which Michel Foucault adopts

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from Nietzsche, and which other postmodern thinkers such as Judith Butler also apply.

In his article "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History"² Foucault contrasts genealogy with history. History studies a phenomenon and its past by looking for its origin. It goes further and further in order to reveal the origin of the phenomenon under study and it then studies what has happened to this object of study during the course of history, how power in different ways has modified it.

Genealogy, instead, does not look for an original, unpolluted form of the phenomenon which is supposed to remain there as its essence in the course of its modifications over time, but instead conceives the phenomenon under study as always, at any point in its past, an effect of some kind of powers. When Nietzsche studied morality in "Genealogy of Morals"³ he did not assume a morality (the original morality) which then would have taken different forms in the course of history. He did not assume that core which is subjected to the history of morality. Instead he assumed that morality is produced through different powers – and it is these powers that become the focal point of his analysis. This, at least, is Foucault's interpretation of what Nietzsche is doing, and Foucault himself follows the same pattern when he studies history of sexuality. He does not assume that there is such a thing as sexuality per se, an original form which then undergoes different modifications in different periods of time, but instead he assumes that sexuality only comes into being as a result of various powers. He also takes these powers under scrutiny. Put short, in genealogy the emphasis is not on searching for the core, but on the layers, and this is what in my view marks it as a postmodern way of thinking.

To move on to explaining my understanding of political ontology, it is common to differentiate between two powerful traditions of political thought, the liberal Anglo-American tradition of Hobbes, Locke and Mill, and the tradition of nationalism and socialism based on Hegel and Marx who both wrote in German. I build on this distinction too, but for me it appears as a distinction between political ontologies. This is because of the profound difference that I see in the way these traditions construct political space, in the elements they use in this construction and in the logical order of the elements.

The Anglo-American liberal ontology constructs its political space out of basic elements which I characterize as transcendently singular individual agents. They are transcendental because they do not have the wealth of characteristics of a real individual but are abstract entities stripped of all other attributes but those belonging to their abstract core. The abstraction process leaves them in possession of a singular interest, and a capacity to choose. Everything else theorized within the liberal framework, concepts like community, society, civil society, the state, are built out of the elements of transcendently singular individuals, which are logically prior to any of the others in the conceptual network. Consequently, in contract theories, for example, the society emerges out of a contract between transcendental individuals that exist logically prior to it.

In the Hegelian-Marxian political ontology the logical order of elements is different. The community, culture or society – in Hegel's terms *Geist* – is logically prior to any other notions, including that of the individual. An individual is not intelligible outside a socio-cultural context. The most interesting feature in the Hegelian-Marxian political ontology is, however, that in this political tradition community is conceived of as an individual, a mind, a knowing and willing subject. More specifically, it is conceived of as a Kantian self-reflective, self-legislative and self-governing subject. This kind of thought is present already in Rousseau's idea of *volonté générale*, and it informs Hegel's idea of state as a consciousness in search of self-consciousness, and reappears prominently in the Marxist idea of a totally self-governed social subject.

The two traditions differ significantly as to their conceptions of freedom. Liberty in liberal tradition is characterized by the Hobbesian metaphor of free motion of bodies in space. A free man, according to Hobbes, is someone who is able to make his decisions and to act according to his interest and will without external obstruction. Just as free bodies continue a steady motion in Newtonian space if nothing obstructs them, so, analogically, free individuals make choices according to their interest if nothing obstructs them. Freedom is basically the absence of obstacles.

In the German tradition the concept of freedom is based on Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy. Freedom has nothing to do with

the metaphor of free motion, instead it has a lot to do with morality. Kant conceives humans as inhabiting two empires: they are, on the one hand, creatures of nature and as such necessarily subject to the laws of nature just as other natural creatures. As natural creatures they follow their inclinations, drives, and natural impulses. On the other hand, humans differ from other creatures in that they are also capable of acting on other than natural motivations. They can deliberate their actions and are capable of moral decisions against their natural drives. Because of this capacity, Kant says, humans also inhabit another empire, the empire of freedom. Thus, in Kant's thought freedom is tightly connected with moral capacity, the capacity to legislate on oneself, to reflect on oneself, to control one's own actions morally. Freedom, in the tradition of German idealism, is not a capacity to follow one's will unobstructed but almost the opposite: the ability to control oneself morally.

A profound difference between the two traditions becomes evident in other central concepts too. Civil society in the Lockean tradition is characterized by liberty and it serves as the location of free moral-political initiative. It is defined against the state or government, which is always conceived of as a possible obstacle for liberty. The Hegelian-Marxian concept of civil society has been inspired by political economy and is defined in terms of necessity and lack of freedom. Moral and political action is not connected with the concept of civil society but instead with the concept of state. The state is conceived of as a self-commanding subject (thus by definition free) which also enables individuals to interactively control the culture (*Geist*) which constructs their individuality.

As profoundly different as the two traditions are in their conceptual framework and in their implications, they do have something in common: the conception of subject, self or agency as an autonomous, closed entity. In the liberal tradition this is the figure of a transcendently singular individual with interest and a capacity to choose, in the Hegelian-Marxian tradition the autonomous self-controlling communal subject. The idea of moral capacity residing in a core self is the common denominator in these two frameworks.

It is my contention that as an antifoundational mode of thought the postmodern entails genealogical questioning of this notion of the

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core self. This has far-reaching implications for both traditions of modern political theory because both of them privilege the figure of the subject. The postmodern problematizes the notional freely choosing individual and it problematizes the ideal of a self-determined autonomous community.

What would then be a genealogical way of understanding agency? It perceives a subject constructed entirely and constantly through power and without a core self. The main effect of this thought is that it destabilizes the determined/undetermined distinction.

As I mentioned, a common theme in the criticisms of postmodern thought in politics has been the fear of losing individually responsible moral capacity when the judging human being is understood as an effect of various powers and moral judgements are no longer explained as emanating from the basic core. This fear derives from a pointed juxtaposition of being autonomous and being determined or influenced from "outside".

But is it really possible to distinguish the human core from influences from "outside"? All through our lives we are drawn in to various power relationships which are supposed to build up our personality, parenting and schooling provides the most obvious examples. The differentiation between an individual core personality and "influences" gets at its most problematic on ethnicity and gender. How do you separate the "person" from the "influences" of being raised as a Navajo, a Frenchman, or a woman? These regimes of power, as Foucault would say, are constitutive to the person. And is not the moral capacity itself, in an individual, also constructed through power? The postmodern deconstructs both the individualized and the universalized "man" or "human" which is supposed to reside underneath the ethnic or gender differences and concentrates instead on effects of such powers as the colonizing power or the gendering power.

The idea of an essential human core has at least three problematic consequences. Firstly, is accountable for the universalizing gestures of the liberal tradition which are increasingly questioned in feminist and neocolonial theory. Secondly, it downplays the role of the powers connected with the construction of individuality. Thirdly, as Foucault's idea of all-pervasiveness of powers makes us aware

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of, it produces as an ideal of a powerfree situation which functions as a horizon in political thought. This unattainable state of total liberation, a complete absence of the contaminating touch of power appears both as an original starting point and as an utopic endpoint.

In the Hegelian-Marxian tradition the thought of an autonomous self produces the ideal of a society's total self-control which is related to the idea of there being a possibility of knowing the real will of the communal subject. The real core self of a society having achieved complete consciousness and knowledge of itself and therefore the ability to self-govern is the ideal shared by both the nationalist and socialist thought.

Jean-Francois Lyotard has worked on the Hegelian-Marxian ideal of self-governance. He is very apprehensive of the problematics imbedded in the Hegelian-Marxian tradition, that it induces the ones, who think that they know the correct will of the community also to think that they have the right to force others into it. Lyotard calls this phenomena, in the revolutionary tradition, with the metonymic name "terror".

Lyotard's suggestion is to deny the passage from knowledge to judgement in politics. In his view it is essential to renounce the existence of a core in the community-individual. He stresses that there is no core-self in the society to be revealed or to be known, and thus, a judgement in a political situation cannot be based on knowledge and analysis of it. A political judgement is always necessarily a judgement without definite criteria.

Both Foucault and Lyotard question the core of agency. Foucault's genealogy is relevant for rethinking the limits of liberal ontology and Lyotard's analysis for critically assessing the Hegelian-Marxian ontology without assuming the liberal one. Out of this questioning emerges an approach in political theory, which I call postmodern: one which refuses to believe in foundation. It looks for ways of understanding society and politics without the basic assumption of intrinsic freedom of individuals (since politics is always involved in the constitution of individuality) and of community as a subject.

The change in attitude may be described as a move away from modern utopias: the liberal utopia of complete freedom of power and the Hegelian-Marxian utopia of totally just self-governing soci-

ety. The postmodern means detachment from both of these utopias. It means a conception of politics divested of the thought of an endpoint that would provide all the right solutions. It means a conception of political space as a constantly agonistic situation with no definite right and wrong and no one right direction to go. It means a situation where there is awareness of power and where judgements are constantly made about what, here and now, is just and what is unjust. So it definitely is a conception of politics as a moral issue, but one without anybody knowing the right answers.

In conclusion, I see that the postmodern does have a meaning in political thought: it unsettles the ontological presuppositions of modern political traditions. Moreover, I believe that it is not incompatible with the possibility of moral-political judgement as feared, but on the contrary provokes political attitude, consciousness of power, and an alert mind to acknowledge difference in one's judgement. By the same token it avoids falling in the trap of either overlooking power or harbouring a fantasy of total control.

Notes

¹ This text is based on a presentation given at Reinhart Koselleck Seminar (University of Helsinki, November 24th 1995) on the central themes of my PhD thesis "The Postmodern and Political Agency".

² Published in English in the volume *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice. Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1988.

³ Tr. Walter Kaufmann & R.J. Hollingdale. New York: Vintage Books 1989.