

— Angela Dimitrakaki

FROM POST MODERNISM TO THE ALT-RIGHT

Notes on the Loss of Objective Reality

A NOTE ON ACTUALLY EXISTING TIME

Is there such a thing as the post-contemporary? The contemporary - ‘together with’ + ‘time’ - can be a noun or an adjective. When a noun, it means ‘one who lives the same time as another’ and marks a collectivity activated by a shared time of existence. When an adjective, it means ‘occurring, living, or existing at the same time, belonging to the same age or period’ but in everyday speech it describes ‘what is happening *now*, in this age and time’ and therefore denotes things, actions, agents that belong to the shared temporality known as ‘the present’. ‘The present’ is the *actually existing time* that we, as living beings, have at our disposal. ‘The present’ cannot be escaped. The present is where a concept such as ‘the post-contemporary’ can be generated in specific ideological conditions - in the very same conditions where historical accounts of the past and informed (or not) projections about the future get negotiated.

Yet even a tentative commitment to the existence of an objective reality, no matter how complex its definition might be, compels us to differentiate between how we approach the past and the future as temporalities that are, for different reasons, absent. To put it succinctly, the quality of absence is different in each case. The past

is a present-that-has-existed, the future is a present-to-be. The past is therefore much more tied to the concept of an objective reality; it can be excavated, even if it needs to be interpreted. The future can only be imagined, even if this act of imagining is necessarily located within an interpretative system and is not free-floating and value-free. Interpretative systems are always activated in the present as the actually existing time, even if they originate in the past and/or concern the future.



What follows in this short essay is predicated on a double premise: first, that interpretative systems can be antagonistic without being equal, in the sense that what leads an interpretative system to become prominent, and even hegemonic, and

another one to be marginalised is the objective reality as such in the conditions of the actually existing time; and, second, that any projection about the future should take into account not just the actually existing time but the past as a temporality that maintains closer links with the objective reality. This is why history as a human science becomes a terrain of struggle.

A NOTE ON THE ALT-RIGHT

In our present, in Earth Year 2021, there is a battle between interpretative systems. This can be said about any era of human history, to the extent such human history has been recorded. The question of science has been central to this battle. Science is connected to a question precisely because of its alleged connection to offering access to the objective reality. As recently put by earth scientist Julien Emile-Geay, 'This is what political choice has turned to in 2020: a referendum on objective reality'.¹ Emile-Geay said this as a commentary on the then upcoming US election of 2020, where one contender, President Trump, had in mid-September 2020 not just denied climate change (as he always does) but also declared 'I don't think science knows actually'.² Trump represents a growing segment not just of American, but of the global population for whom either science is not capable of explaining an objective reality or an objective reality does not exist. The wealth of conspiracy theories noted in relation to Covid-19 is merely an indication of a developing 'political unconscious', to borrow Fredric Jameson's seasoned phrasing, that threatens to become the dominant ideology of our present, of our 'contemporary'.³ This is the ideology of the alt-right - a right that is deemed 'alternative' precisely because it can pull support from across the political spectrum rather than rely on the traditional guardians of the pillars of the *status quo*. (The relationship of the alt-right to the 'fascist matrix' has been the subject of debate, but the fact that fascism is also not relying (exclusively) on the traditional guardians to defend the very foundations of the order but is self-fashioned, when it suits, as anti-systemic should give us a clue.⁴) The question I want to pose is how this dominant-ideology-in-progress, at the centre of which we find the denial of, or at least scepticism about, the existence of an objective reality came about. Is there anything objective that can be said about that? How did the evolution of the history of ideas turn so as to land us in a historical moment where all interpretations of the present

are deemed at best equivalent and at worst subjective?



A NOTE ON THE RELATIONSHIP OF TWO IDEAS: POSTMODERNISM AND GLOBALISATION

Although a long story should be told in answer to the above questions, my proposed short-cut is that the alt-right is but the evolution of postmodernism, a cultural narrative that had relativism at its core, and that was of salient significance for the ideological outcome of the Cold War. At least in the art history of the contemporary - that is, the art history that refers to developments since the 1960s - postmodernism, exported on a global scale by the West (a term which conceals the ties of a territory to the birth of capitalism), is rarely discussed as a Cold War weapon. As references to postmodernism became less fashionable after 1989, when 'globalisation' came to the fore, art history on the left opted to quickly bury the concept that was itself seen as the grave of so-called 'grand narratives'. The move was understandable, and yet it has so far resulted in foreclosing a critical examination of the role played by postmodernism in the trajectory of dominant ideology in the past half century, from the perceived defeat of May '68 (and overall, the historic compromise of the western working class marking that era) to the rise of the alt-right. This period has been the evolving 'contemporary' of contemporary art and theory.

To begin situating postmodernism within the Cold War suffice perhaps to say that

postmodernism signified ‘freedom’ in the 1970s and 1980s in a way that far surpassed the strategic potential of Abstract Expressionism – a mere art movement, after all, and one from before ‘the contemporary’ came into being, whereas postmodernism was an entire cultural narrative, a mentality, a sensibility shaped as a response to the presumed license of signs to mean whatever and move wherever, both of which depended on the observer. Postmodernism was an extreme banalisation of the theory of relativity in the field of culture, but this is less important than the fact that all art scenes wanted suddenly to be postmodern, and especially those that identified as ‘peripheral’. Postmodernism’s hegemony in those decades can be appreciated only if we apprehend the desire for postmodernism beyond the core of the West (and especially America) which exported it.

In the mid 1980s, American art historian Hal Foster had raised important questions about postmodernism’s political allegiances which are now largely forgotten. Although he proposed a distinction between ‘bad’ (reactionary) and ‘good’ (attending to emancipatory demands) postmodernism, he held serious doubts about this proposition.

‘[...] do these opposed practices of textuality and pastiche differ in any deep *epistemic* way? Whatever else is claimed for them, is not the subject decentred, representation disentranced, and the sense of history, of the referent, eroded in both? [...] If this is the case, then the neoconservative ‘return’ to the subject, to representation, to history may be revealed – historically, dialectically – to be one with the poststructuralist ‘critique’ of the same. In short, pastiche and textuality may be symptoms of the same ‘schizophrenic’ collapse of the subject and of historical narrativity – as signs of the same process of reification and fragmentation under late capitalism. And if these two models of



postmodernism, so opposed in style and politics, are indeed historically one, then we need to consider more deeply what (post)modernism might be [...].⁵

Foster feared that postmodernism was fundamentally reactionary. Even if this required further elaboration, the ‘freedom’ of the sign registered as symbolic of capitalism’s usurpation of ‘freedom’ at large, and its reduction to discursive pluralism in the late bourgeois democracies. It is in this context of liberalism where the alt-right flourished. More importantly however, the freedom of (re)signification became the springboard for the ideological interchangeability that marks the alt-right.⁶ I am not arguing that this evolution of postmodernism could have been foreseen, though one way of describing the alt-right could be that it is postmodernism finally becoming not just public, but popular. It wasn’t always so. As Imre Szeman had once seen the matter:

‘Postmodernism was never a public concept in the way that globalization has turned out to be. The postmodern, appearing only occasionally in an article on the design of a new skyscraper or in sweeping dismissals of the perceived decadence of the contemporary humanities, never made anything more than a tentative leap from universities to the pages of broadsheets. By contrast, globalization is argued for by the World Bank [...] it constitutes official state policy and is the object of activist dissent: the Zapatistas did not rise up against postmodernism, nor was it the preponderance of self-reflective, ironic literature in bookstores that brought anarchists into the streets of Genoa.’⁷

That could indeed be said back in 2010. People did rise up against globalisation, but not against postmodernism. In a way, this continues to be the problem: that people are *still* not rising up against postmodernism. This is where the similarities between the last quarter of the 20th century and the first quarter of the 21st century stop. For in the latter, postmodernism congealed into the political unconscious of relativism, consequently becoming hard to detect and

settling as a revamped ‘anything goes’ (do we remember Lyotard?) on the platforms of digital democracy. Szeman’s assessment that ‘there is more in the concept of globalisation than there ever was with postmodernism’ is a moot point in 2021. In fact, postmodernism mutated into a political unconscious within, and *because of*, the conditions set by globalisation.

Szeman concludes: ‘Even if both concepts function as periodizing terms for the present, globalization is about blood, soil, life, and death in ways that postmodernism could only ever pretend to be.’⁸ This apprehension of the relationship between globalisation and postmodernism should now be amended. It is true that globalisation is about blood, soil, life and death, which means that it is in the realm of material conditions. If postmodernism is not there however, this is not because it has been overcome by history but because it never was there in the first place. Postmodernism was from the outset a *super-structural* effect - in the sense that Marx once regarded the distinction between base and superstructure in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*.⁹ It is perhaps apt to revive this theoretical schema: globalisation (a liberal concept occluding the fact that it was specifically neoliberal capitalism, its socio-economic divides and dead-ends that went global) as the ‘base’ of the material conditions engendered postmodernism as a hegemonic cultural narrative - a narrative of, and about, the superstructure, complete with an epistemological apparatus that pushed against anything ‘fixed’ and ‘stable’ - as if social and cultural processes necessarily lacked duration and durability; as if changes in the ‘text’ (an in/famous protagonist of postmodern aesthetics) was all that emancipatory movements should care for. Anyone familiar with the feminist art historical texts of the heyday of postmodernism would be conversant, for instance, with their profound antipathy towards the fixity of meaning and with the adoption of psychoanalysis as an analytical tool - one capable of stressing the instability of processes that produced the gendered subject, which were seen to give hope about the latter’s transformation. (Of course, human life,

including women’s lives, proved too short to witness change at a scale that we might see in terms of an ‘exit from patriarchy’ by any stretch of the imagination, but let us not dwell in that.) The reference to feminism figures as a mere example - indeed one that used to signify ‘good’ (or ‘critical’) postmodernism: figurations of postmodernism that extended, often without acknowledgement, the radical political impetus to emancipation encountered in modernity, even if the latter was fraught with contradictions.¹⁰ Yet, the reference to the base-superstructure schema comes with a caveat. For postmodernism, seen as superstructural effect, appeared as a cultural dominant *before* the material conditions of globalisation appeared in full bloom - since this happened only after 1989. In some ways, postmodernism was articulated as an ideological prefiguration of what matured after the end of the Cold War. Did postmodernism function as the preparatory normalisation of the acceptance of the emergent socio-economic order? Was, in other words, postmodernism a necessary ideological passage? Was it an indispensable myth for a social truth in the making that had to be concealed as, precisely, a truth? And how can such a hypothesis be rescued from the realm of conspiratorial thought and be introduced to the realm of dialectical thought?

A NOTE ON THE CONTEMPORARY

The relationship of postmodernism to globalisation is key to understanding how the antagonism between interpretative frameworks is shaping today - an antagonism that, given bourgeois democracy’s punitive demarcation of revolution as largely terrorism, impacts the future of politics as such. This is not a matter of political aesthetics, but saying that hardly means that political aesthetics would not have an important role to play in the constitution of an antagonism which ultimately affects all that matters, from the so-called biblical (climate change) to the so-called trivial (production and reproduction in households). The emergence of neoliberalism in the 1970s, in the Pinochet experiment, already demonstrated the links between authoritarianism and capital’s needs

right as postmodernism was gaining conceptual ground. This link went undetected in western art history, which attached itself to postmodernism as ‘the new’. The development of globalisation (the globalisation of neoliberalism) since the 1990s has been associated with the rise of authoritarianism – a connection that, in the past few years, has been impossible to miss.¹¹ The mutation of the postmodern license into the alt-right is the ideological framework underpinning this trajectory – sustaining a politically necessary interpretative context where belief has replaced argument, and where the conflation of ‘systemic’ and ‘anti-systemic’ prevails. If the risks appear obvious for our ‘contemporary’, the contribution of the liberal art field to this predicament is less so. The proposition put forward here is that a critical historiography unpacking the connection between postmodernism, globalisation and the alt-right in its ascent as a new hegemony is essential for learning from the objective reality of our yesterday. And we must learn fast.

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2. Ibid. President Trump’s quote comes from an exchange about the California wildfires. Excerpt: Trump interrupted an official, Wade Crowfoot, the secretary of California’s Natural Resources Agency, to argue the climate “will start getting cooler, you just watch”. Crowfoot responded: “I wish science agreed with you.” To which Trump retorted: “I don’t think science knows actually.” Crowfoot later tweeted: “It won’t actually get cooler, Mr President,” alongside a temperature graphic.”
3. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Cornell University Press 1981.
4. See Olivier Doubre, ‘Mutations of Fascism: An Interview with Enzo Traverso’, *Verso Blog*, 28 February 2017, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3112-mutations-of-fascism-an-interview-with-enzo-traverso>, accessed 19 November 2020.
5. Ibid, p. 132.
6. For a discussion of this, see Angela Dimitrakaki, ‘Left with TINA: Alienation and Anti-communism’, *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 31 (2019): 25–48.
7. Imre Szeman, ‘Globalization, Postmodernism and (Autonomous) Criticism’ in Imre Szeman et al, eds, *Cultural Autonomy: Frictions and Connections*, UBC Press, Vancouver 2010, p. 71.
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9. See Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, London 1971, and, indicatively, given the rich debates in Marxism on the topic, Chris Harman, ‘Base and Superstructure’, *International Socialism* 2/32, Summer 1986, pp. 3–44 and Raymond Williams, ‘Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory’, *New Left Review* 1/82, Nov – Dec 1973, pp 3–16.
10. An interesting text on these contradictions is Perry Anderson’s ‘Modernity and Revolution’, *New Left Review* 1/144, March – April 1984, 96 – 113.
11. See *FIELD*, Issue 12 & 13 editorial, 2018, <http://field-journal.com/editorial/field-issue-12-13-editorial>, accessed 15 September 2020. The Editorial is by Grant Kester. See also the main essay of the project, Greg Sholette, ‘Optimism of the Will: 2018 *FIELD* Reports on the Global Resistance to Neoreactionary Nationalism’, <http://field-journal.com/editorial/optimism-of-the-will-2018-field-reports-on-the-global-resistance-to-neoreactionary-nationalism>, accessed 15 September 2020.

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