

The Postmodern Condition: I. A World of Paradox, Contradiction and Change

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What are the paradoxes, whip lashing contradictions and dizzying changes of which our world is made?

I cannot remember exactly when I first encountered the term postmodernism. I probably reacted to it in much the same way as I did to the various other "isms" that have come and gone over the past couple of decades, hoping that it would disappear under the weight of its own incoherence or simply lose its allure as a fashionable set of 'new ideas.' But it seemed as if the clamour of postmodernist arguments increased rather than diminished with time. Once connected with poststructuralism, postindustrialism, and a whole arsenal of other 'new ideas,' postmodernism appeared more and more as a powerful configuration of new sentiments and thoughts.

- David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*

As leaders we are entering a changing world of relationships and ideas. It is often called "the postmodern revolution." The postmodern world is in the midst of being born. It does not yet have clear definition, other than its origins in and difference from the modern era. Hence the name postmodern. It is still defined with reference to its mother (modernism) rather than having broken off as a free and independent movement or set of ideas and images with its own distinctive name. Even though postmodernism is young and therefore still filled with superficial, facile and often internally contradictory analyses, it cannot be dismissed, for these analyses offer insightful and even essential perspectives and critiques regarding an emerging era.

In the postmodern camp there is neither the interest in the systematic building of theory, nor the interest in warfare between competing paradigms. Rather everything is pre-paradigmatic, i.e. there is an attempt to live and function without the scaffolding of paradigms of thought. One of the reasons for such a divestiture is seemingly the sheer impossibility of "knowing." Tom Peters acknowledges that in the early 1980s he knew something about how organizations achieved excellence. By the late 1980s, he discovered that he was mistaken. Many of the excellent organizations of the early 1980s became troubled institutions by the late 1980s.

Other theorists and social observers have been similarly humbled by the extraordinary events of the 1980s and 1990s. They just haven't been as forthcoming (or opportunistic) as Tom Peters.

"Postmodernism at its deepest level," notes Andreas Huyssen, "represents not just another crisis within the perpetual cycle of boom and bust, exhaustion and renewal, which has characterized the trajectory of modernist culture." Rather, the postmodern condition "represents a new type of crisis of that modernist culture itself." Many futurists (especially those who focus on the environment) similarly speak of a crisis-of-crises. This crisis-of-crises and the ambiguity, the paradoxes and the irony that accompany this era of grand questioning are founded in the interplay between globalization and localization and, even more fundamentally, in the interplay between order and chaos as we are beginning to understand these two states.

A Fragmented, Paradoxical Image: Globalization and Localization

According to the postmodernists, our world is becoming progressively more global, while it is also becoming progressively more segmented and differentiated. Though many of the postmodernist theorists spoke of this contradictory trend in our world at least ten to fifteen years ago, it is remarkable how contemporary this perspective seems to be, given the developments in Europe (and elsewhere in the world) over the past decade. While European countries are moving toward a unified common market and community, we also see the movement (particularly in Eastern Europe) toward increased nationalism and factionalism among specific national, ethnic and racial groups.

Globalization is 'Alive and Well'

From one perspective, globalism thrives. Corporate executives worldwide share values and language more common to them than to the nations they hail from. Western business culture is studied and emulated in the remotest of regions, playing out the value systems of the first world with great

commercial success. And studies show that the world, by and large, likes the prospects of individual prosperity for which globalization seems to hold out hope.

We are increasingly successful in saying a few things that are universal for all people. Walter Anderson suggests a list of "ordinary ideas" that are held by most people in the world. The commonality arises in part from shared experiences, which in turn are the product of the electronically-mediated global community of which Marshall McLuhan spoke prophetically many years ago. We can create world-encompassing computer-based models that predict the flow of resources, the growth of population and the decay of our ecology with frightening accuracy. Similarly we can now trace worldwide trends in fashion, movies and other expressions of popular culture. This point is vividly confirmed seeing a young man in China or a young woman in Iraq, wearing a T-Shirt with a picture of an American sports hero or comic character, trying to either defy or defend a culture that is radically different from our own. We now have global life styles and intersect cultures that readily cross and borrow from many different societies and social values. The bohemian, international society of Paris during the 1920s is now replicated in many urban settings, ranging from Hong Kong and Singapore to London and even Moscow.

At a much deeper level, there is even the possibility (or is it only a hope?) that countries with differing levels of economic development are drawing closer. On the one hand, there is a growing awareness in at least some Western countries that non-European, non-Western cultures must be met by means other than conquest or domination. In the non-Western world on the other hand, there is growing recognition that issues of ecology and the environment are not just capitalistic or imperialistic artifacts, nor primarily a matter of politics. There is a deepening sense that the ecological perspective itself offers a penetrating critique of the modern way of life which the developing world both wants and does not want to embrace.

Localization is also 'Alive and Well'!

The picture gets more complex—and fragmented. New ways to divide the world are springing up. Robert Barnett is developing a cult following both among "the flags" (generals) and C-SPAN viewers, the crowd who gets its news "straight" and doesn't like what they perceive as the spin of other channels. Barnett sees the world breaking into "core" and "gap" countries, the first being largely democratic and not warring with each other, and the second representing countries with lower levels of education, GDP, women's rights and overall political participation. Are these two groups inevitably fated to collide in a "war of civilizations," as Barnett asserts and Samuel Huntington prophesied before 9/11?

Thomas Friedman similarly described the simultaneous strengthening of a global, high technology society (symbolized by the "Lexus" car) and a resurgence of nationalism and local traditions (symbolized by the "Olive Tree," a nurturing and nourishing symbol of belonging). He suggests that the contemporary political conflicts and threats of terrorism throughout the world can be attributed in the final analysis to the tension between these two contradictory forces, often played out within the same community and even within the same individual. Think of the global manager, who speaks English all day, video-conferences with colleagues all around the world, manages resources for the profitability of the firm, and then spends his evenings and vacations speaking his native tongue, participating in religious and ethnic communities that think and judge life from a very different perspective than his day-time environment.

In more recent years, Peter Drucker tried to make sense of this inter- play between globalization and segmentalization by focusing on the "growing incongruence between economic reality and political reality":

[B]usiness-and increasingly many other institutions as well- can no longer define their scope in terms of national economies and national boundaries. They have to define their scope in terms of industries and services worldwide. But at the same time, political boundaries are not going to go away. In fact, it is doubtful that even the new regional economic units, the European Community, the North American Free Trade Zone (NAFTA) or MercoSur, the proposed economic community in South America, will actually weaken political boundaries, let alone overcome them.

Drucker pushed the image of complexity and even contradiction further by suggesting that there are actually three overlapping spheres in our contemporary postmodern world:

There is a true global economy of money and information. There are regional economies in which goods circulate freely and in which impediments to the movement of services and people are being cut back, though by no means eliminated. And then increasingly there are national and local realities, which are both economic, but above all political. And all three [spheres] are growing fast. And businesses-and other institutions, for example, universities-have no choice. They have to live and perform in all spheres, and at the same time. This is the reality on which strategy has to be based. But no

management any- place knows yet what this reality actually means. They are all still groping.

Globalization author Stephen Rhinesmith warns that to operate globally, today's executive needs both a very high level of intellectual sophistication as well as an evolved capacity to work across cultures and in matrix structures, with reporting lines and conflict resolution processes that require continuous negotiation between remote teams and individuals.

We see the interplay between globalization and localization played out on a much smaller stage each day around the world. It is played out in the use of language. While English has become the language of global commerce and political debate, local languages have re-emerged in importance in many corners of the world. English is not the first language for most people; rather it is the third language -the first language being each person's local language (e.g. Taiwanese in Taiwan) and the second language often being the formal, national language (Mandarin in Taiwan).

Thus, while the postmodern world is noted for its diffuse boundaries, this new World Order is also composed of a set of discrete, competing entities whose clash of values and priorities will never allow global tranquility to exist. We have seen the reemergence of small nation-states and of nationalities within countries. While efforts are being made to bring people together and to minimize differences-as in the creation of a unified European Community- there is a simultaneous movement toward articulating and even exaggerating differences in religion, politics, culture and language. At the heart of this emphasis on differences and national character is the remembering of values and social purposes at both a national and organizational level. Does this emergence of a clear sense of distinctive intention-rising like a Phoenix from the ashes of the industrial modern era-portend the return to a pre-modern emphasis on the spiritual domain of organizational life?

We find this same interplay between globalism and localism manifest throughout American society. We know of the role of the United States as the single global power in the world today and of the struggles both within the United States and within virtually all other countries in the world to come to terms with this unique global condition. By contrast, we also know of the movement back to local community and to fundamental religious and ethnic values in contemporary American life.

Robert Bellah and his colleagues write about new forms of community that are to be found in the United States. In the modern world that we are leaving behind, men, women and children lived in small, geographically contained communities (villages, towns, small cities). According to Bellah, we now find

the postmodern community in "lifestyle enclaves." These enclaves are constituted of people who usually don't live near each other (except in the case of enclaves that are age-related, such as singles-oriented condos or retirement communities). Rather, members of the enclave share something that brings them together frequently or on occasion. These lifestyle enclaves may be found in Porsche-owner clubs or among those who regularly attend specific sporting events. They are also found among churchgoers and those who attend fashionable nightclubs. Regardless of the type of enclave that someone chooses, this enclave contributes to the diversity and ultimately the unpredictability of the larger social system of which the enclave's participants are members.

Interlocking Systems

Physical scientists have suggested several different labels for the diverse-diverging, interlocking and unpredictable-systems that Drucker and many postmodernists describe. Physical scientists would consider these systems to be chaotic. They are justifiably identified as chaotic because behavior inside each system and between systems is neither predictable nor readily described. In recent years, however, the term chaotic has been reserved for systems that are much less coherent and structured than the world political/economic system described by Drucker and the postmodernists. The three-sphere world of Peter Drucker is more accurately identified as a complex or turbulent system in which domains of order (the dynamics operating within any one of the three spheres) are intermixed with domains of chaos (the dynamics operating between the three spheres). Highly complex systems are perhaps even more difficult to comprehend than chaotic systems, given that they seduce us with moments of rationality and clarity only to dart away into other moments of insanity and confusion, when their orderly subsystems collide with each other.

This recognition of complexity in the contemporary world system—and the accompanying interplay between globalization and segmentalization—is perhaps most vividly represented in the attempts that have been made over the past four decades to create accurate computer-models of the economic, political and environmental dynamics of our world. Many of the high powered computer-models of our world (the models developed by Jay Forrester and his colleagues at M.I.T and Dartmouth College) have been highly successful in predicting and describing the general trends in our postmodern world. They have not been very successful, however, when it comes to predicting the precise impact of global events (such as the availability of food or temperature changes) on specific geographic regions or societies in the world. Global computer-based models have now generally been replaced by models that acknowledge broad worldwide dynamics, while also recognizing that each of these dynamics plays out

somewhat differently and at a different rate in each of several geographic regions of the world. While Forrester and his colleagues (notably Donella and Dennis Meadows) attempted to build a unified, world-based model of various ecological dynamics, Mesarovic and Pestel described and modeled a world in which subsystems offer their own distinctive, self-organizing dynamics.

We have been similarly unsuccessful in using global models to predict yet another complex and turbulent system-namely, the weather. We are not much better at making predictions than we were twenty or thirty years ago. Specific, localized aberrations or rogue events (what chaos theorists call "the butterfly effect") that can neither be predicted nor adequately described apparently have a major influence on the weather that occurs in other, remote parts of the world. In North America we have seen the influence of El Niño (a small body of water off the western Central America coast), much as we recently witnessed the impact which conflicts in very small countries (Kuwait, Kosovo) or a sexual misadventure (the Monica scandal) has had on the entire world community.