Leading into the Future VIII: Language and Segmentalism

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According to Andreas Huyssen, the postmodern world is a bit "softer" than the modern world.[i] It is less a world of facts and figures and more a world of story and performance. Martin Jay, an intellectual historian at the University of California, suggests that we are moving from a modern world that was primarily mediated by visual communication (descriptive writing, television, and movies) to a postmodern world that is once again (as in the premodern world) mediated primarily by auditory communication (speech, and narrative writing). We are moving from a world that uses metaphors of sight ("having a vision of a future world," "imagining an alternative") to metaphors of speech ("finding one's voice," "telling one's own story").

Language is Itself Reality

The postmodern literary critics who do *deconstruction* propose that language should gain primacy in the understanding of any text (be it literature, history or philosophy). Rather than (to use Polanyi's term) attending *from* the language used in any text, the deconstructionists attend *to* the language, thereby making the language being used much more visible than is typically the case in other forms of literary criticism. The deconstructionists (led by Derrida), believe that the language being used in a text is itself the reality rather than being the means by which some other reality (e.g. the reality of history or the reality of a literary figure) is described. Nothing exists on the page other than words and nothing exists in a spoken narrative other than the words being used to tell the story.

A shift from objectivity and vision to subjectivity and voice is prevalent in our postmodern world. In its embracing of a constructivist notion of reality, postmodernism takes a significant step in positing that language or, more generally the use of symbols and signs, is central. Language is not simply a handmaiden for reality, as the objectivists would suggest. Language is not a secondary vehicle that we must employ when commenting on the reality that underlies and is the reference point for this language. While objectivism is based on the assumption that there is a constant reality to which one can refer (through the use of language and other symbol/sign systems), constructivism is based on the

assumption that the mode and content of discourse is the closest thing we have to a reality. If reality is a social construction, then the language being used to describe this elusive and changing reality is itself a major source of this social construction.

The postmodernists often take this analysis one step further by proposing that language is itself the primary reality in our daily life experiences. Language begins to assume its own reality, much as money (and now credit cards, electronic transfers, options, and so forth) are perceived as real. Language, like money, ceases to be an abstract sign that substitutes for the "real" things of value. Money used to be a substitute for gold or property, now it is itself important. Similarly, language used to substitute for that which it denotated. Now it is important in and of itself. In the large and complex postmodern world, we are often distant from many of the most important events that impact on our lives: war, the death of significant others, the use of our money by the government (taxation). Living in a global community, we no longer have direct experience of, nor influence over, many of the things that were accessible when we lived in much smaller and more directly experienced communities. As a result, we often talk about things rather than actually experiencing them. We listen to a lecture on Asian art rather than actually seeing the art. Language itself becomes the shared experience. Conversation itself becomes the reality.

This may have always been the case, to some extent. We may only now be returning to a sense of reality that was inherent in the premodern world. Language and conversation may have always played a central role in our society. Who we are—our sense of *self*—may have always been conveyed by the stories that we tell about ourselves? Perhaps our stories about self themselves constitute our sense of self. Perhaps our stories about self are themselves what we mean by *self*. This would suggest that our stories about childhood, about major adult accomplishments, and about difficult lifelong disappointments may be the basic building blocks of self-image—whether or not they are accurate. Thus, we are not only influenced by a broad-based social construction of reality—which is conveyed through the stories of the society in which we find ourselves. We are also influenced by a more narrowly based personal construction of reality that is conveyed through stories we tell about ourselves (and perhaps stories that we inherit about our family and immediate community.)

One of the major implications of this notion of language as reality is that language and therefore reality is ephemeral. Once we have spoken, the reality that was created when we spoke, is no longer present.

Even if we say the same words, they are spoken in a different context, hence have somewhat different meaning. Thus, even when our "speaking" comes in the form of written words or in the form of other images (visual, tactile, etc.) these words or images will have different meaning. Meaning will shift depending on who hears them, what the setting is in which the communication takes place, and which words or images have preceded and will follow these efforts at communication. According to the postmodernists, therefore, reality is a shifting phenomenon that is subject to change and uncertainty. An entire field of study (hermeneutics) has emerged in recent years to bring some order and meaning to this very confusing state of affairs.

Globalization and Segmentalism

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 thirty years ago, it is remarkable how contemporary this perspective seems to be, given the developments in Europe, the Mid-East (and elsewhere in the world) over the past decade. While European countries are moving, in a globalizing manner, toward a unified common market and community, we also see the movement (particularly in the face of immigration from war-torn countries) toward increased nationalism and factionalism among specific national, ethnic and racial groups. In the Mid-East we see a similar sense of we versus they, with religious differences even within a single faith bringing about dangerous splits between countries and communities within a single country.

From one perspective, globalism thrives. We are increasingly successful in saying a few things that are universal for all people. Walter Truett Anderson suggests that the following list of "ordinary ideas" are held by most people in the world (or at least in the Western world):[ii]

- That there is a human species, all of its members biologically capable of interbreeding with all the others, but not with members of different species.
- That the world is divided up into nation-states.
- That there are such things as atomic weapons, and that a global atomic war is possible.
- That there are many different religions, and that some people do not take any of them very seriously.
- That societies change and keep changing.

The communality arises in part from shared experiences, which in turn are the product of the electronically-mediated *global community* of which Marshall McLuhan spoke prophetically over thirty years ago.[iii] We can create world-encompassing computer-based models that predicts the flow of resources, the growth of population and the destruction of our ecology with frightening accuracy.[iv] Similarly we can now trace worldwide trends in fashion, movies and other expressions of popular culture. This point is vividly confirmed in the specter of 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 lifestyles and many more *intersect cultures* that readily cross and borrow from many different societies and social values. The bohemian, international society of Paris during the 1920s has been 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 the Eastern and Western worlds are beginning to come together. There is a growing awareness, in at least some Western countries that, "cultures, non-European, non-Western cultures must be met by means other than conquest and domination."[v] In the Nonwestern world 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 world that the Eastern world both wants and does not want to embrace.

From a quite different perspective, the world seems to be highly segmented. We are becoming increasingly less successful in saying much that is generally valid about even our local communities or nation—let alone the world. We are confronted with discrepancies, diversity and unpredictability. Polarization exists throughout the world. Huyssen describes an "appropriation of local vernaculars and regional traditions" in postmodern societies.[vi] Robert Bellah and his colleagues have written about new forms of community that are to be found in the United States.[vii] In the modern world, men, women and children lived in small, geographically contained communities (villages, towns, small cities).

According to Bellah, they now find postmodern community in "lifestyle enclaves."[viii] 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, according to Bellah, share something in common 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.

Beginning in the 1990s, optimistic organizational gurus, such as Peter Drucker, have tried to make sense of this interplay between globalization and segmentalization by focusing on the "growing *incongruence* between economic reality and political reality":[ix] The world economy is increasingly becoming global. National boundaries are impediments and cost centers . . . [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 Economic 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 further noted that the predictions of a global community have been long-standing and inevitably inaccurate:[x] There has been talk about the "end of sovereignty" since well before 1918. But nothing has emerged yet to take the place of national government and national sovereignty in political affairs. In fact, since 1914, the trend has been toward increasing splintering. . . . Since 1950 one mini-state after the other has come into being, each with its own government, its own military, its own diplomatic service, its own tax and fiscal policy, and so on. So far there are no signs yet of any *global* institutions, not even in the economic sphere, for example, a global Central Bank controlling the totally reckless flows of money worldwide, let alone a global institution controlling tax and monetary policies worldwide.

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

> 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 anyplace knows yet what this reality actually means. They are all still groping.

Physical scientists have suggested several different labels for the diverse and unpredictable systems that Drucker and many postmodernists have described. Many physical scientists 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.

This recognition of complexity in the contemporary world system—and the accompanying interplay between globalization and segmentalization is perhaps most vividly demonstrated in the attempts that have been made over the past half century 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.[xii] 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.[xiii] 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.[xiv] We find this kind of modeling today in the forecasting of pandemic outbreaks. There is a general world-wide forecast of outbreak levels (and deaths) over an extended period of time, and then specific national (and even sub-national) forecasts that take into consideration political and cultural differences between countries.

Conclusion: Predicting the Butterfly

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 that we were twenty or thirty years ago.[xv] 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 Nino* (a small body of water off the western Central America coast), much as we have witnessed the impact which conflicts in very small countries have had on the entire world community. And a single instance of police brutality can create an international avalanche of protest. Are there many El Niño's that directly impact on our daily lives? Are there other influential events that are far removed and unknown (and perhaps unknowable) to us? We may be forced to live with (and acknowledge) the contradiction between globalism and localism in many aspects of our daily lives.

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Endnotes

[i] Huyssen (1987, p. 179)

[ii] Walter Truett Anderson (1990, pp. 21-22)

[iii] Marshall McLuhan (1964)

[iv] (Meadows, et al., 1972).

[v] Huyssen, 1987, p. 220).

[vi] Huyssen (1987, p. 187)

[vii] (Bellah, et al, 1985)

[viii] (Bellah, et al, 1985)

[ix] Peter Drucker, *Management Challenges for the 21st Century*, New York: HarperBusiness, 1999, p. 63.

[x] Peter Drucker, *Management Challenges for the 21st Century*, New York: HarperBusiness, 1999, pp. 63-64.

[xi] Peter Drucker, *Management Challenges for the 21st Century*, New York: HarperBusiness, 1999, p. 64.

[xii] (Meadows, et al., 1972).

[xiii] (Mesarovic and Pestel, 1974)

[xiv] Loye and Eisler, 1987, p.59).

[xv] (Gleick,1987).