

Leading into the Future X: Are We Post Post-Modernism?

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The inconsistency and fragmentation of the postmodern world make it very difficult to build a coherent theory or to recommend specific strategies or courses of action in response to this new societal condition. Each of the pressing themes of postmodernism that I have covered in previous essays in this series (constructivism, language as reality, globalism interwoven with segmentalism, and fragmentation) contribute to an even more basic theme that often makes the very analysis of the postmodern condition particularly difficult. In essence, it is virtually impossible to make a definitive statement about our contemporary world because this world is filled with contradictions and discrepancies (leading to what I have labeled VUCA-Plus in Essay IX). We are living in a world that is simultaneously premodern, modern and postmodern. For every new phenomenon that can be identified as postmodern, we can find another phenomenon that is clearly modern or even premodern.

Ironically, all of these diverse phenomena provide evidence of the universal presence of a postmodern world. The inconsistencies of the hypothesized postmodern era allow the postmodern analyst to never be proven wrong. Any data (other than absolute uniformity, which will never be the case) fit into the postmodern model. The more discrepant the data, the more confirming these data are of the postmodern hypothesis. Show me evidence of modernism and I will declare it to be amenable to my postmodern analysis. Show me premodern styles and forms, and I will be equally convinced that my postmodern hypothesis is correct. As in the case of a Freudian analysis of dreams, all evidence can be used in a way that confirms the initial hypothesis. Thus, in some ways, the world picture that is being conveyed by the postmodernists can't be disproved, for contradictory evidence is itself part of the postmodern premise.

An Incoherent and Edgy World

The postulation of a fragmented and inconsistent postmodern world, however, seems to be more than just a semantic or intellectual ploy to avoid any disproof of the postmodern perspective. There is ample evidence to suggest that this is a central (if not *the* central) ingredient of our contemporary world. The postmodern world is filled with fragmented and incoherent images of the future, as well as fragmented images of art, politics and the sciences. This is most concretely and perhaps clearly exemplified in the cavalcade of events that many of us experience as we transact our daily work. Several years ago, for

instance, I was walking down a street in an American city and passed a man with a flower in his lapel, who was tap-dancing and encouraging each of us who was passing by to “smile and be happy.” Twenty feet away was a second man with a sandwich board on his back that solemnly declared that humankind and the American government were irredeemably corrupt and that our world is about to come to an end. These two messages were received in a very confusing context.

Wealthy businessmen and businesswomen were walking rapidly past other men, women and children in torn clothes who were begging for money. Newspaper headlines spoke of candidates who no one wants to elect and of gross mismanagement of public and corporate funds. Yet, it was a beautiful day. The air was fresh because pollution control standards were beginning to work, and a group of concerned citizens have successfully restored a nearby park. Should I be happy? Should I be sad? Should I be angry? Is the world (at least as we know it) coming to an end? How did we ever come to a state where there is such a discrepancy in the living conditions of American citizens? These fragmented and contradictory images must either be ignored on a daily basis or somehow comprehended in a manner that makes sense to me and my fellow city-dwellers.

The fragmented and inconsistent image is also exemplified in the emergence of postmodern architecture. Whereas modern architecture tended to stress uniformity and order, the postmodern schools have emphasized diversity and complexity. Postmodern buildings in many cities blend classic, Greco-Roman columns and cornices, with clean modern lines and neo-Baroque decorations. Rough cement slabs are placed next to smooth marble walls and wood-inlaid ceilings. Water spills out over highly abstract brass forms, while tourists and workers on lunch break sit on 19th Century New England-style wrought-iron benches, watching brightly-colored balls roll through plastic tubes in order to set off quarter-hour chimes or bang against Japanese-style resonant wood blocks.

Corporations throughout the United States have built postmodern facilities in suburban areas that include lakes, beautiful grounds laced with walking and jogging trails, fitness centers, and gourmet luncheon rooms, usually intermixed with rather sterile-looking concrete buildings filled with confining cubicles and mauve or gray colored, modularized furnishings. Optimistically, we are told that a new era of more user-friendly office buildings has come. An article from *Fortune* magazine of the early 1990s (November 18, 1991, pp. 141-142) offered this glowing report:

Unlike most office parks built in the past three decades -- anonymous-looking blocks of steel and glass, many of them Darth Vader black—the new suburban complexes will be designed on a smaller, more human, even homey, scale. Often, they will resemble farms or college campuses.

Since this time, the theme of “park” and “campus” has become even more prevalent—with many corporations defining their grounds as “campuses”. It is noteworthy that one major high-tech corporation (Oracle) even turned a theme park into their corporate headquarters in Silicon Valley.

The people who fill these urban and suburban buildings are equally diverse with regard to gender, age, nationality, and physical challenges—as are their customers. Members of the organization even participate in a variety of premodern celebrations—company-wide Christmas and Hanukkah gift giving, Fourth of July picnics, and departmental birthday parties. Yet, in true postmodern fashion, one wonders to what extent the premodern celebrations are a bit phony, and even more importantly to what extent there really is postmodern equity and equal access among these people to the career opportunities of this organization. A postmodern canopy of diversity often seems to be draped over a very modern and WASPish culture of privilege and discrimination.

At an even deeper level, one wonders if this fragmentation and inconsistency—and the accompanying edginess—are temporary. Does postmodernism suggest that we are in a major transition between a modern society and some new society that has not yet become clear or at least been properly named? Alternatively, is the postmodern world in which we now live a rather long-lasting phenomenon? We may be moving into a fragmented world that will not readily change. We may never (at least in our lifetime) be able to return to a world of greater simplicity. Regional or national coherence and consistency may be a nostalgic remnant of the past.

Images of the Future

The implications of a long lasting fragmented and inconsistent society are great. The remarkable futurist, Fred Polak (1973) proposed almost 50 years ago that the continuation of any society depends in large part on the presence in this society of a sustaining and motivating image of its own collective future. For instance, European communities thrived for many centuries under a clearly articulated, Christian-based image of personal and collective salvation. Similarly, many Asian countries have been guided for many centuries by a coherent set of propositions about the nature of the world and society that were offered by Confucius (or the Buddha). According to Polak, when a society has lost an image of its future, then this society will soon crumble. A new society will rise in its place that does have a clear

and guiding sense of some collective future. Polak assembled an impressive display of historical facts and figures to buttress his argument.

If Polak is correct, then one wonders about the survival of our fragmented and inconsistent postmodern societies. Where do we find the clear and coherent images to guide us in preparing for our own collective future? Will we lose our way and our vitality at this critical point in our history? Perhaps Pollack is only partially correct. We may find that many small “micro-communities” will be formed, each with its own image of the future and its own sustaining vision of what is the proper order for society. If this is the case, then the question shifts slightly. Can our world continue to exist in such a fragmented state? What will prevent these micro-communities from constantly being in conflict regarding the validity and universality of their own visions? To what extent are the unending conflicts in the Middle East a preliminary vision of an emerging neo-feudal world?

Concluding Comments

Any obvious answers to the questions posed by Polak and his societal critique diminish the important and profound nature of his analysis. We will not, therefore, attempt to provide this kind of answers. What we can offer in this series of essays are several preliminary suggestions concerning not only how our postmodern world is likely to be manifest in organizational settings, but also what a post postmodern world might look like and what actions those leading into the future might take to address the deeply-embedded problems of fragmentation and potential dissolution.

These matters are not easy to assimilate—as one of my students candidly noted several years ago:

For me, as well as most present generation managers, postmodern theory has a rather disconcerting feel to it. We have been schooled in modern theories that are strongly grounded in systems approaches, scientific methods, and the benefits of increasing efficiency. Postmodern theory, though not invalidating these concepts, holds that they are only part of the solution to the social and economic work that organizations are formed to do. The modern manager sees systems as the ultimate tool for making sense out of chaos. The postmodern manager sees chaos as what is to be managed and systems though very useful as merely one aspect of the chaotic environment. To the postmodern manager chaos is not bad. It is what is.

Hopefully, those of the mid-21st Century, who are leading (and learning) into the future, will find the order that underlies much of the chaos in contemporary organizations. If these leaders are to learn into the future, they will have to be intellectually honest—which means they will have to acknowledge the

chaos that inevitably underlies much of the apparent order to be found in contemporary organizations. This will take courage and even a bit of bold action in the midst of VUCA-Plus (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity, turbulence and contradiction).

Reference

Polak, Fred (1973) *Image of the Future*. Cambridge, CA: Elsevier Scientific Publications.