"FORGET POSTMODERNISM:

BRUNO LATOUR'S

NOUS N'AVONS JAMAIS ÉTÉ MODERNES"

Given the proliferating literature on postmodernism, one might think that all the changes on the subject had been rung. Such an assumption would underestimate the creative capacity of French philosophers. Bruno Latour's *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes: Essai d'anthropologiesymétrique* (Paris: Editions la Decouverte, 1991) manages to turns the discussion inside out by challenging a central assumption shared by friend and foe of postmodernism alike.

The contemporary conversation between postmodernists, modernists, and anti-modernists does not simply date back to Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1979, English translation 1984). Today's discussants, although they may not realize it, are engaged in a second generation of reflection on this issue. Several thinkers in the late 1800's and the early 1900's believed that they were witnessing as momentous a transition as that from the Middle Ages to Modernity.

Arnold Toynbee, who coined the term, identified the "post-Modern Age" as beginning with the end of the 19th century, dominated by the European middle class, and the beginning of the 20th by which time a large industrial working class had emerged (Toynbee, p. 338). Nikolai Berdiaev believed that Modernity would be succeeded by a new Middle Ages (Berdiaev, ch. 2). C.E.M. Joad summarized the climate of opinion when he declared that "we have come, we feel, to a definite break in the tradition of our civilization. The nineteenth century was the end of an epoch: we, it is increasingly evident , are at the beginning of another" (Joad, p. 24).

The sentiment of transition was not unique to philosophers. As the 19th century neared its end, George Bernard Shaw asserted that Ibsen's *A Doll's House* signalled an important turning point. Nora's

departure, he claimed, was more "momentous than the cannon of Waterloo...for when the patriarch no longer rules, and the 'breadwinner' acknowledges his dependence, there is an end to the old order..." (G.B. Shaw, p. 143). The works of Nikos Kazantzakis result from his agonizing over what it meant to live in a transitional age. Closer to the present, Walker Percy's novels were premised on the belief that modernity, which could be called the "Secular Era," had come to an end with the catastrophes which marked the first half of the 20th century (Percy, p. 114).

The fascination with endings that occupied these individuals was often linked to a hopefulness about the role of the philosopher in articulating the transformation into a new epoch. By contrast, the second half of the 20th century saw the rise of a new generation, influenced by the critiques of Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger. This newer generation tends to take a more skeptical view of professional philosophy's role. Richard Rorty epitomizes the latest stage with his assurance that post-Enlightenment culture "would contain nobody called 'the philosopher'" (Rorty, p. xxxix). It is these thinkers who usually come to mind when discussing postmodernism. They begin by rejecting the Enlightenment project of apodictic knowledge based on pure reason. Their writings tend to emphasize play, the rejection of absolutes, and the irrecusable multiplicity of perspectives that mark human life.

Such a view is not universally adopted. The latest generation also includes those who are reluctant to accept postmodernism. It is still possible in the late 20th century to find someone who looks longingly and gratefully not to a Nietzsche, but to a St. Benedict, as does Alasdair MacIntyre. Still others, like Hilary Putnam and Jurgen Habermas wish simply to reform modernity, not break with it.

Despite the diversity of positions, the participants in this conversation share one belief. Together, they can chant the same refrain: "Modern we once were." Postmodernists add a stanza: "Modern we once were; postmodern we will become." Opponents of postmodernism add their own stanzas: "Modern we once were; to the premodern we seek a return" is one; "Modern we once were; Modern we should remain" is another. Latour's voice is significant because he wants to alter not the second, but the first stanza. His contribution: deny the central assertion common to everyone else and claim that "We Have Never Been Modern."

At first glance, something seems very wrong with this title. As we examine the period between the Renaissance and World War I, it would be hard to claim that there was nothing distinctive about European civilization. The triumph of the subject, the transformation of enchanted nature into dead matter, colonization, belief in progress, Galilean science, and the Enlightenment mark off European civilization as unique in a way usually associated with the adjective "Modern." Here is where a philosophical penchant for distinctions helps Latour. European thinkers did construct what he calls a modern "Constitution" built around a "great partition" between humans and nature. This Constitution parcelled out citizenship into two main categories, "subject" and "object."

In so doing, it organized two different judicial realms, that of "nature," a material world independent of humans, and that of "culture," a social world created by humans. The aim of such a separation was the creation of two new, distinctly modern, realms. They would be "modern" because the pre-modern elements of superstition, tradition, myth, and prejudice would have been eliminated. These "superstitious" elements, mixing together gods, humans, natural forces and ancestral customs, had led to overly rigid constraints: belief in a fickle, anthropomorphized nature on the one hand; and a society suffocating in the closed world of convention on the other.

The modern Constitution stipulated that citizens were to begin all inquiries with a ritual cleansing, an eliminative activity Latour names "purification." Political theorists were not to remain rooted in the traditions, historical limitations, and customs of the past. Their task, rather, was to construct a political order based on a properly purified reason. Scientists were not to contaminate themselves by involvement and participation in nature's processes. The purified view, the key to the advancement of science, demanded a specific stance toward nature: that of an objective spectator.

Such, according to Latour, was the modern project, the intellectual field within which, with varying degrees of faithfulness, the philosophers of the modern age played their games. That something like the modern Constitution did exist, he does not doubt. What he asks of his readers, though, is that, instead of paying attention to modernity's rules and laws, we pay attention to its practices. Here, he argues, we will find a situation quite unlike the dominant ideology. While purification based on the bifurcations into subject and object, culture and nature was the

ideal, the actuality was quite different. It was dominated, as human practice has always been dominated, by the decidedly un-pure, mongrelized epistemological outcomes that Latour calls "hybrids" or "quasi-objects."

Living in the last decades of the 20th century gives us an advantage for understanding "quasi-objects." More and more we are confronted with phenomena which do not fit the purist categories of subject or object, nature or culture. Global warming and ozone depletion are two examples cited by Latour. These result from interactions between the cultural and the natural. Neither purely "subjective" nor isolatedly "objective," they are best describe as "hybrids" or "quasi-objects." This contemporary clue occasions a re-thinking of the entire epistemological field. Such a re-thinking leads to the recognition of just how prevalent are "hybrids." Latour gives examples:

> Non seulement la pompe à air, mais aussi les microbes, l'électricité, les atomes, les étoiles, les équations du second dégré, les automates, et les robots, les moulins et les pistons, l'inconscient et les neurotransmetteurs (p. 147).

The sharp split between scientists who merely "discover" truths of nature, and political reformers who "invent" novel social ideas cannot hold once the modern Constitution is exposed as spurious. Here Latour echoes a theme that has become part of the intellectual landscape in the second part of our century, whether in Gadamerian hermeneutics or post-Kuhnian philosophy of science. But such themes were familiar also to the turn-of-the-century generation. Peirce's semiotic with its emphasis on mediation, and Dewey's insistence on the "accrual" of forms to materials within inquiry, could, without much difficulty, be retranslated in terms of "quasi-objects." Pragmatists had already grasped the fact that we live, have always lived, in what Latour calls the "l'Empire du milieu" (70) characterized by pervasive mediation and the proliferation of "hybrids."

If we have never been modern, what are we to make of those who embrace postmodernity? Latour's answer is that postmodern thinkers do little to challenge the modern Constitution. Indeed, they reinforce it with an important amendment: the privileging of discourse. Here too is a purified realm which, following De Saussure, exists independently from reference to external nature. The privileging of discourse neither mitigates nor challenges the purificatory mandate of the modern Constitution. That mandate is, instead, strengthened. The re-vitalized purifica-

tory mandate also leads philosophers to view themselves primarily in terms of critique and denunciation. Those who live under the modern Constitution see contamination everywhere. Their zeal becomes focused on debunking, on seeking to overcome prejudices and superstitions. Such missionary zeal abates, however, with the realization that we have never been modern.

> Nous n'entrons pas dans une nouvelle ère; nous ne continuons plus la fuite éperdue des post-post-post-modernistes; nous ne nous accrochons plus à l'avant-garde de l'avant-garde; nous ne cherchons plus à être encore plus malins, encore plus critiques, a creuser encore un peu davantage l'ère du soupçon (69).

Postmodernists do signal an important change, however. Their presence marks the termination of a particular way of thinking, a way which sought always to move beyond the past.

> Loin d'être le fin du fin, ils marquent la fin des fins, c'est-à-dire la fin des façons de finir et de passer qui faisaient se succéder à une vitesse toujours plus vertiginieuse des critiques toujours plus radicales et plus révolutionnaires (83-84).

The great irony here is that engaging in more radical and more revolutionary critiques is a thoroughly modern enterprise. Postmodernism's tendency to extend criticism to the very roots of philosophy, its claim that we have entered a new post-Philosophical epoch, are sure signs that it remains loyal to the modern Constitution. Regardless of its influence in departments of literature, "le postmodernisme est un symptôme et non pas une solution fraîche" (68).

How are to judge Latour's analysis? Surely those inclined to favor the likes of Derrida, Rorty, Lyotard, and Baudrillard will object that Latour has not painted postmodernism with a fine brush. Instead he has used a large brush that eliminates nuances and differences. He has, they will complain, first painted a caricature , and then criticized it.

While this may be true, he has at least challenged philosophers to re-think the nature of their discipline away from the model of denunciation and critique which does dominate much postmodern writing. Here, in spite of the caricatures of postmoderism, is a challenge to be taken seriously as philosophy looks for ways to define itself in the twenty-first century.

Other critics of Latour might want to ask whether he has done anything more than exemplify the general claim that no era is either fully self-conscious or consistent? Could we not say that the medievals were not really medieval nor the Romantics really Romantic in the sense Latour intends by his thesis? Is it not the case that every epoch reveals a gap between its Constitution and its practice? In a sense the answer is yes. Each epoch has its unspoken, unchallenged assumptions which later historians bring to light. Latour, however, wishes to undertake a different project.

The gap he identifies between theory and practice is not focused on identifying unrecognized presuppositions of the past. His more important aim is to encourage us to reconsider the very way in which we understand time and history. Admitting that we have never been modern provides a more generous way of dealing with the past. No longer need we make a fetish out of being more radical or more critical. Modernity, as Latour put it, tended toward "la réduction de l'être au *novum*" (100). Our very identity depended on marking ourselves off from our predecessors.

Once we realize that we have never been modern, we can view time, not as a line, but as a circle expanding in every direction. Such a view eliminates the oscillation between the extremes of radical novelty and eternal return. "Le passé n'est pas dépassé, mais repris, répété, entouré, protégé, recombiné, réinterprété et refait." (102) Our activities remain what they have always been, not modern, but "polytemporal." This more bountiful way of interpreting time allows us to engage in constructive and synthetic work without having to identify radical beginnings, our own or anyone else's.

Latour seems particularly on target here. One dominating metaphor of modernity was that of the *tabula rasa*, what we might call the myth of the completely fresh start. Descartes announced it in his *Discourse*. Bacon proposed it via the propadeutic of eliminating the "four idols." Locke made it a centerpiece of epistemology. Politically, the fable of the state of nature was an attempt to clear away obstacles to reform by recreating a fictional, pristine realm. When Freud came up with his Oedipus Complex, what sounded like a breakthrough in the understanding of the human psyche was nothing but the crystallization of an attitude that had been prominent throughout modernity: the only way to establish ourselves as special involves killing off the father, making a clean break with our ancestor.

Latour's analysis is helpful in orienting ourselves toward a central ontological question that underlies this mythos of modernity: the particular understanding of time which opens into a definition of being in terms of novelty. We recover our sense of being non-modern or a-modern when we see ourselves as "polytemporal." There is no need to preserve the false dichotomy of modernity, either the embrace of sheer novelty which leads to constant critique and denunciation, or an antiquarianism which seeks to re-create the past.

We should, instead, see ourselves as what we are, what we have always been, "des échangeurs et des brasseurs de temps" (103). The real question is never how we should break with the past nor how we should recapture its greatness. It is always how we should tinker with our own era, patching it together as a combination of tradition and novelty.

The challenge of the 21st century then becomes not so much the ever more zealous desire to overcome and break with the past. It is, rather, the attempt to live fully in the present by re-establishing our condition as non-modern, aligning our intellectual convictions with our practices.

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