

## Book review

David Harvey, 1989, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Blackwell Publishing.

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### Introduction

David Harvey's well-known work *The Condition of Postmodernity*, first published in 1989, elucidates the concepts of modernity and postmodernity from wide-ranging political, cultural, and social perspectives. The author attempts to logically trace the links and processes that have allowed modernity to transform into the condition of postmodernity. His main argument is that the effects of the "compression of space and time" on society are the main cause of this transformation. Although the work came to public view about a quarter century ago, I think that its main argument is very applicable to this age, where we see the rapid progress of information technology radically compress our "space and time," and hence, I believe it is necessary to review this book. As a student of sociology with Mongolian nationality, the questions raised in this work about modernity and postmodernity are especially relevant. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, The Mongolian nation has been experiencing radical changes, more so than developed countries such as Japan. This article reviews Harvey's work and reevaluates its relevance in our information age from the perspectives of an aspiring Mongolian sociologist.

## Summary

David Harvey is currently professor of Anthropology and Geography at the City University of New York. Among the numerous books he has written, *Social Justice and the City*, *Limits of Capital*, and *Spaces of Hope* are the most notable. The book *The Condition of Postmodernity* is a materialist critique of postmodernity that suggests the ideas and arguments associated with this period actually emerged from contradictions within capitalism itself.

The book consists of four parts. Part One “The passage from modernity to postmodernity in contemporary culture,” deals with the process that culture underwent from one period to the other. He raises the question of whether we are truly living in a new period or if it is just another fashionable concept. To make it easier for us to answer this question, he starts by highlighting two examples, namely Jonathan Raban’s *Soft City*, and the photographs of Cindy Sherman. Raban in *Soft City* rejected the thesis of a city being neatly stratified by occupation and class, and falling victim to totalitarianism, but rather sees it as a place of wide-spread individualism and entrepreneurialism where people are relatively free to act as, and become what they please. “Personal identity had been rendered soft, fluid, and endlessly open” to the exercise of the will and the imagination. Therefore, the city is soft, amenable to variety of lives, dreams, and interpretations, but these qualities also cause it to be especially vulnerable to psychosis and the totalitarian nightmare. Harvey agrees with Raban and states that *Soft City* should not be read as an anti-modernist argument but as a vital affirmation that the postmodern moment has arrived.

Harvey also quotes other writers who describe modernity as positivistic, technocentric, rationalistic, and progressive, coupled with a belief in absolute truth and standardization of knowledge and production, while Postmodernity is seen as privileging heterogeneity and valuing differences

as liberative forces in the redefinition of cultural discourses. Fragmentation, indeterminacy, and intense distrust of all universal or “totalizing” discourses are the hallmarks of postmodernist thought. Next, to help us grasp the processes that led to the development of postmodernity, he goes on to describe the meaning of the term “modern” more deeply, by looking at its historical use from the age of Enlightenment up to the anti-modern movement of 1960s. He then summarizes the current narratives surrounding postmodernism, citing architectural examples to give the reader a more fine-grained understanding of what this term entails. He describes fiction, fragmentation, collage, eclecticism, a sense of ephemerality, and chaos as the main features of not only postmodern architecture and urban design, but also art literature, social theory, psychology, and philosophy.

The first part ends with a connection being made between modernization and Marx’s argument about capital and profit, and the division and alienation of labor. New trends associated with capitalist production, such as urban organization, the fluidity and ephemerality of corporate location and the constant drive to increasingly rationalize production are also mentioned. Finally, the possible pros and cons of postmodernity are proposed: the pros being the concern with differences, complexities and nuances of interests and cultures, and the reflective qualities of social, political, and economic practices of society, while the cons include deconstruction almost to the point of nihilism, and a preference for aesthetics over ethics.

The second part of the work concentrates on the political—economic transformation of late twentieth-century capitalism. Even though we still live in a society where production for profit remains the basic organizing principle of economic life, signs of radical changes in labor processes, consumer habits, geographical and geopolitical configurations, and state powers and practices abound. Here, Harvey mainly describes the change from Fordist capitalism to the capitalism of flexible accumulation. Fordism, which enjoyed its peak during the 1960s eventually suffered from many

inefficiencies caused by over-accumulation, and rigidity. He argued that: flexible accumulation naturally took precedent over Fordism in response to the latter's weaknesses. The main symptoms of Fordist capitalism were rigid relations between capital, government, and organized labor, decreasing production and profits, increasing inflation, and social tension between those who hold the privileged production jobs and those who do not.

The newly emerged form of capitalism, namely flexible accumulation, was characterized by deregulated capitalism, the de-concentration of rapidly increasing corporate power away from national powers, increasing internationalization of capital, an increase of managerial strata, and a decline in the effectiveness of national collective bargaining. This new form of capitalism also created diverse challenges to state bureaucracy and power, and specialization in services etc. Moreover, it is through sophisticated financial systems that flexible capital accumulation has been achieved. The nation state, though seriously weakened as an autonomous power, nevertheless retains important powers for disciplining labor and for intervention in financial flows and markets. However, the state also becomes much more vulnerable to fiscal crisis and the patterns of international money trading. Thus, Harvey is tempted to see the flexibility achieved through production, labor markets, and consumption more as an outcome of the search for financial solutions to the crisis-tendencies of capitalism, rather than the other way round. This means that the financial system has achieved a degree of autonomy from real production unprecedented in the history of capitalism, carrying it into an era of equally unprecedented financial dangers.

The third part deals with the experience of space and time in respect to different social configurations. Here the author argues that neither time nor space had existence before matter. Therefore, the objective qualities of physical time-space cannot be understood independently of the qualities of material processes. Then we can argue that objective conceptions of time

and space are necessarily created through material practices and processes, which serve to reproduce social life. Social time and social space are differentially constructed. Each distinctive mode of production or social formation will embody a distinctive bundle of time and space as well as practices and concepts. The author suggests that the current mode of production or social formation is marked by the compression of time and space. According to the author both time and space is compressed to achieve the shortest turnover according to the logic of capitalism. This naturally has many consequences, for instance, the adaptability and flexibility of workers becomes vital to such capitalist development. Workers, instead of acquiring a skill for life, can now look forward to at least one if not multiplicity of de-skilling and re-skilling periods in a lifetime. The accelerated destruction and reconstruction of workers' skills has been a central feature in the turn from Fordism to flexible modes of capital accumulation. The feeling that we have lost a sense of the future, other than when the future can be absorbed into the present, is another consequence of the above. Similarly, volatility and ephemerality make it hard to maintain any firm sense of continuity.

The central paradox is: the less important the spatial barriers, the greater the sensitivity of capital to the variations of place within space, and the greater the incentive for places to be differentiated in ways attractive to capital. The result has been the production of fragmentation, insecurity, and ephemeral uneven development within a highly unified global space economy of capital flows.

The main argument here is that the cultural phenomenon of postmodernity is a result of time-space compression that occurred as a consequence of the transition from Fordist capitalism to flexible accumulation. Compression of time in postmodernity is identified as acceleration in the turnover of capital.

In the final part, the author summarizes the book, emphasizing how

aesthetics have replaced ethics in postmodern thought, by drawing on an example of the image making of contemporary politicians.

### **Evaluation**

Overall, *The Condition of Postmodernity* is a useful book in terms of describing the qualities that distinguish postmodernity from modernity. The clear examples and logical arguments the work contains make it even more persuasive and educative.

Even though the author agrees with Raban and states that the postmodern moment has arrived, he does not necessarily declare a new era. I think he is ambiguous in doing so; however, he is clear in detailing the changes, proclaiming that a shift has occurred, which has resulted in a condition that can be identified as postmodernity. Yet, he leaves it up to the reader to decide whether or not to identify the contemporary condition as a transition to a new paradigm, or as a mere continuation of modernity under the same logic of capitalism.

From the viewpoint of an aspiring Mongolian sociologist, many useful tools and lenses are provided in the above work that enable one to see the dynamics of the rapid changes that are occurring in Mongolia and the world as a whole with more precision, and to grasp the underlying causes of those changes more skillfully. The course that Mongolia followed after the collapse of the communist regime, and the condition that it has arrived at by following this course, uncannily matches the condition of postmodernity the author describes in this book. For instance, plurality now exists in Mongolia under capitalistic logic. Mongolian society is extremely pluralistic since half of its population is still leading a nomadic lifestyle, at the same time the other half is fully urbanized and modernized. Time and space compression is also evident in all aspects of social, political, and economic life in Mongolia. Society here is enjoying, yet suffering from, the same advantages

or symptoms that the world as a whole is experiencing as a result of the compression of time and space.