

# How “postmodern” is “postmodernism”?

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## Abstract

This article sets out to question the claim that “postmodernism” is merely a development of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. What is unique about contemporary postmodernism is the way in which it combined intellectual developments that emerged during the past five hundred years in a peculiar manner. Therefore the supposed relatively *recent* origin of postmodernity is not only *misleading* but also *historically unsound*. This is shown by going back to the pre-Enlightenment roots of both “modernity” and “postmodernity” – and it is done by accounting for the emergence and historical sources of modern *irrationalism*, *historicism* and the so-called “*linguistic turn*.”

## Hoe “postmodern” is die “postmodernisme”?

### Opsomming

Dit is die toeleg van hierdie artikel om die aanspraak dat die “postmodernisme” bloot ‘n ontwikkeling van die 2de helfte van die 20ste eeu is te bevraagteken. Die unieke van die kontemporêre postmoderne gees is juis dáárin geleë dat dit verskillende denkontwikkelinge wat gedurende die afgelope vyf honderd jaar na vore getree het op ‘n besondere wyse saamgesnoer het. Daarom is die veronderstelde reletief-resente ontstaan van die postmodernisme nie alleen *misleidend* nie, maar ook histories gesien *onjuis*. Dit word aangetoon deur terug te vra na die vóór-Verligting wortels beide van die modernisme en die postmodernisme terwyl tegelyk rekenskap gegee word van die ontwikkeling en historiese bronne van die moderne *irrasionalisme*, *historisme* en die sg. “taalwending”.

### 1. Introduction

In 1992 Zigmunt Bauman published a book with the title: *Intimations of Postmodernity*. The basic thrust of this book is similar to a vast number of publications, coming from diverse areas. It sets out to inform the reader about the impasse of “modernity” / “modernism” in order to highlight the

vantage point of “postmodernity” / “postmodernism”.<sup>1</sup> In spite of the growing popularity, in certain academic circles, of the conviction that we are living in a “postmodern world,” there are also other academics who are not so thoroughly impressed with the claims of originality put forward by “postmodernists.” When a competent sociological analyst, such as John O’Neill, speaks about *The Poverty of Postmodernism* (1995), one may suspect that there is something wrong in the attempt to portray the culture in which we live exclusively as being “postmodern.”

Jürgen Habermas, the well-known philosopher-sociologist from the Frankfurt-School, is quite explicit in his rejection of the idea that we have transcended “modernity” as a “form of life”:

The concept of modernity no longer comes with a promise of happiness. But despite all the talk of postmodernity, there are no visible rational alternatives of this form of life. What else is left for us, then, but at least to search out practical improvements *within* this form of life? (Habermas, 1994:107).

Already in 1981 Habermas said that we have to learn from the mistakes of modernity without giving up its project:

I think that instead of giving up modernity and its project as a lost cause, we should learn from the mistakes of those extravagant programs which have tried to negate modernity (Habermas, 1990:351).

In order to characterize the *postmodern condition*, Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh, alternatively, commence by using a number of characteristics to identify *modernity*. The general picture of modernity which they portray comprises features such as its “myth of progress,” its “realism” that seeks to “grasp the infinite, irreducible complexities of the world as a unified homogeneous totality” and the intellectual rhetoric of “scientific objectivity, nonbiased observation and universal maxims.” (Middleton & Walsh, 1995:14 ff., 31-33, 34.). It may be the case that what we call “modernity”, so they proceed with their argument, was an inherently unstable hybrid of realism and autonomy, a transitional station between classical and medieval culture, with its submission to the given, and postmodernity, with its frank admission of human construction (Middleton & Walsh, 1995:41).

Let us reflect for a moment on the following three elements of their analysis: (i) the supposed *realistic* and (ii) *holistic*<sup>2</sup> nature of modernity and (iii) the postmodernity allows for *human construction*.

Re (i):

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<sup>1</sup> Some authors avoid the identification of these two pairs of terms.

<sup>2</sup> “... the world as a unified homogeneous totality”.

Their (mentioned) statement that modernity is characterized by its “realism”, however, is incorrect (Middleton & Walsh, 1995:31-33). *Realism* is said to be “central to the Cartesian ideal” (1995:41). Yet, the traditional medieval realistic metaphysics still accepted *universality* outside the human mind (as ideas in the Divine Mind and as the universal substantial forms inherent within things). By contrast, the *nominalistic* position of René Descartes is clearly expressed where he says: “number and all universals are only modes of thought” (Descartes, 1965:187). This orientation also explains why Descartes cannot any longer accept the realistic criterion of truth – as an agreement between *thought* and *being*. His nominalistic alternative does not acknowledge a contradiction between our “ideas” and “universal essences” outside the human mind: “contradiction [exists] ... in our ideas alone” (Descartes, 1976:25).

Re. (ii)

The basic orientation of modern philosophy (since Descartes) is atomistic (individualistic). Reality is understood in terms of its supposed simplest elements (atoms). This idea inspired the social contract theories to construct society out of its “atoms”, the individuals. It was only during early Romanticism that a *holistic* mode of thought started to dominate the scene – particularly elaborated by Schelling, Fichte and Hegel (the so-called *freedom-idealism*).

Re. (iii)

Although *construction* is assessed to be exclusively *postmodern*, later on (see Welsh et al. page 48) it is said that *construction / reconstruction* lies at the root of **both** the modernist and the postmodernist notion of the “self-constructed self.” Nonetheless, on page 56, it is once again claimed that the view that we live in a world of our “own construction” is implicitly postmodern! Unfortunately, Middleton and Walsh totally neglects the role of *historicism* and *irrationalism* as it emerged at the beginning of the 19th century. In a different context, and with the positive aim to argue for the development of a distinctly Christian economics, Hoksbergen unfortunately also shows no historical awareness of the nature of the emergence of *historicism* and *irrationalism* at the beginning of the 19th century. His discussion of the main traditions and themes of postmodernism therefore does not realize that the features highlighted by him in principle were present already at the beginning of the 19th century (cf. Hoksbergen, 1994:126-142, 134).

To be sure, the entire motive of *logical creation* actually dominated nominalistic humanism since the Renaissance. This motive played a dominant role in the thought of Thomas Hobbes and of Immanuel Kant<sup>3</sup> - but both these thinkers are ignored by Middleton and Walsh.<sup>4</sup> The after-effect of

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Hobbes is particularly known for his totalitarian view of the state as it is developed in an atomistic fashion in his book *Leviathan* (1651). Immanuel Kant, the giant of the 18th century, is best known for his

the supposed *constructive* abilities of human beings also surfaced during the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the idea of the “*social construction* of reality” – compare the views of Berger, Luckmann, Schutz and Husserl. As we shall argue below Kant elevated human understanding to become the *formal law-giver* of nature. The basic *rationalism* present in this view continued to inspire Husserl’s idea of *construction*. Existential phenomenology, on the other hand, transformed Husserl’s rationalism into an *irrationalistic* perspective.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, the contemporary “postmodern” idea that we *create* the world we live in (either through thought or through language) simply continues core elements of *modern* humanism!

## 2. The supposed contrast between “modernity”/“modernism” and “postmodernity”/“postmodernism”

Bauman claims that “postmodernity” may be “interpreted as fully developed modernity” (Bauman, 1992:187) but at the same time he wants to maintain that “postmodernity” is a “self-reproducing, pragmatically self-sustainable and logically self-contained social condition defined by *distinctive features of its own*.” A theory of “postmodernity” is called “adequate” only if it operates with “its own vocabulary” and manages to emancipate itself from the “concepts and issues spawned by the discourse of modernity.” The “modern mentality” is reflected in the struggle for “*universality, homogeneity, monotony and clarity*” (Bauman, 1992:188). In order to understand the postmodern condition of society through a “separate sociological theory of postmodernity” it is required to “break decisively with the concepts and metaphors of the models of modernity” (Bauman, 1992:188).

Baumann is quite adamant that a theory of postmodernity must discard first of all

the assumption of an “*organismic*”, equilibrated social totality it purports in Parsons-like style: the vision of a “principally co-ordinated” and enclosed totality (a) with a degree of cohesiveness, (b) equilibrated or marked by an overwhelming tendency to equilibrium, (c) unified by an internally coherent value syndrome and a core authority able to promote and enforce it and (d) defining its elements in terms of the function they perform in that process of equilibration or the reproduction of the equilibrated state (Bauman, 1992:189).

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influential *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, 1787<sup>2</sup>), *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) and his *Critique of Judgment* (1790, 1793<sup>2</sup>, 1799<sup>3</sup>).

<sup>4</sup> Early modern humanism secularized the biblical motive of creation by elevating human reason to become the *law-giver* of creation. In paragraph 3.1 below we shall return in more detail to the “constructive” inclination of modern Humanism – culminating in Kant’s view of the categories of human understanding.

<sup>5</sup> One can define *rationalism* as an absolutization of universality (or of: *conceptual knowledge*) and *irrationalism* as an absolutization of individuality and contingency (or of: *concept-transcending knowledge*).

In contrast to this assumption the theory of postmodernity has to model a social condition that is “essentially and perpetually *unequilibrated*.” It is composed of elements “with a degree of autonomy” large enough to “justify the view of totality as a kaleidoscopic – momentary and contingent – outcome of interaction” (Bauman, 1992:189). Whenever *order* is found, it is only “local,” “emergent” and “transitory” – the metaphor of a *whirlpool* appearing in the flow of a river is appropriate capturing an “incessant metabolism and constant renewal of content” (Bauman, 1992:189).

In the second place, according to Bauman, the theory of postmodernity “must be free of the metaphor of progress that informed all competing theories of modern society,” the “postmodern condition is a site of constant mobility and change” (Bauman, 1992:189). Furthermore, the category of *society* ought to be replaced by that of *sociality*: “a category that tries to convey the processual modality of social reality, the dialectical play of randomness and pattern (or, from the agent's point of view, of freedom and dependence)” (Bauman, 1992:192).

In order to reverse the structure of the “cognitive field” Bauman also proposes a focus on agency, or, much rather, on the “*habitat* in which agency operates” (Bauman, 1992:192). It coheres with a process of *self-constitution*, which should, in order to underline the “graduated and ultimately inconclusive nature of the process”, be viewed as “self-assembly” (Bauman, 1992:192):

I propose that sociality, habitat, self-constitution and self-assembly should occupy in the sociological theory of postmodernity the central place that the orthodoxy of modern social theory had reserved for the categories of society, normative group (like class or community), socialization and control (Bauman, 1992:189).

Amongst the main tenets of the theory of postmodernity Bauman mentions that under the postmodern condition “habitat” is “a complex system.” Agencies are only *partly* dependent upon each other, but since the lines of dependence are not fixed “their actions (and consequences) remain staunchly under-determined, that is autonomous” (Bauman, 1992:192).

The only “room” left for *social collectivities* is within the domain of imagination and symbolic construction:

*Tribal politics* ... is a generic name for practices aimed at collectivization (supra-agentic confirmation) of the agents' self-constructing efforts. Tribal politics entail the creation of tribes as *imagined communities*. Unlike the premodern communities the modern powers set about uprooting, postmodern tribes exist in no other form but the symbolically manifested commitment of their members (Bauman, 1992:198).

### 3. Modernity versus Postmodernity – historically seen a sound distinction?

The image of “modernity” portrayed in this project of “postmodernity” suggests that the ideal of (contingent) autonomy, the acknowledgement of perpetual change and the self-constitution of the symbolical constructs of agents are all recent “postmodern” phenomena. However, we want to argue that there are sound historical reasons to question this whole image. In addition to that certain immanent-critical considerations as well as a reference to contemporary reflections on the issue of *change* may help us to gain a better understanding of certain inescapable elements of theory formation which are not only still present in Bauman's account but which are referring to unavoidable structural conditions for scholarship as such.

The aim to surpass the limitations of the *systems model* does seem to be a goal pursued by some prominent sociologists of our day, although it is certainly not true that all of them want to follow this path. We only have to think about the impressive revival of Talcott Parson's thought in the “neofunctionalism” of Jeffrey Alexander and his school during the last decades of the 20th century,<sup>6</sup> as well as the vast contribution of Habermas to the whole debate of modernity.<sup>7</sup>

Looking at the rise of the modern mind since the Renaissance, Kant's three *Critiques* stand out as a sign-post of the attempt to *reconquer* the lost territory of the initial motive to be *free* in the modern (secularized) humanistic sense of *autonomy* (i.e., being obedient to a law prescribed by humankind to itself). This *freedom-ideal*, which was jeopardized by the dominance of the *natural science-ideal* since Descartes, advocates a consistent emphasis on *universality* – something that, in turn, was to be challenged seriously by the 19th and the 20th centuries.

Since the contemporary emphasis on language and on the lingual (-symbolic) construction of social reality creates the impression that this is a unique feature characteristic of the recent emergence of the “postmodern” age,<sup>8</sup> we have to highlight *one* facet of modern *nominalism* dating back to the transition of the medieval to the modern era.

#### 3.1 The pre-Enlightenment origin of the motive of “logical creation”

Emphasizing the primacy of the *will* (over against the choice of St. Thomas Aquinas for the primacy of the *intellect*), William of Ockham turns his back on medieval *realism* by only acknowledging the *subjective* existence of *universals* in the human mind (*mente humana*), encompassing both words (*voces*) and general concepts (*conceptus*). Since every *universal*,

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<sup>6</sup> See Alexander, 1985; 1987; 1988; 1990; 1990a; 1990b.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Habermas, 1971; 1981; 1983; 1981:3-14 ; 1990 and 1994.

<sup>8</sup> Perhaps covering the last 40 to 50 years, although some may go as far back as Nietzsche.

according to him, is a purely mental quality, no universals exist in reality outside the mind (*Summa logicae* I, 14). Universals are seen as *substitutes*, referring in a *signifying* way to the multiplicity of *individual things*. In reality only *individual things* exist. Science, however, is concerned with *universals* (as the subjective universal image of the real individual entities). Over against the realistic conception of truth as the agreement between *thought* and *essence* (*adequatio intellectus et rei*), nominalism shifted the criterion to the inner activity of the human mind – truth concerns the *compatibility of concepts*.

Early modern humanistic philosophy explored this nominalistic attitude in many different ways. We only have to focus upon some crucial statements made by Thomas Hobbes, the British philosopher of early humanism, to realize how misplaced some of the claims of “postmodernity” are. The motive of *logical creation* indeed characterizes the autonomy-ideal and the first manifestations of the modern humanistic natural science-ideal. Nominalism stripped factual reality both from God's *conditioning law-order* and from its universal side – evinced in the *orderliness* of concretely existing entities.<sup>9</sup> Since *rationalism* claims that universality is the only source of *knowledge*, it is clear that the motive of *logical creation* implicitly transforms subjective human understanding to become the *law-giver* of nature.

Hobbes affirms the nominalistic conception of truth when he states that truth does not *inhere* in things, but that it is a feature of *names* and their comparison in *statements*.<sup>10</sup> Add to this Hobbes's conviction that demonstrative science is only possible with regard to those things which, in their generation, are dependent upon human discretion (*arbitrio*),<sup>11</sup> then it becomes clear that already here we are confronted with a conception of the *creative power* of human *thought* and *language* anticipating both Kant's extreme position and even Richard Rorty's more recent point of view (see Rorty 1989:39 ff.). Since, according to Kant, the material of experience (sense impressions) is *chaotic*, the natural order is (formally) made possible through the categories as *forms of thought*. Thus seen, the concepts of understanding in Kant's conception function as *formal law-giver* of

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<sup>9</sup> Experimental natural science can only approach the God-given *conditions for* physical entities by investigating their *orderliness* – the universal side of entities at the factual side of reality. In Isaiah 28:26 ff. we learn that God gave human beings the knowledge to do things as they should be done; black cumin and cumin are removed with a stick; grain is ground for bread; and so on. Things should be handled in *this* or *that* way according to their God-given *nature*. Thanks to the *orderliness* of these things we find the path to an understanding of the order which God established for their existence! Through this, God teaches us how we should deal with his creatures – taking into consideration His will for their existence.

<sup>10</sup> Ernst Cassirer formulates this as follows (1971:56): “Die Wahrheit haftet nicht an den *Sachen*, sondern an den Namen und an der Vergleichung der Namen, die wir im Satze vollziehen: *veritas in dicto, non in re consistit*” (cf. Hobbes, Th. De Corpore, Part I, Chapter 3, Par.7 & 8). “Truth does not inhere in the things, but belongs to the names and their comparison, as it occurs in statements.”

<sup>11</sup> “Earum tantum rerum scientia per demonstrationem illam a priore hominibus est, quaram generatio dependet ab ipsorum huminum arbitrio” (Hobbes, Th. *De Homine*, Chapter X, par.4 – quoted by Cassirer, 1971:57).

nature. They are not derived from experience (a posteriori) but are (a priori) lying at the basis of experience: “*Categories are concepts, which prescribe laws a priori to phenomena, and thus to nature as the totality of all phenomena* (Kant, 1787:163). Although Kant restricted the humanistic science-ideal to the domain of sensory “phenomena”, these words clearly highlight to what an extent he still adheres to the *deification* of human understanding as the *a priori formal law-giver of nature*.

One may remark that in terms of this conception Kant wants to account in a typically *humanistic* fashion for the capacity human beings have to formulate laws to which things in nature are subjected (cf. the remark of the physicist Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker, 1972:128). In 1638 Galileo explores a *thought experiment* by imagining a body being placed on a resistance-free horizontal plane, from which he concludes that the motion of such a body would be uniform and enduring if the plane is extended into infinity (cf. Galileo, 1973.) From this thought-experiment he deduced his *law of inertia*. Apparently from the spontaneous and purely *subjective* activity of human understanding Galileo thus deduced a fundamental determination of things in nature and then prescribed it to them. Holz sees in this thought-experiment a movement from the *object* to the *subject* – which materialized in Kant's thought in the following conviction: “human understanding does not create its *a priori* laws out of nature, but prescribes them to nature” (cf. Kant, 1783:79, and Holz, 1975:357-358).

As already mentioned, we may even advance beyond Kant in our assessment of the importance of Hobbes's nominalism by looking at a key-figure within the scene of “postmodernity,” Richard Rorty. Richard Bernstein defines the rationalistic tradition (designated by him as “objectivism”) as “the basic conviction that there is or must be some permanent, a-historical matrix or framework to which we can ultimately appeal in determining the nature of rationality, knowledge, truth, reality, goodness, or rightness” (Bernstein, 1983:8). Mary Hesse sees scientific revolutions as “metaphoric redcriptions” (cf. Rorty, 1989:50). In following her Rorty remarks: “This account of intellectual history chimes with Nietzsche's definition of ‘truth’ as ‘a mobile army of metaphors’ ” (Rorty, 1989:17). Rorty (1989:16) views “intellectual history” as “history viewed as the history of metaphor.” “Old metaphors are constantly dying off into literalness, and then serving as a platform and foil for new metaphors.”

### 3.2 The transition from universality to change and individuality

The point he wants to make is that “every specific theoretic view comes to be seen as one more vocabulary, one more description, one more way of speaking” (Rorty, 1989:57). The germs of this view are fully present in the quoted conceptions of Hobbes!<sup>12</sup>

Whereas roughly speaking, one can say that the 18th century is the period of extreme (conceptual) *rationalism*, the transition to the 19th century can be designated as an acute awareness of the *historical dimension* of reality. By the end of the 18th century this, first of all, was due to the pioneering work done by Johann Herder, a contemporary of Immanuel Kant. Korff calls Herder the *German Rousseau* and Cassirer praises Herder as the Copernicus of the (science of) history (Ernst Cassirer, 1957:226.). Proß sees in Herder the key figure who, in rejecting the “Aufklärung” (*Enlightenment*), prepared the rise of *romantic historicism* (see Cassirer, 1957:226 ff. and the introductory remarks of Proß as the Editor of Herder, 1978).<sup>13</sup>

Although early romanticism transposes the *universal* to the *unique*, it did not distance itself from the inherent *atomism* (individualism) of the 18th century. The step to *holistic irrationalism* was eventually given by Schelling, Fichte and Hegel – three prominent post-Kantian philosophers in Germany during and after the rise of *romanticism*. We should observe that although Herder believes that society is subject to thorough *historical change*, he does not want to advocate an *anchorless relativism*. To curb this unwanted consequence, Herder upholds the *ideal of humanity* which guarantees, as universally binding rule, the *unity* and the *meaning* of history (Cassirer, 1957:228). Niebuhr, the tutor of Leopold von Ranke (perhaps best known for his statement that the science of history studies the past as it actually happened to be), demonstrates the transition from the 18th to the 19th century in a remarkable way. From the *romantic movement* – including Goethe and Schiller (Germany), Bilderdijk and Da Costa (The Netherlands), and Shelley and Keats (Britain) – Niebuhr received his appreciation of *mythical thought*. Without relinquishing the imaginative exuberance present in myths and sages, Niebuhr wants to treasure the *historical way of thought* in its own right.

With an obvious hint to Plato's classical allegory of people living in a cave (*The Republic*), Niebuhr compares the historian with a person whose eyes adapted so effectively to the dark that it is possible to observe things that would be invisible to the newcomer. Where Plato appraises these “shadow-

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<sup>12</sup> Rorty “metaphorizes” diverse givens – such as language, conscience, morality, and hopes: “To see one's language, one's conscience, one's morality, and one's highest hopes as contingent products, as literalizations of what once were accidentally produced metaphors, is to adopt a self-identity which suits one for citizenship in such an ideally liberal state” (Rorty, 1989:61).

<sup>13</sup> A more detailed analysis of the successive epistemic ideals of the past three centuries is found in Strauss (1996).

images” *negatively*, Niebuhr assesses them positively – for on occasion he characterizes the work of the historian as “work done under the earth” (cf. Cassirer, 1957:237).

In opposition to Plato, who acknowledges only knowledge directed at the true (static) *being* of things as worthwhile, Niebuhr is convinced that only *historical change* provides genuine knowledge. This kind of knowledge is the most appropriate type of knowledge for humanity comprising the vital self-developing of human beings.

### 3.3 Unresolved problems: the emergence of language as new horizon

Over against the deification of universal (conceptual) knowledge during the 18th century, we are here brought into contact with the importance of *historical change*. However, this *irrationalist* and *historicist* reaction against Enlightenment *rationalism* contains hidden problems that would become explicit only during and at the end of the 19th century. It is noteworthy to mention that this process was anticipated by the first critical reactions to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. It was in particular Jacobi, Hammann and Herder who pointed out that Kant neglected the nature of *language*.<sup>14</sup> Herder even calls “man” a “creation of language”.<sup>15</sup> Also Fichte emphasizes that language mediates the spirituality of reason and consciousness (Reiß, 1966:24).

During the 19th century Wilhelm Dilthey embodied the flourishing of historicism and at the same time set into motion a reflection conducive to the occurrence of the so-called “linguistic turn.” He reacts intensely to the positivistic mode of thought with its emphasis on *explanation*. He wants to find a new criterion to distinguish between the *natural sciences* and the *humanities*. This follows from the fact that the mental world is stamped by the presence of values and aims requiring a new method to capture this teleological domain. In contrast with Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* Dilthey develops a critique of *Historical Reason*. This critique entails the human capacity to understand itself as well as society and its history, constituted by humankind.<sup>16</sup> Karl Mannheim, one of the prominent sociologists of the first half of the 20th century and the founder of the sociological subdiscipline known as *sociology of knowledge*, had a solid understanding of the romantic roots of Dilthey's *irrationalistic historicism*:

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<sup>14</sup> That Kant indeed distorted the meaning of history emerged also more clearly during the 19th century – beyond the rise of historicism as such. The discovery of *non-Euclidean geometries* (by Gauss and Lobatsjevski) relativized Kant's *table of categories* by making it clear to what an extent his analysis of *understanding* was *historically* dependent upon Newton's *Principia* (1686).

<sup>15</sup> “Der Mensch ist ein freidenkendes, thätiges Wesen, dessen Kräfte in Progression fortwürken; darum sei er ein Geschöpf der Sprache!” (Herder, 1978:73).

<sup>16</sup> Already during the 18th century Vico claimed that humankind knows *history* better than *nature* since it was *made* by humankind.

Dilthey is borne by, and may be the most important exponent of, that irrationalistic undercurrent which first became self-aware in Romanticism, and which, in the neo-Romanticism of the present, is on the way, in altered form, to effecting its attack on bourgeois rationalism (Mannheim, 1982:162).

Only what can be experienced in the context of a historical, world-encompassing coherence, could serve as the *immediately certain* basis of knowledge acquisition – and only by means of empathy one can attain a genuine understanding (*Verstehen*) of spiritual reality. The natural sciences *know*, the humanities *understand* (Dilthey, 1927:86). Dilthey no longer supports the positivistic science ideal seeking the typically human in some facet of nature. The historical aspect now occupies this vacancy: to be human means to be *historically conditioned* (1927:275, cf. Diwald, 1963:38 note 11). Habermas furthermore mentions the implied *linguistic framework* present in Dilthey's hermeneutics:

We don't understand a symbolic expression without an intuitive prior-understanding (*Vorverständnis*) of its context, because we are not capable of freely transforming the presence of an unquestioned background knowledge of our culture into an explicit awareness.<sup>17</sup>

### 3.4 The “unifying intellectual force” of nominalism

These transitions are rooted in the undercurrent of *nominalism* operative in modern humanism since the Renaissance. Nominalism (cf. Strauss, 1993:104-127) has an *ambiguous* nature, since it is both *rationalistic* and *irrationalistic*. We have mentioned that *rationalism* entails the absolutization of knowledge in terms of *universal* features, i.e., it deifies *conceptual* knowledge, whereas *irrationalism*, on the other hand, focuses upon whatever is unique, individual, unrepeatable and contingent, thus restricting knowledge to the *approximating* understanding of concepts stretched beyond the limits of their natural application (*concept transcending knowledge*) – i.e., to *idea-knowledge*.<sup>18</sup>

The perplexing fact is that **nominalism** comprises **both** these elements: In respect of the *typical structure of entities*, nominalism does not accept any *conditioning order (universal structures)* for,

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<sup>17</sup> “Einen symbolischen Ausdruck verstehen wir nicht ohne das intuitive Vorverständnis seines Kontextes, weil wir das fraglos präsente Hintergrundwissen unserer Kultur nicht freihändig in explizites Wissen verwandeln können” (Habermas, 1983:17).

<sup>18</sup> Immanuel Kant introduced the German term *Grenzbegriff* to designate that *thought-form* employed to *think* the *unknowable*. A strict translation of this term *Grenzbegriff* is *boundary concept*, *limit concept* or even *limiting concept*. However, contrary to the intention of the term *Grenzbegriff* the connotation of the term *limit* suggests

or any *orderliness* (*universal structuredness of*) such entities. Every entity is *strictly individual*. In terms of our distinction between *rationalism* and *irrationalism*, nominalism surely represents an *irrationalistic* view of the nature of entities, since every individual entity is completely stripped of its *universal orderliness* (*law-conformity*) and *conditioning order*. This characteristic applies to both *moderate nominalism*, viz. *conceptualism* (Locke, Ockham, Leibniz and others), and to *extreme nominalism*, that rejects all general and *abstract ideas* and only accepts *general names* (Berkeley and Brentano).

This *irrationalistic* side of nominalism, however, does not exhaust its multifaceted nature, because *universals* are acknowledged fully *within* the human mind, at least as *general words* in the case of Berkeley's and Brentano's *extreme nominalism*. This restriction of knowledge to *universals* is typical of *rationalism* in the sense defined by us. Therefore, it is possible to see *nominalism* as being simultaneously *rationalistic* in terms of the universals – concepts and words – in one's mind, **and** *irrationalistic* in terms of the strict individuality of entities outside one's mind. Just compare the way in which Habermas captures the stance taken by Rickert in this regard: “Rickert presupposes – and here he is covertly in accordance with *Lebensphilosophie* – the irrationality of a reality that is integrally present only in nonlinguistic experience” (Habermas, 1988:4).

The inability of conceptual knowledge to grasp what is unique and individual caused philosophers to look at the *senses* (cp. the development of positivism and neo-positivism) and at *language* to bridge the gap. It seems as if *language* can indeed mediate between *universality* and *individuality* in a way which transcends the limitations of *concept formation*. Already Mannheim had a clear understanding of these issues for he clearly grasped something of the *twofold* nature of nominalism: “Nominalism proceeds from the unjustifiable assumption that only the individual subject exists and that meaningful contextures and formations have being only to the extent that individual subjects think them or are somehow oriented toward them in a conscious manner” (Mannheim, 1982:196-197, cf also p.224). As a consequence, we can speak about a general (and currently widely acknowledged) shift from *concept* to *meaning*, from *thought* to *language*. Habermas in an interview is equally explicit about this shift:

**Question:** *Doesn't the traditional philosophy of consciousness have it much easier, in that it can still rely on the convincing power of the postulate of the ethics of responsibility?*

**Answer:** The philosophy of consciousness from Descartes through Kant up to Husserl took its point of departure [in] the fundamental question of epistemology and set to work on the question of subjectivity, that is, the relation of the representing subject to its own

presentations of objects. This philosophy forms a fruitful tradition, one to which we are all still related. Where would any of us be without our Kant? The great critics of the philosophy of consciousness, Heidegger on the one side, Wittgenstein on the other, have now led the way to a linguistic and pragmatic turn that today flips over, so to speak, and in the form of contextualistic views lead to a second historicism. In general, a world-creating subject – even a subject that internally reproduces its external environment – is no longer the point of departure for the philosophy of language. Therefore, this philosophy has to ask itself whether this new paradigm of reaching understanding between communicatively socialized subjects who always already find themselves in linguistically developed and inter-subjectively shared life-worlds – whether this paradigm has even re-attained the old problem level (Habermas, 1994: 115).

Habermas does not want to acknowledge the lingual dimension of reality at the *cost* of the demands for logicity (rationality). Against the back-ground of the considerations treated above we may now attempt to answer the question whether we really have to see *postmodernity* merely as a **recent** phenomenon?

#### **4. The “old face” of “postmodernity”: concluding remarks**

It should now be clear that “postmodernity” and its supposed “new” features are actually “old” *humanistic* ones. The key *historicistic* claims of postmodernity derive from *post-Kantian Romanticism* and its *lingual emphasis* was anticipated by *nominalism* since its very inception (cf. Ockham and Hobbes), and was also suggested by Jacobi, Hamman and Herder even before the end of the 18th century! The key-figure in the genesis of the linguistic turn, in so far as we may see it as an attempt to overcome the limitations of concept-formation with respect to what is unique, contingent and individual, Wilhelm Dilthey, actually lived the greater part of his life in the 19th century. To be sure, what is called *postmodernity* merely constitutes a new *power concentration* of the irrationalistic side of nominalism. This basic orientation even pre-dates *modernity* – in the sense of the 18th century Enlightenment!

Yet, acknowledging these historical roots should not mislead us to underestimate the vastly permeating (and uprooting) effects of contemporary postmodernism. Although the features united in it are not new, their current hegemony surely *is new*. The claim that in a fragmented and ever-changing world every person is entitled to his or her own “story” – while negating any and all grand meta-narratives (Leotard) – has the pretension of being just one amongst many other “stories.” Yet,

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concept-formation. For that reason it may be better to employ the phrase: *concept-transcending knowledge*.

without realizing it, this new orientation, over-emphasizes *historicity* and *linguisticity* at the cost of other dimensions of creation co-conditioning human existence equally. In fact, this postmodern claims operates as an alternative grand meta-narrative, namely the one that holds that *everyone* only has his or her partial story without any “universal” claim to truth.

From the fact that this statement itself rests upon a *universal claim* – “enabling” it to apply to “everyone” – its inherent self-uprooting nature is made manifest in its very formulation. Without an inherent *constancy* and *universality* even the exclusively elevated conditions of *historicity* and *linguisticity* lose their meaning.

The enemy of scholarship and culture is not universality and constancy, but the internally antinomic attempt to assert historical change and lingual ambiguity at the *cost* of constancy and universality. It is only when we take serious the liberating biblical perspective that creation cannot be explained merely in terms of some or other aspect of it that in principle we can escape from the one-sidedness of orientations such as rationalism, irrationalism, historicism and “linguism” – all of them combined and fused in the contemporary fad of *potmodernism*.

The over-estimation of *rationality* in the legacy of the West cannot be divorced from the all-pervasive *nominalistic* conviction that reality itself supposedly has a “rational” structure. Since nominalism denies both the God-given order for (law for) the existence of creatures *and* the universality of creaturely response to those laws (evinced in their lawfulness or orderliness), it is quite “understandable” why modern secular humanism “loaded” the human subject with the additional “responsibility” of becoming the law-giver/constructive agent of its own world.

Key Words	Kernbegriffe
(post)modernism	(post)modernisme
nominalism	nominalisme
historicism	historisme
irrationalism	irrasionalisme

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