

Let me begin by listing down randomly what I consider to be modern and postmodern. On the basis of this unsystematic inductive exercise, I shall then attempt, in an unpostmodern way, to arrive at a working definition of postmodernity. In so doing, I hope to come close to figuring out the answers to the 2 questions I have assigned myself, namely, a) what sort of problems or topics does the postmodern world offer to sociology? b) what are the examples of postmodernist approaches to human affairs?

What is modern, what is postmodern? I think Nixon's Watergate is modern, while Clinton's Monicagate is postmodern. By approving a break-in of the Democratic Party headquarters, Nixon committed a manifestly illegal act. Clinton's alleged offense is a private one, morally questionable perhaps, but not necessarily illegal. Nixon's was a power-trip, Clinton's was a pleasure trip.

Marcos and Ramos are modern, while Cory and Erap are postmodern. Marcos and Ramos were both consumed with technocratic nation-building and institutionalization, whereas Cory and Erap are concerned with meeting the expectations of the mobilized masses. Marcos and Ramos are closed systems, Cory and Erap are open-ended.

Sociology is modern, media studies is postmodern. The founders of sociology aspired to deploy the methods of the physical sciences in order to theorize the social world and hopefully make it more predictable and controllable. Sociology is rooted in the narrative of historical progress. The new disciplines of media and cultural studies on the other hand, do not begin from any assumption of human reason and progress. Their concern is simply to analyze the new vocabularies of representation and their impact on human affairs.

Cancer and heart diseases are modern, whereas AIDS and clinical depression are postmodern. The first two spring from an environment of abundance. The latter arise from lifestyles of experimentation and psychic stress.

Heterosexuality is modern, gayness is postmodern. Gayness explodes the entrenched metaphysics of gender, and invents its own language by which to represent its own experience. It refuses to be governed by a moral narrative that makes no allowances for homosexual relationships.

Graft and corruption is modern, sexual harassment is postmodern. Graft violates the modern bureaucratic

ethos that separates the public from the private. But sexual harassment violates identity and the ethic of personal autonomy.

Dieting and exercise are modern, liposuction is postmodern. The concern is the same: control of the body. But in liposuction, technology is deployed to recreate the body directly as an object of manipulation.

The list is endless. Bungalows are modern, condos are postmodern. Spouses are modern, partners are postmodern. Science is modern, poetry is postmodern. Hillary Clinton is modern, Princess Diana is postmodern. Arranged marriages are pre-modern, and pre-nuptial agreements and living-in are modern, but living-in without living together is postmodern. Familism is pre-modern, nationalism is modern, and cosmopolitan is post-modern.

The factory worker is modern, the OCW is postmodern. The CCP is modern, whereas the ABB is post-modern. Lakas-NUCD is modern, Abanse Pinay is postmodern, and KBL is premodern. I think the Sandinistas are modern, but the Zapatistas are postmodern. Marx is modern, so are Weber, Durkheim, and Parsons. But Nietzsche is post-modern, like Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida and Rorty. The nation-state is modern, but civil society is post-modern.

The Communist Party is modern, but people's organizations and social movements are postmodern. Cash is modern, but credit card is post-modern. The bank is modern, but the ATM is postmodern. The jeep is premodern, the taxi modern, and the LRT is postmodern. Trade in goods is modern, but trade in futures and currencies is postmodern. Equity capital is modern, but portfolio investments are postmodern. Typeset printing is modern, but desktop publishing is postmodern. The telephone is modern, the Internet is postmodern. Economic development is modern, sustainable development is post-modern. Bureaucratic agencies are modern, task forces and special commissions are postmodern. The still camera is modern, the videocam is postmodern. Newspapers are modern, TV is postmodern. Math is modern, metaphors postmodern. Vilma and Nora are modern, but Rosanna Roces and Amanda Page are postmodern. Dale Carnegie is modern, but Thomas Moore is postmodern. The cafeteria is modern, but cyber-café's are post-modern. Fraternities are modern, but the UP mountaineers and UP Divers are postmodern. The Protestant chapel in U.P. is modern, but the Catholic chapel is postmodern.

We can play this language game interminably, without having to pause at every instance to check whether our usage of modern and postmodern makes any sense. But it

is my hope that every one of the examples listed here lends some clarity to the concept we are trying to define.

What we have in postmodernity, I think, is a condition where the introduction of the latest and fastest technologies accelerates the speed and multiplies the risks to which the human person and society are subject. The societies we live in are becoming civilizations of speed. As speed compresses time, the intervals of our lives also get shorter and shorter. There is a violence in speed that has not been fully recognized, says the French urbanist Paul Virilio:

People say: you are too rich, but no one ever says you are too fast. But they are related. There is a violence in wealth that has been understood: not so with speed.

I first read Virilio's book *Pure War* while on board a flight from London's Heathrow to Hong Kong. The two overworked stewardesses in our section were frantically distributing breakfast trays to passengers just before landing in Hong Kong. The captain had just proudly announced that we made good time and we should be landing 30 minutes ahead of schedule.

The menu card had promised a full English breakfast of scrambled eggs, ham and sausage patty, grilled tomato and baked beans, with fruit juice, rolls,

and coffee. When my tray arrived, however, I noticed the empty dish in the middle. The hot meal was missing; there was not enough time to distribute it, and even less time for the passengers to consume it. In fact, there was barely time to collect the trays back before landing. We had all become victims of speed.

Outbound from Manila the week before, I had exactly the opposite experience. A light dinner of cold cuts was served on the Manila to Hong Kong leg of the journey. Two hours later, after the plane had picked up more passengers in HK, a second dinner was served, with a double round of drinks. But I was still digesting the previous meal. My metabolic speed could not keep up with the plane's speed. Going west from Asia, the experience always strikes me. The flights are getting faster and faster, you could actually look out the window and watch the approaching dawn catch up with the last light of dusk. My intestines could not keep up with the speed of these new airplanes.

Machines are getting faster, says Virilio, but the body's rhythms and reflexes remain the same. We think we drive machines, when in truth we are driven by them. The result is a type of violence whose magnitude we have not begun to contemplate.

Many years ago, on my first visit to Bali in Indonesia, I had wondered why there were so many animal

carcasses by the roadside of that exotic island. It did not take long for me to get the answer. The small powerful Liteace van that I was riding in, known locally as a Bimo, ran over two dogs and sideswiped a person in the course of a single journey. Before the arrival of these speed demons, the narrow streets of Bali had been the exclusive pathways of bull carts and unhurried pedestrians. The big tourist coaches had to honor their right of way. But the Bimos were different; they were alien machines meant for locals.

The same scene was replicated in Beijing in the mid-80s. China's frenetic modernization and open-door policy ushered in the era of the fast taxi. In the hands of local drivers who were just beginning to taste the exhilaration of speed, Volvos and Benzes became killing machines. Overnight, millions of commuters on bicycles who moved in slow graceful waves along Beijing's wide boulevards found themselves marginalized by these new masters of the highway.

The most terrifying technological violence, however is that of the war machine. In the modern war that Virilio imagines: The pilot answers to the slogan of the Exocet missiles: fire and forget. Push the button and get out of there. You go home, you've seen nothing. You fired forty, sixty kilometers away from your target, you don't care, the missile does it all. Virilio could have been describing the Patriot missiles and Smart bombs

unleashed by the US military in the Desert Storm against Saddam.

Speed leaves us no time to think, to concentrate on the meanings of our actions, or to realize what we have become. Ancient societies, says Virilio, were systems of brakes, interdictions, and limits. In contrast, today's societies are systems of acceleration. Speed is the new form of violence.

It was the same kind of violence that we experienced just over a year ago when on waking up one morning in July 1997, Filipinos saw the peso lose value minute by minute, and the prices of stocks plunge like rockets out of control. Short-term capital that had come into the country in trickles over a 4-year period left the country in less than 4 days, leaving in its trail unfinished high-rise buildings, companies forced to close down overnight, and millions of workers thrown out of work. I am told that at one point human beings had to intervene to shut down the computers to stop them from automatically giving out orders to sell. The interconnected machines had been programmed to behave in the most brutal fashion, without any regard for the long-term consequences of such massive withdrawals of capital from severely cash-strapped economies like ours.

"Welcome to the risk society," the sociologist Anthony Giddens would have told us, in reference to a world in which institutions become obsolete overnight and risks are compounded

by the speed at which they are inflicted on unprepared societies. Yet we have probably seen only the tip of this postmodern iceberg. New products and new technologies with far-reaching effects on our bodies and our environment are even now being released in the world market. They will open up new horizons, but they will also spark new problems. They will change the way we think and the way we organize our lives. They will transform our priorities, question the relevance of existing institutions, and challenge our long-standing concepts of government.

Postmodernity has made possible the transfer of money across the earth at lightning speed. It has also made possible the movement of migrant workers across the globe on a scale and at a speed never before anticipated by our national planners. Today there are about 7 million Filipinos working abroad, roughly 10% of our population. They are found literally in every nook and corner of the world, serving as domestic helpers, crew members in cargo boats, underpaid factory workers, and overworked entertainers and prostitutes. A good number are young Filipinas who travel halfway across the earth from small farming villages in the Visayas to the large anonymous capitals of Europe to marry foreign men they first met through video mail order catalogues. I met two such Filipinas many years ago on a plane from Frankfurt to Oslo. They were both in their early 20s and it was their first time to travel abroad.

In fact they had never seen any part of Manila except the airport. Foreign travel and the promise of instant prosperity induced their parents to release them from their traditional obligations at home. Such a decision would have been inconceivable 20 years ago. But today marrying a foreigner has become the most common escape hatch for women seeking liberation from their own oppressors at home.

What I have tried to describe here are situations that are difficult to make sense of if we remained fixated with a picture of a national society that is undergoing its own transitions as if in isolation from the globalizing forces that are at work in the world today. The modern sensibility still operates with the notion of nations as social systems. It underestimates the porous character of social systems, and their permeability to global trends and forces. In contrast, postmodern perspectives highlight the global character of most socio-logically meaningful phenomena, or examine the manner in which local communities maneuver their way within the global setting.

The usage of the term postmodern immediately suggests the existence of the modern and the pre-modern. It implies a periodization of social forms, or a succession of socio-historical configurations – in itself ironic, because postmodern perspectives question linear historical development. Postmodern theories

begin with an incredulity toward grand narratives of theory and of history.

Be that as it may, it is useful to distinguish postmodern sensibility from postmodernity and postmodernism. Postmodernity connotes a particular socio-historical condition featuring certain forms of being and practices. Postmodernism implies a cultural movement in the artistic and literary world. Postmodern sensibility, on the other hand, is a way of asking questions about life and about the world in general, which eschews macro-theory and universalizing epistemology, morality or aesthetics.

My particular interest here is in characterizing the postmodern condition or postmodernity, and the postmodern sensibility. It is of course possible to analyze postmodern conditions through modern lenses, just as one may apply a postmodern sensibility to any kind of social condition.

When we talk of postmodernity, we refer to certain conditions that have been previously theorized under other concepts, like post-industrial society, or late capitalist society, or third wave knowledge-based societies (Toffler), or information society. The reference is to social formations that have been massively shaped by the industrial machine, the factory, science, capital, bureaucracy, legal culture, and the sovereign nation-state. These are societies that now must contend with

rapid developments in communications and information technology, genetic engineering, biotechnology, satellites, etc.

On the other hand, when we speak of the modern sensibility, we usually refer to the concern for control, order, homogeneity, predictability, hierarchy, productivity, work, efficiency. Modernist thought grounds its politics on philosophies of history and universal foundations based on metaphysical motions about human nature.

In contrast, the postmodern sensibility connotes plurality, difference, openness, unpredictability, tolerance, play, autonomy, and inventiveness. It is against metanarratives or grand theories about society and history. It favors pragmatic construction of operational norms to high-minded promulgation of first principles. It pushes the frontiers of knowledge by constantly questioning of existing paradigms and inventing new ones. It tolerates the incommensurable, and promotes the heterogeneity of language games. It does not believe that the purpose of inquiry is the quest for truth; rather it believes that all inquiry must be guided only by the quest for solutions. Now, both modernist and postmodernist are styles of thought or intellectual trends that may be found in any society.

The failure of capitalism to solve the persistent problems of poverty and marginality in many parts of the world,

just like the failure of the socialist revolution to break out in societies where social conditions should have long ripened into revolutionary situation, has however induced an incurable pessimism about the inevitability of progress and prosperity. This political pessimism and despair is what has often characterized the postmodern political stance. The usefulness of sociology for any kind of meaningful social planning has been placed in doubt. Many Third World intellectuals have lost faith in the feasibility of the socialist alternative after its defeat in Eastern Europe, yet they see no future either in capitalism.

An exception to pervasive postmodernist pessimism is the brilliant young Brazilian lawyer, Roberto Mangabeira Unger, who believes that both the socialist and the capitalist paradigms suffer from what he calls "false necessity." Unger himself does not claim it for his work, but I would call his seminal writings on politics refreshingly postmodern.

Unger refuses to accept that the historical context we live in the so-called Third World countries is a matter of fate, or nothing but the necessary consequence of the operation of blind social laws. He believes that we have the "freedom to remake the social worlds we construct and inhabit."

The aim, Unger makes clear, is not to show that we are free in any ultimate

sense and somehow unrestrained by causal influences upon our conduct. It is to break loose from a style of social understanding that allows us to explain ourselves and our societies only to the extent we imagine ourselves helpless puppets of the social worlds we build and inhabit, or of the lawlike forces that have supposedly brought these worlds into being.

The key to his concept of politics is the distinction between the "formative contexts" of our social life and the "formed routines" by which we deal with one another in society. Formed routines or arrangements are the residues of past accommodations and compromises among competing groups in society. When they ossify, they acquire the appearance of necessary institutions obeying sociological laws. In fact they are nothing but conventions that have outlived their time. Many aspects of our present economic and political practice are like these. Our tedious electoral process and the constant gridlock that characterizes our lawmaking system are good examples of such routines.

Formative contexts or frameworks, on the other hand, comprise all the institutional arrangements and imaginative preconceptions that shape routine conflicts over the mastery and use of key resources. Such resources include economic capital, governmental power, technical expertise, and even prestigious ideals. The legitimate use and proper disposition of these

resources is what formative frameworks define.

So much political debate centers on the routines rather than on framework, says Unger. The institutional and cultural framework of social life is mostly left untouched, taken for granted, and accorded undeserved necessity and authority. The result of this is the failure to imagine alternative possibilities of social organization or to transform the context itself.

By institutional and imaginative context, Unger means, for example, laws on property rights, constitutional provisions on representation and limits of political activity, ideas on the role of government and of political parties; styles of business organization, ideals of private community, family life and friendship; models for private contract, and of work. In short, structure and culture.

The tendency of much radical politics, he says, has been to think of these formative contexts as organic wholes, whose various components have a natural affinity with one another, and that can only be changed through a total system-transforming revolution. But in fact, he argues, the components of a social order are only loosely and unevenly connected; they can be replaced piece by piece rather than only as an inseparable whole.

He believes that the existing theories and ideologies have produced a willful closure to the surprises of politics.

Unger is convinced that our institutional frameworks can be reimagined in the midst of ordinary social activity, and to the extent that we can do so, we can succeed in undermining rigid social roles and hierarchies.

Unger comes from a radical tradition, and he shares with Marxists the basic idea that society is an artifact, made by human beings, rather than a natural entity following a necessary script. But he differs with those who would constrain political intervention by the notion of society as being governed by some deep structure with determinable laws or tendencies.

There is fire and urgency in Unger's criticisms and prescriptions for a transformative politics. He speaks especially to those whose political passions have been stilled by the defeats of collective struggles and experiments, but whose spirits continue to seek a battleground broader than that of personal relations and private perfection. A battleground where struggles are waged simultaneously through contrasting visions of society and secret movements of the heart.

I am sorry these scattered remarks have taken so long to express. I have tried to show that the postmodern condition poses certain challenges to scholars and political activists alike, for which the conventional modernist paradigms exemplified by sociology may no longer prove suitable. The

postmodern condition remains in my view under-theorized. I have tried to provide illustrations of postmodernity by reflecting on certain personal experiences. But even more difficult to grasp are the common characteristics that untie postmodern perspectives to one another. My own reading has taken me out of the province of sociology, into the realm of philosophy. No one who seriously reads post-

modern philosophy will remain unshaken in his political convictions. But it is a risk worth taking if one cares for his intellectual growth. The American philosopher Richard Rorty does not think that postmodernism need lead anyone to political pessimism. I only know that anyone who can combine Friedrich Nietzsche with John Dewey deserves at least a careful read.

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