



## Exploring Impredictability: Lyotard on Disrupting The Totalization in Postmodernity

### KEYWORDS

Grand-narratives, Modernity, Postmodernity, Impredictability.

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**ABSTRACT** *In postmodern condition pragmatism over shadows ethics as efficiency and profit become the driving forces. Global-market driven economies place profit above other values. The paper explores Lyotard's perspective who insists that this needs to be resisted by looking at the transformative possibilities that cannot be predicted, explained or mastered by technologically based system of reason.*

Answering the query 'What is it like to be Post Modern' is rather difficult. Simon Malpas, an important comentator on the postmodern, while making an effort to answer it, points out that the contemporary culture moves at an almost incomprehensible speed. The opportunities and the lifestyles open to people in Europe and North America seem to multiply exponentially as new ideas, technologies and fashions appear at ever increasing rates. Space and time shrink to almost nothing as we move around the world at breakneck speed. Civilisations, traditions and forms of social interaction are transformed or even annihilated as borders become more fluid and conventions, customs and ways-of-life that distinguished one place from another turn into matters of choice for an internationalised consumer. The world is now, quite literally, at our fingertips as we choose and purchase lifestyles from where ever we please, eclectically piecing together patchworks of images and signs to produce our identities. This shrinking of world is not just a result of physical movements of jet-setting business people and package holiday makers, but even more a consequence of the culture created by the mobile phone users who are always 'in touch', the television viewers who are fed stories from around the globe almost at the instant that they occur, and the internet surfers who can access the most up to the minute, arcane or even bizarre information from any corner of the planet at the push of a button. We inhabit a multinational, multimedia, interdependent world marketplace and have been 'globalised' (2007,1-2).

Jean-Francois Lyotard Stresses that the 'eclecticism is the degree zero of the contemporary general culture : you listen to reggae you watch a western ; you wear paris perfume in Tokyo and dress retro in hongkong ; knowledge is the stuff of T.V. Game shows ... Together, artist, gallery owner, critic and public indulge one another in the Anything goes - it is time to relax." But this is not the complete picture as Lyotard points out further that "this realism of Anything goes is the realism of money ... This realism accomodates every tendency just as capitalism accomodates every 'need' - so long as these tendencies and needs have bying power " (1992,8).

As Malpas elegently sums up that contemporary culture in all its variety rests on 'money' or 'buying power' and the apparently borderless postmodern world is so only for the elites who have wealth and power to travel, consume and freely choose their lifestyles. For the dispossessed people globalisation, more often than not, means a loss of security and self-determination. For these groups the consumer

lifestyles of rich are little more than fantasies and hopeless aspirations. Together with the postmodernism of lifestyles and consumer choices there is another postmodernism : that of deregulation, dispersal and disruption as the securities of tradition and community are being continually crushed.

The difficulties in a clear and concise definition of postmodern are multiplied as the sort of process is one of the key elements in the rationality that the postmodern discourse sets out to challenge. It often seeks to grasp what escapes these processes of definition and celebrates what resists or disrupts them. The term 'postmodern' is employed in two important and significant ways either as 'postmodernism' or 'postmodernity'. Postmodernism has tended to focus on theory, meta-theory, style and aesthetic expression whereas postmodernity has been employed to designate a specific cultural context for historical epoch.

Lyotard's *The Post Modern Condition* : A report on knowledge is one of the most accepted and comprehensive accounts of postmodernity. He sets out to identify the contemporary world as postmodern and the book investigates the condition of knowledge in most highly developed societies. He contends that the status of knowledge is changed as societies enter the post-industrial age and cultures enter the postmodern age. He argues that in contemporary world there are knowledge driven economies in which technological innovations and the ability to access and manipulate ideas rapidly is the important means of surviving, making and enhancing profits. As a result we become consumers of the knowledge that has been transformed into a commodity, "knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be produced in order to be valorised in a new production : in both cases the goal is exchange" (1984, 4). This commercialised view of knowledge is for Lyotard a significant shift from the ways in which knowledge was conceived earlier, including the modernity.

In order to bring out differences between modern forms of knowing and ways in which ideas are generated and communicated in the postmodernity, Lyotard analysis knowledge into narratives : the ways in which world is understood through the stories we tell about it - which include everything from science to gossip - that tie together ideas, impressions and events to form coherent sequences. Each form of narrative is grounded in a particular set of procedures and rules - implied or explicit - so that there are clear rules of legitimacy, validity or to differentiate good

from bad, within a particular discourse. Lyotard classifies the set of rules that determine the legitimacy of particular forms of narratives as 'meta-narratives' and argues that these metanarratives provide criteria that allows one to judge which ideas and statements are legitimate, true and ethical for each different form of narrative. Along with meta-narratives that legitimize individual statements and ideas, Lyotard also points to the concept of grand-narrative. Grand-narratives, according to Lyotard, are the governing principles of modernity and it is through their analysis that he defines modernity and points out how it has given way to postmodern condition.

Grandnarratives produce systematic accounts of how the world works, how it develops over history and the place of human beings in it. In other words grandnarratives construct accounts of human society and progress. Lyotard identifies two main forms of grandnarrative: speculation and emancipation. The speculative grand narrative charts the progress and development of knowledge towards a systematic truth ; a grand unified theory in which our place in the universe is to be understood. The grand narrative of emancipation, on the other hand, sees the development of knowledge as driving human freedom as it emancipate humanity from mysticism and dogma through education ; knowledge on this account 'is no longer subject, but in the service of the subject' (1984, 36).

By bringing together different narratives and metanarratives that constitute a culture, modernity's grand narratives present an idea of the development of knowledge as a progress towards universal enlightenment and freedom. Lyotard argues that with the advent of postmodern the nature and status of knowledge changes, shattering the systematic and emancipatory aims of the grand narratives. He contends that the project of modernity has not been forsaken or forgotten, but destroyed, "liquidated, The loss of overarching grand narratives and their idea of progress means that the metanarratives also begin to lose their status, prompting Lyotard to define postmodern as "incredulity towards metanarratives" (1984, xxiv). By this he means that the criteria that organise knowledge, demarcate the legitimate and valid from the illegitimate and invalid in each discipline, and guide the development of ideas are no longer as persuasive as they were when they formed a part of modern grand narrative. The sort of grand narratives that used to organise knowledge, categories its usefulness for humanity and direct it towards a goal have lost their power in the postmodern world. All that remains as an organising principle are the criteria of efficiency and profit that are propagated by capitalism's global market. Whereas grand narratives seek to draw all knowledge into a single system, capitalism's global market driven cultures are more than happy with fragmentation, so long as fragments of knowledge are conducive to more profit. Thus all developments of knowledge are determined by the pragmatic logic of the markets rather than the overarching dreams of universal human good. The criteria of universalism and emancipation have been replaced by the criterion of profit. Contemporary capitalism, he argues, 'does not constitute a universal history, it is trying to constitute a world market' (1988, 179). Lyotard holds that knowledge itself has become a commodity and is the basis of power: 'Knowledge in the form of an informational commodity indispensable to productive power is already, and will continue to be, a major - perhaps the major - stake in the world wide competition of power' (1984,5). Research and development are funded by business and government to give them a competitive edge in the world mar-

ket. The global competition of power has become a battle for knowledge and the goal is efficiency. The sole criterion of judging a narrative is its effectiveness in making global market and capitalism work more quickly and more efficiently. Lyotard sees the main threat facing members of postmodern society as the reduction of all knowledge to a system whose only criterion is efficiency for making more and more profit. The markets for science and technologies, having lost touch with emancipatory goals with the modern grand narratives, have become 'a vanguard machine, dragging humanity after it, dehumanising it" (1984, 63) as all forms 'of knowledge are being judged solely in terms of its potential for increasing efficiency and profit. Lyotard points out that "the question (overt or implied) now asked by the professional student, the state, or institutions of higher education is no longer, 'is it true?' but 'what use is it?' in the context of merchantilisation of knowledge, more often than not this question is equivalent to: 'is it saleable?' And in the context of power growth : is it efficient? '... what no longer makes the grade is competence as defined by other criteria true/false, just/unjust etc. (1984, 51).

In postmodern condition pragmatism takes over from ethics as the efficiency and profit takes over as the driving forces of action. Here, it would be pertinent to note that contrary to popular perception among theoreticians, academicians and intellectuals, Lyotard is not calling us to celebrate this technological inhuman. The idea that in postmodernity truth and justice have been usurped by the self-interested propaganda of political and economic super powers and multi-national corporations is something that Lyotard recognizes but struggles against through his writings. He stresses that the universal criteria of truth and falsity, right and wrong, and good and evil have been questioned and can't be taken for granted, he constantly pursues the question of what it means to think and act responsibly in the absence of such absolute rules or universal laws. He does not retreat into despair or celebrate the loss of intellectual or political consensus. Rather he searches for new ways of analysing culture and society in order to discover various possibilities for thought and action that may help make the world more just and fair. He stresses that "justice as value is neither outmoded nor suspect. We must thus arrive at an idea and practice of justice that is not linked to that of consensus" (1984, 66). Therefore, for Lyotard the key task of postmodern thinker is to confront both - the apparent loss of values. In 'anything goes' consumerism and the seemingly irresistible power of the capitalism's global market driven economies of the west that place profit before other values. He calls for resisting this vanguard machine that drags humanity after it, dehumanising it, in search of ultimate efficiency. Lyotard holds that this needs to be resisted by the postmodern thinker by looking at transformative possibilities that cannot be predicted, explained or mastered by technologically based system of reason. This practice focuses on the individual 'little narratives' and their differences from each other, the fact that they are not all reducible to the criterion of efficiency. Once the grand narratives have fallen away, we are left only with the diverse range of language games, and: the aim of postmodern criticism should be to do justice to them by allowing them to be heard in their own terms. The task of the postmodern critic is thus not to 'explain' the event, but rather to pay attention to it and respond to it in such a way that it retains its singularity thereby not reducing differences to the single criterion of efficiency. Lyotard's thought generates ways to destabilise and disrupt the totalising efforts - whether they be the grand narratives of the modernity or the criterion of the efficiency for

making more profit associated with postmodernity. The primary aim of Lyotard's writing is through these disruptions, to allow different voices and new ways of thinking writing and acting in the emerging world. This can open up new possibilities for thought and action and allow those voices threatened with silence to be heard opening more pluralist modes of thinking about history, present and the future.

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