

**POSTMODERNISM:
A FEMINIST CRITIQUE**

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Abstract: In this article the author suggests that progress in philosophy can be conceived through contemporary French theories that propose a new, polysemantic way of thinking. Postmodern philosophy has tried to renew the meaning of the subject, of the subject's identity, and of language and communication. The author believes that the postmodern, feminist approach to those concepts represents significant progress in philosophy. It is, in fact, exactly in the context of feminism—conceived of not just as a women's sociopolitical or scientific activity but as a broad theoretical approach to many areas—that Western philosophy has acquired its most explicit and adequate meaning. A crucial example here is the new historicophilosophical analysis of the concept of *gender*. The author appeals to Lipovetsky, Lacan, Derrida, Kristeva, and other thinkers to show how postmodern feminism helps to overcome the binary vision of the contemporary world and the dichotomic composition of earlier philosophical thought.

Keywords: French theory, feminism, postmodern, subject, identification, language.

The specificity of the approach that I suggest in this essay lies in the fact that the starting point of our analysis is neither the history of feminism nor the development of feminist ideas but the contemporary state of so-called Western philosophy, which at a certain stage of its evolution found itself closely associated with the problems of feminism. And it was exactly in the context of feminism that Western philosophy acquired its most explicit and adequate meaning.

In fact, the attempt to establish a correlation between postmodernism, taken as a wide definition of contemporary culture and philosophy, and feminism gives us sufficient ground for the most extraordinary conclusions. For example, we find that feminist postmodernism or feminist poststructuralism does not appear to be merely a practical philosophy.

Another conclusion is that the feminist movement does not boil down to a set of women's sociopolitical or scientific activities but rather repre-

sents a broad theoretical approach to many areas. This conclusion is of critical importance when we evaluate the real prospects for women's struggle for liberation from male domination, the theoretical backing of which struggle is increasingly coming from male postmodernists.

The most curious conclusion from the historicophilosophical point of view, however, is that nowadays theoretical feminism has become the focus of major philosophical problems. In the past, the changing role of women was in fact only an interesting illustration of evolving social concepts; but at present the situation has, so to speak, been turned upside down. The relativity of sexual roles, the independence of one's identifications with other roles—all the kinds of things that, for instance, Gilles Lipovetsky attributes to the phenomenon of third femininity—have become a powerful theoretical source for the study of modern society and for the original self-determination of the newest philosophy. The basic element defining the specifics of postmodernism in general and the newest individualism builds on feminism. Thus Lipovetsky has presented his original vision of future philosophy, and this interpretation is gaining ground among other philosophers.

From our point of view, everything that has been said above is not surprising. It is, instead, natural. In trying to find a new subject, a new style, or a new method for emerging philosophy, postclassical thought was only attempting—indirectly—to analyze the problem of sexuality. However, it was only the philosophy of postmodernism that actually mastered this analysis. Such a “manifestation,” such an explicit comprehension of what was only a marginal subject of analysis in classical philosophy, is one of the most important features of postmodernist philosophy.

To borrow a neat thought from Jacques Lacan (which was, incidentally, a response to one of the already poststructuralist articles of Michel Foucault), such a philosophical position allows us to draw attention to the most important issue. According to Lacan, that issue is (very often and even most often) the inner part of that which is called the act—and this inner part, Lacan holds, is exactly that which does not identify itself.

Thus the philosophy as well as the whole culture of postmodernism performs a dual function: it presents a new subject previously hidden from public view, and it makes this presentation in a completely different manner. Most illustrative in this respect is the key term of theoretical feminism, *gender*. The use of this term establishes a new subject of research—that is, of relations between the sexes in a specific, situation-based, sociohistorical context. In addition, it elaborates the new, purely postmodernist attitude toward this subject by demonstrating, in essence, the desire to relieve these relations of their hierarchical nature.

The evolution from the philosophy of modernism and philosophical structuralism to poststructuralism and postmodernist philosophy was at the same time an attempt to overcome the binary vision of the contempo-

rary world and the dichotomic composition of philosophy itself. As was well put by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the most important task of contemporary metaphysics is the overcoming of its antitheses in answering the so-called eternal philosophical questions as well as in stating these issues themselves. The traditional alternatives of general and singular, of society and individual, of possibility and reality, of a project and its realization, of new and old, of intuition and rationality, of faith and reason, of expression and expressive means, and of male and female have at last become, in the newest philosophy, the subject of historicophilosophical critique. This critique includes the themes of feminism, and in relation to this critique the new atmosphere of postmodernism and a new style of philosophical thinking are being formed. This process is in fact the search for a third path and has no alternative. Such an approach is based on the most fundamental distinction of the culture of postmodernism (including philosophical culture), the distinction that focuses on human beings, their perceptions of the world, and the world itself, taking these three factors to be tightly interdependent.

The problems of subjectivity and of a subject's identity become two of the key issues here. The problem of a subject's identity includes, to a large extent, the problem of sexual identity. However, in current philosophical discussions many contiguous topics are to be found: for example, questions about the subject's self-identification as regards national, cultural, historical, and age issues. The subject's identity is taken as something that cannot be reduced to a structure or function but rather represents a fragmented phenomenon. In that sense, the general feeling of postmodern philosophy coincides with the ideas of postmodernist feminism—the aim is to make explicit what is distinguishable.

Derrida used another term to single out the phenomenon on which we are focusing here, a phenomenon that is present in recent history: the “decentration” of culture. The situation in society and culture is similar to the situation in language (communication) and philosophy: there is no center or kernel around which social relations, culture, interpretation, and philosophical concepts can exist. Therefore the aim of contemporary thinking—as Derrida puts it—is not to reflect the “available present,” fixed and simple, but to conceive the “distinction,” absent and possible. To pursue this aim is to think on the basis of totally new sign concepts, systems, and modes of communication. Derrida's criticism of traditional “onto-teleo-phallo-phono-logocentrism” should bring to life a quite new—a “decentrated”—method of proceeding in philosophy, a method that (to use the name of his method of textual analysis) can be called “deconstructivist” thinking in philosophy, a philosophy of the “hymen.” In fact, this new method of philosophy offers a wholly new vision of the contemporary world, admitting no static and simple definitions.

The key issue of postmodern philosophy is the problem of finding a new method for the expression of this new tenor. This is a problem of text and

language, an attempt to construct a language that allows one to express the above sorts of distinction or, at least, to exclude hierarchical structures. Gilles Deleuze sees this problem as involving the transition from a molar (binary, dual) principle of division to a molecular one. Roland Barthes suggests the thesis that the number of languages equals the number of wishes. In the context of this problem, the issue of sexuality is being reformulated so as to interpret sexuality as a social construct that manifests itself in specific forms.

Within this new philosophical orientation, the term *feminine* is used to define a fundamentally new approach to the problem of the subject's identity, an approach that assumes a plurality of specific decisions about that identity. Reflecting the "invariant" feminine as the key for understanding the realities of an ever-changing society is a specific feature of postmodernism. Postmodernism considers the notion *female* not as an alternative to *male* but as a rejection of alternative understandings of that notion. In considering the female, one should speak of a phenomenon much broader and more significant than merely a new stage in the economic position of women and of the organization of their household work. The project here is about a new method of constructing the phenomenon that might be called "feminine" identity.

This drawing together, in essence, of the newest philosophy and of the feminist/gender constituents of contemporary thinking was prearranged by the so-called linguistic breakthrough in previous philosophy. That breakthrough focused on the description of discursive methods of constructing subjectivity, putting such methods at the center of modern philosophical studies. Thus the poststructuralists considered social phenomena as specific linguistic practices in relation to which the subject has always played a passive role.

While acknowledging this passive role, however, the poststructuralist critique also envisaged the possibility of withstanding the language structure that reproduces, within itself, hierarchical relationships. The philosophical feminist critique, which knew of this poststructuralist critique, was shaped by the search for language practices that escape such relationships and are distinct from those dominating the contemporary scene.

To note some of the views of leading theorists in this area, we find Derrida asserting that one and the same system is constituted by the affirmation (consolidation) of the paternal logos and the phallus (an organ that, according to Lacan, amounts to a kind of privileged designating). Or, again, Julia Kristeva suggests that the semiotic stage of the subject's formation, being beyond the control of conscious stereotypes (symbols that emerge later on), might most adequately and pluralistically express the infinite, polyvariant (or multivariant) desire that, as Lacan states, constitutes the basis of subjective identity. Besides these thinkers and the others noted above, we should also mention Foucault and Barthes, who, following Lacan, considered the sphere of unconscious, corporal expres-

sion to be a place where subjectivity reflects itself. We also should observe that, in the context of these philosophical developments, semiotics has appeared to be a sphere in which male theorists could participate actively in the feminist struggle. Kristeva suggests that marginal feminist writing might change the existing “colonial” order. Her concept is based on the theory of two types of designation and on Barthes’s idea of changing the language itself, which is a project of liberating language from everything depressed, irrational, mystical, and semiological. We also should note here that if the new thinking has truly succeeded in analyzing both the forms of resisting traditional power structures and the concept of “structure” itself, then quite often this thinking will seem antihumanistic from the point of view of the traditional understanding of subjectivity as individuality.

Thus the appeal to the concepts *female* and *feminine*, which can be found among the “classics” of postmodern philosophy, tends to reflect mostly a search for a familiar and adequate definition within the new symbolic thinking, elusive and polyvariant as it is.

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