Post Modernity or High Modernity?

by: Christian De Cock

While the preponderance of writings on postmodernism in recent (radical) writings on organisation theory undoubtedly has pushed organisations studies toward new and interesting ways of looking at the subject both as a discipline and as a substance (cf. Parker 1992), there is a danger that postmodernism might fall victim to the same smugness that it so successfully exposed in the old orthodoxy. For example, Tsoukas (1992) argued that many self-confessed postmodernists or authors writing on postmodernism tend to identify the "core" features of modernism in a way that leaves out its most vital characteristic: its inherent reflexivity. In keeping the modernism-postmodernism debate alive and moving it in new territory we may perhaps expect further spin-offs for organisation theory. I do not aim to develop a full-blown argument in this short essay; I rather want to fire some "critical salvos" into reality which may spark off reactions in others. In doing this I have built largely upon the ideas of the British sociologist Giddens (1990, 1991) and the German philosopher Sloterdijk (1984, 1991). Both rejected the conceptualisation of postmodernity as an epoch and characterised our period as a time of high modernity.

Although Giddens' ideas provide the main source of inspiration for this section, I believe a cursory overview of some of Sloterdijk's critique of modern life and philosophy will enrich this discussion. In any case, I believe that this philosopher deserves more attention than the brief citation by Gergen (1992) which was later picked up by Burrell (1993) that "... the scholar should play the fool or the dandy, or more provocatively, go piss in public. (Gergen 1992: 215)"

For Sloterdijk (1991) modernity can only be understood on the basis of a self-igniting self-movement. Progress is "movement" for movement's sake, a movement in order to increase the capacity to move. There are no ethical principles of a modern kind which are not at the same time kinetic impulses. All projects of modernity focus on overcoming situations which hamper people's movements. Thus modernity is ontologically a being-for-movement. This ontology is valid for us because it is irresistible realised by us and it can be identified as mobilisation-as-such (the military connotation is non-coincidental: it is also "being for self-destruction"). Universities have developed into providing a pre-education for this mobilisation and Sloterdijk considers them to be cognitive suppliers for "the attack of our time on the rest of time" (1991: 63). The extreme dynamism of modernity has contributed to maintaining a spiritual "stuckness" within super-mobile structures. There is a focus on "keeping going" at whatever cost.

People are in search of everything, except existence itself. One has to, before one really starts living, first do something else, fulfil one more requirement, fulfil one desire that is more important at the moment... (Sloterdijk: 1984 317)

A critique of the kinetics of our time cannot be the basis of "a practice", according to Sloterdijk. The absurd result of a critique of kinetics is that real processes are described in such a way that initially there is "nothing to do". The consequences of such a critique are to take a step back to perceive better, to hesitate, to stop doing what has always been done. Everything else will engender blind movement, however beautiful the action slogans may sound.

Postmodern thinking is conceptualised by Sloterdijk as something that explicitly incorporates the turbulence, the vacuum, the depressions which seem to be linked to the spontaneity caused by modernity. Yet, Sloterdijk refuses to reject the concept of rationality although he admits that "the way things are now, loyalty to rationality can only be expressed as disloyalty" (1984: 80). Rationality is at the same time logic and more than logic: it is reflected logic. Rationality is only possible for the person who sees from which part of the world he or she is a "part" (it is about their own experience of the human condition). The true rationalistic tradition is incompatible with logical-positivism which tried to encapsulate thinking in the barrel of pure analysis and denounce major themes of the philosophical traditions as mock-problems. Rationality leads to the loss of naivety and promotes the
collapse of objectivism through a heightened experience of the self; it focuses on the rational apparatus (the "spectacles") and not on the "order of things".

Sloterdijk's outlook on system theories is essentially pessimistic. System theories want to make people internalise "right illusions" once and for all (cf. service culture, efficiency of the market) because without this illusion modern society cannot function properly.

In a world of incalculable risks, where chance and change have outgrown all planning, and where the old order no longer can cope with new events, there is hardly any other way for the individual than a streamlined formula... (Sloterdijk 1984: 277)

As mentioned above, Giddens shares Sloterdijk's assessment that we have not moved beyond modernity but are living through a phase of its radicalisation.

The disorientation which expresses itself in the feeling that systematic knowledge about social organisation cannot be obtained, I shall argue, results primarily from the sense many of us have of being caught up in a universe of events we do not fully understand, and which seems in large part outside of our control. To analyse how this has come to be the case, it is not sufficient merely to invent new terms, like post modernity and the rest... Rather than entering a period of post-modernity, we are moving into one in which the consequences of modernity are becoming more radicalised and universalised than before. (Giddens 1990: 2-3)

The discontinuities which separate modern social institutions from the traditional social orders are characterised by: the pace of change, the scope of change, and the intrinsic nature of modern institutions (e.g. nation state, commodification of products). Giddens sees modernity as double-edged phenomenon. It provides vastly greater opportunities but also incorporates a dark side (totalitarianism, militarism, degrading aspects of industrial work). This dark side is inherent to modernity, not just the consequence of some aberrations or imperfect applications of rationality. (cf. Burrell 1994)

In pre-modern times there was no separation from time and space: "when" was almost universally either connected with "where" or identified by regular natural occurrences. Spatial dimensions were dominated by "presence", by localised activities. In modernity we see the advent of relations between "absent" others.

In conditions of modernity, place becomes increasingly phantasmagoric: that is to say, locales are thoroughly penetrated by and shaped in terms of social influences quite distant from them. (Giddens 1990: 19)

But why is the separation from time and space so crucial? Giddens argues that this separation is the prime condition for a process of disembedding, the "lifting out" of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space. It is also the gearing mechanism for that distinctive feature of modern social life: the rationalised organisation.

According to Giddens two types of disembedding mechanisms are involved in the constitution of the conditions of modernity: symbolic tokens (e.g. money) and expert systems (e.g. cars, a doctor). All disembedding mechanisms depend upon trust. Trust here is vested, not in individuals, but in abstract capacities. For example, it is money as such which is trusted primarily, not the person with whom a particular transaction is carried out; our trust is not so much vested in the person of the doctor but in the authenticity of the expert knowledge he or she applies. It is a basic part of Giddens' argument that the nature of modern institutions is deeply bound up with the mechanisms of trust in abstract systems, especially trust in expert systems. No one can completely opt out of the abstract systems involved in modern institutions.
A further distinction has to be made between trust in a system (a faceless commitment, faith is put in workings of knowledge of which the lay person is largely ignorant) and trust in persons (involves face-to-face commitments in which indicators of the integrity of others are sought). Access points, the points of connection between lay individuals and the representatives of abstract systems, are places of vulnerability for abstract systems, but also constitute injunctions at which trust can be maintained or built up. Attitudes of trust toward specific abstract systems are liable to be strongly influenced by experiences at access points. For example, electoral systems might be regarded not just as means of securing interest representation, but as ways of institutionalising access points connecting politicians and the population.

Trust in the reliability of nonhuman objects, it follows from this analysis, is based upon a more primitive faith in the reliability and nurturance of human individuals. Trust in others is a psychological need of a persistent and recurrent kind. Drawing assurance from the reliability or integrity of others is a sort of emotional regrooving which accompanies the experience of familiar social and material environments. Ontological security and routine are intimately connected, via the pervasive influence of habit.

Although many of our everyday lives are filtered by the intrusion of expert knowledge it is misleading to see this situation in Habermas' terms, as "the colonisation of the life world by expert systems" (cf. Burrell 1994).

Just as in the case of deskilling processes in the workplace, there is a constant tension between the appropriation of knowledge on the part of the experts and other officials and its re-appropriation by lay actors in the contexts of day-to-day life. This is intrinsic to the very reflexivity of modernity. (Giddens 1991:210)

What is characteristic of modernity is not an embracing of the new for its own sake, but the presumption of wholesale reflexivity - which of course includes reflection upon the nature of reflection itself. A further feature of modernity is the discovery that the development of empirical knowledge does not in and of itself allow us to decide between different value positions (cf. Vickers 1968).

The reflexivity of modern social life consists in the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character. (Giddens 1990: 38)

This provides a deeply unsettling outlook. The reflexivity of modernity subverts reason where reason is understood as the gaining of certain knowledge. It exposes the equation of knowledge with certitude (i.e. to know is to be certain) as misconceived. We can never be sure that an element of knowledge will not be revised. In other words, truth exists only in the interminable interrogation of currently accepted truths. (cf. Tsoukas 1992) We are left with questions where once there were answers: a general awareness of this phenomenon - the continuous movement of doing away with the closure of meaning - filters into anxieties which press in on everyone.

In science, nothing is certain, and nothing can be proved, even if scientific endeavour provides us with the most dependable information about the world to which we can aspire. In the heart of the world of hard science, modernity floats free. (Giddens 1990: 39-40)

Giddens, just like Sloterdijk, is very much aware of the high consequence global risks we all run due to the runaway character of modernity for which no specific individuals or groups are responsible. The juggernaut (he term comes from the Hindi Jagannath, "lord of the world" and is a title of Krishna; an idol of this deity was taken each year through the streets on a huge car, which followers are said to have thrown themselves under) image he uses to characterise modernity is an evocative way to end this essay.
The juggernaut reflects the image of a runaway engine of enormous power which, collectively as human beings, we can drive to some extent but which also threatens to rush out of our control and which could rend itself asunder. The juggernaut crushes those who resist it, and while it sometimes seems to have a steady path, there are times when it veers away erratically in directions we cannot foresee... (Giddens 1990: 139)

We all must ride the juggernaut. The lack of control which many of us feel about some of the circumstances of our lives is real. Modernity is here and it is not going away.

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References


